

To the media

PRESS RELEASE

A world's first: the Herbarium of the University of Neuchâtel available on Wikimedia

Neuchâtel, 5 July 2012. The University of Neuchâtel and Wikimedia CH, the association for the advancement of free knowledge, have signed an agreement for the digitization and dissemination on free collaborative websites of photographs of dried pressed specimens of Swiss plants from the herbarium of the University of Neuchâtel (UniNE). This agreement is a world's first. It puts into concrete form an initiative taken by Charles Andrès, Chairman of Wikimedia CH and lecturer in biology at the University of Neuchâtel. Thanks to the participation of the Institute of Biology and especially that of Jason Grant, the person in charge of the herbaria, several hundred specimens have already been digitized and will shortly be uploaded to Wikimedia Commons, the online media library. Eventually, some 30,000 specimens comprising images and scientific descriptions of Swiss plants will be available for public viewing.

In autumn 2011, Wikimedia CH launched "Wiki Loves Universities", a framework project for collaboration between the association and Swiss universities. The aim of the project is to create links between the academic world and the Wikimedia movement, be it through lecturers promoting Wikipedia, or through collaborations to release content. Digitization of the herbarium housed at the University of Neuchâtel forms part of this effort to disseminate knowledge available in Switzerland to as many people as possible.

"This is a first for our University and for Wikimedia CH," announced Nathalie Tissot, Vice-Rector responsible for research valorisation at the UniNE and co-signatory of the agreement. Although museum and scientific collections have already gone through a similar process with Wikimedia, the digitization of a herbarium and its dissemination on free collaborative websites is a world's first. In addition to guarantees of professionalism in carrying out the project, this pioneering agreement offers the University of Neuchâtel an opportunity to preserve precious specimens on a long-term basis and also gives the institution superb online visibility, since every digitized specimens will indicate the origin of the document.

The University of Neuchâtel is in fact the owner or custodian of a huge collection of herbarium specimens dating back to the 18th century and containing 475,000 plates of undeniable scientific and historical interest. Some bear the signature of Louis Agassiz, the famous 19th century Swiss-American botanist, zoologist and geologist.

"The digitization and dissemination of images from herbarium collections of which the University of Neuchâtel is either the owner or custodian not only facilitates scientific advancement for researchers, both here in Neuchâtel and worldwide, but also strengthens links between the University and society as a whole, through the distribution of information which is normally difficult to access or unknown. These two aspects correspond to two of the University's fundamental roles," added Edward Mitchell, Professor of Soil Biology and co-director of the Botanical Gardens of the University and City of Neuchâtel.

The agreement provides for digitization of the University's "Swiss Herbarium", consisting of 70,000 plates produced by researchers and students over the years, or coming from gifts or legacies, such as collections belonging to the City of Neuchâtel that were entrusted to the University by the Natural History Museum in 1918. At the moment, the specimens in the Swiss herbarium are classified alphabetically, by family, genus

and species. Digitization means that a virtual herbarium will be created and made available via the database of Neuchâtel's Natural History Museum. It also means that the collection can be reorganised on the basis of different criteria (author, place, etc) depending on requirements.

"This initiative will also reduce the amount of handling to which these fragile plates are subjected, and will create a unique teaching tool," commented Jason Grant, who also teaches botany at the University of Neuchâtel. "It will provide valuable help in documenting endangered species, in identifying invasive plants and in comparing flowering dates, which reflect the influence of climate change."

"Several hundred files are ready to be disseminated on Wikimedia Commons, and as a result used on other Wikimedia sites, such as Wikipedia," said a delighted Charles Andrès. "Because the funds to finance this project came from Swiss donors, we have decided to digitize the Swiss herbarium first, as a priority."

A photographer commissioned for the project, Ludovic Péron, will digitize around 30,000 plates between now and the end of the year. At the end of this phase, Wikimedia CH will make the digitization equipment available to the University of Neuchâtel for one year, so that the work can be continued by qualified staff – botany research assistants and students, who will be given special training by the association. In exchange, the University undertakes to place all the digitized images under a free licence on Wikimedia Commons, ensuring that a valuable heritage will be not only be safeguarded for future generations but also disseminated to a wide audience.

Description of the project in Wikimedia Commons :

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Commons:Neuchâtel_Herbarium

Category with images :

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Neuchâtel_Herbarium_Project

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