

Biodiversity Challenges for Central Africa and the Role of the Tervuren Museum's Program in Data Sharing

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SUMMARY

Due to Central African colonial history, the most important collections from the ex-Belgian colonies RD Congo, Rwanda, Burundi (and others, from several other West and East African countries) were deposited in the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium, originally named 'Musée du Congo Belge - Museum van Belgisch Congo'. Nowadays a federal Belgian institution with both research and museum activities, it was founded in 1898 at Tervuren, a town 15 km east of Brussels.

The bird collections consist of about 150,000 specimens exclusively from Central Africa. Most of these are study skins, but about 10 % are in alcohol. Explorers of the 19th century obtained the oldest material. Later, H. SCHOUTEDEN, a director of the museum, collected in the Belgian Congo during expeditions in the 1920s. SCHOUTEDEN's correspondents, including A. PRIGOGINE who collected over 20,000 specimens in eastern RD Congo, sent in the bulk of the material. After about 1980, only a few specimens were added (some recent small collections originate from the Comoros). Recent technical activities include: coding of labelled data, quality control of the data, selection and start of a programme for optimal data management, and production of distribution maps. Tervuren holds type material for 226 nominal bird taxa; at least 124 of these are still in use as valid names. The Ter-

vuren collections were, in former times, mostly used as taxonomic reference collections. While this use continues (and demands for tissue increase), the collections more recently have been mined for information about local biodiversity. The collections have the potential to add a historical dimension to biodiversity research. In view of the global importance, there is increasing demand for access to the information, including researchers from the countries of origin. Indeed, the irreplaceable collections in Tervuren originate from a Biodiversity Hotspot with a wealth of natural resources, but with very few local biological collections. The African countries involved have inadequate infrastructure for research or for training. Opportunities for interactions with the global scientific community are limited, even in a time with major advances in modern information communication technology. Therefore, Tervuren launched a campaign to revive the Central African zoological research and started a cooperation between African scientists. The 'African Biodiversity Information Centre', with start funding from the Federal Belgian Government, aims to specifically address the set of obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity. The aim is to give access to the information from our holdings to the institutions in the countries of origin.

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