

Ribbens, Eric. 2006. The Wired Herbarium #1: Introduction. In The Vasculum (newsletter of the Society for Herbarium Curators), July 2006.

Every major shift in paradigms or protocol is accompanied by unanticipated new solutions to problems. In this spirit, every herbarium curator should look at this webpage.

<http://herbariaunited.org/atHome/> is a fascinating website developed by the Botanical Society of the British Isles (BSBI). Don't be put off by this slightly confusing webpage, but scroll down and go to the link herbaria@home: <http://herbariaunited.org/ahcontent/AHabout/> This probably should be the real root page.

The goal of herbariaunited@home is to allow volunteers to remotely transcribe label data. Specimens are digitally photographed, and volunteers work from these digital images to type the label information into an electronic database. Serious users should register, a quick and painless process, and then read the tutorial. The tutorial is clearly oriented around British herbaria, and reassured me that I would be able to understand what was supposed to go where. It also left me with a few questions. For example, how do they track annotations?

I contacted Tom Humphrey, the site manager. He wrote: "Feedback from volunteers has been overwhelmingly positive. People enjoy having the opportunity to take part in research, and find it satisfying to be able to apply their expertise. However, the project is currently dependent on a fairly small core group of very active volunteers, who account for a large proportion of the total work done (this Zipfian distribution is a typical pattern for volunteer projects across many disciplines). The main difficulty that herbarium@home has faced has been to promote the project to large numbers of volunteers and to sustain long-term interest in the work."

However, over 26,000 sheets have been digitized since this project started just a few years ago. The software driving this system is impressive. Even on a slow modem, it is rapid and clear, with extensive and understandable help prompts. The entire history of the digitization is stored. I'm left with two impressions. First, I'd like to know more about the software, the quality control process, and associated issues such as tracking annotations. Secondly, I'm impressed with this approach to database development: they've made open-ended volunteer involvement a rather painless involvement on the part of the volunteers.

To quote Tom Humphrey again: "The project has been successful as a demonstration that open-ended volunteer involvement in herbarium specimen documentation can be a reliable, productive and cost-effective way to document collections. It's an approach that may be particularly well-suited to under-resourced or orphaned collections where documentation by paid staff or in-house volunteers is not feasible. The potential to increase public access to and involvement with herbarium collections is also one of the strengths of the project. I hope that as we attract more volunteer members and as more institutions join the collaboration, that the project may have a significant impact on herbarium documentation in the future."

The entire webpage is quite well designed, although I do think the root page is a little busy and is clearly more designed for people who already know about the project than for the uninitiated. While I'm more interested in the management of data acquisition, an entire subset of the

webpage is devoted to access to existing information. I presume eventually this data will be merged into DIGIR or some other global database.

Software development was a significant component of this project. I asked Tom what difficulties they encountered and how they solved them. He mentioned that one problem is volunteers working without the support of being in the herbarium itself. “A lot of software development effort concentrated on encouraging online interaction and encouraging users to have the confidence to make corrections to existing records. A break-through came with providing an automated link to request feedback on the message board, which provided an unobtrusive way to get people looking at newly created records, spotting mistakes and participating on the message board. Another simple but important change was to allow records to be saved while partially complete (with only some of the fields filled in), an option that was added after I realised that too often new users were encountering difficult sheets early on and being scared away from the project, rather than being able to just tackle the bits of the sheet that they could make sense of.”

In conclusion, I encourage anyone interested in database development, open source movements and involving the general public, or innovative new applications of herbarium data, to visit this site. A final message from Tom Humphrey: “It would be great to hear from any herbarium that would either like to be involved in the current herbariumathome.org setup or would like to use our software to start a similar independent project.”