

University museums in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Current status of university museums in Sri Lanka was evaluated. Results of questionnaire and interview survey revealed that the majority of universities lack museums. Two universities, including the pioneer University of Colombo, possess natural history museums administrated by curators. One of the oldest, University of Peradeniya, has a geological museum without a curator. Other universities possess a museum dedicated for Muslim culture, an art museum and an engineering museum. Poor infrastructure, dearth of finance devoted in corporate plans for development, lack of curators and absence of research were identified as major weaknesses.

Introduction

The functions of university museums are to assist the educational and scholarly mission of the undergraduate and research community through the study, exhibition, preservation and growth of collections. Does this happen in museums of Sri Lankan universities? In Sri Lanka, out of 17 state universities there are 14 that offer natural science and applied science subjects for undergraduates while three universities specialize in performing arts, religious studies and defense studies.

Methodology

Questionnaire and interview surveys were conducted to find the status and academic utilization of university museums in Sri Lanka.

Results and analysis

It was discovered that more than 50% of universities that offer natural and applied sciences lack museums of any type or condition. Two universities including the pioneer and the best ranking of the 17 universities, University of Colombo, and more recently established Sri Jayewardenapura University, possess specialized natural history museums with appropriate infrastructure. Each is administrated by a museum curator. One of the oldest universities in Sri Lanka, University of Peradeniya, has no natural history museum but a geological museum without a curator. The Open University of Sri Lanka dedicated for distant education possesses limited collections of specimens to facilitate undergraduate teaching but no separate museums have been established. Among all the university museums are an art museum and an engineering museum that are utilized for inspiration and exploration rather than undergraduate teaching. South-Eastern University possesses a museum dedicated for Muslim culture. Sabaragamuwa University which has formally established a museum recently has a substandard collection of items which do not satisfy the normal constitution or function of a museum. Universities dedicated to religious studies and defense studies as well as universities in war affected North (Jaffna University) and East (Eastern University) and their campuses lack museums.

Current evaluation reveals that majority of museums in Sri Lankan universities do not satisfy any function other than undergraduate teaching. In fact, natural science museums in universities are solely random collections of wet or dry preserved specimen used for undergraduate teaching. No Sri Lankan university museums facilitate research or hold voucher specimens.

Discussion

What should or could be happening in the currently deprived conditions of the university museums in Sri Lanka? Poor infrastructure and lack of curators are presently major weaknesses. The role of the

museum curator where present is restricted to maintenance of the collection. Museum curators are rarely involved with academic related teaching and research in a formal manner. Except for the geological museum, art museum and engineering museum, university museums are not utilized for stakeholder awareness and inspiration. Sri Lankan university museums are restricted to undergraduate teaching and the current survey sadly revealed that university museums are not open for the research community. This is related to bureaucracy and negligence. The university museums are simply considered as collection of old specimens. A change of attitude through awareness is a must if this scenario is to be altered in the future. The Fauna and Flora Protection Act imposes much hindrance in the enhancement of university natural history museums despite the biodiversity wealth of the country. The sole repository of specimens is the National Museum and the Department of Wildlife Conservation while university museums are not authorized to maintain such collections. Little funds are devoted in corporate plans to develop university museums. It is necessary to change the status of university museums by providing infrastructure and skilled personnel. Providing finance and freedom to generate finance by introducing courses for enthusiasts, and promoting education and awareness programs, are possible changes that could alter the current status. It is also necessary to encourage the research community to become involved with university museums by encouraging researchers and enthusiasts to work with university museums and publish their findings. Additionally university museums should be allowed to become type repositories to upgrade the status of university museums in Sri Lanka. Establishment and development of university museums in previously war affected areas in the North and Eastern sectors should be encouraged by appropriate funding.

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