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THE ARTIFACT RECORDING SCHEME
Practical Aspects

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The idea of an artifact recording scheme was first put forward in New Zealand some two years ago at the Extended Annual General Meeting on "Artifacts and Their Study". (Newsletter v.4 no.3 pp.3-21, Je 1961). The idea was generally approved and recording projects were begun on a small scale in different centres; particularly in Auckland, where considerable development and refinement of techniques, and of the Artifact Record Form took place.

The question still remained of how far the Association was prepared to go in sponsoring this scheme, and of how the body of recorded information rapidly being built up was to be organised. Following an indecisive directive from the Annual General Meeting last year, Council on 8 December 1962 decided to adopt the scheme on a "local and individual basis." This means that artifacts may be recorded by members for their own use, and the records are retained by them; and that, where the recorder wishes copies of the record forms may also be sent to the local file keeper. They will not as a rule be sent to Central Files, except in cases which I shall deal with below.

The actual process of recording and the proper use of the forms is dealt with by Mary Oliver elsewhere in this issue. I will concern myself here with what is done with the information after the artifacts have been recorded.

The chief difficulty in the way of the scheme is the numbering of the artifacts and the matching of the artifacts with their respective record forms. Obviously the method used for the site recording scheme, where the file keeper assigns numbers to the sites as he receives site records, cannot be used for artifacts. This is because the recorder himself must assign a number to the artifact at the same time as he records it, and must actually write the number on it. The record forms will therefore be numbered by the recorder, not by the local file keeper. The problem here is that a sequence of numbers beginning at "1", cannot be assigned to each collection, as the result would be dozens, perhaps hundreds, of such sequences with no way of matching the records with appropriate artifact.

Obviously no numbering system can completely overcome this problem. We can however, go a long way towards doing so in the case of artifacts known to come from a site recorded in the Site Record Scheme. In these cases the artifacts can be numbered serially according to the number of the site from which they come; e.g. N160/1/1, N160/1/2, etc. This scheme will provide a tidy and easily handled numbering system for this class of artifacts. There are however, two possible pitfalls.

If two recorders are working independently on different collections

from the same site there will be two sequences of artifacts numbered "1" onwards for the same site. This could cause confusion, but a careful check against the forms would establish which sequence the artifact belonged to and this would be sorted out and the object in question re-numbered if they ever found their way into a Museum collection.

There will be a temptation to assign an approximately localised artifact to a known site in the vicinity - sometimes rightly but no doubt often wrongly. This temptation must be resisted strongly; unless the artifact is in firm association with the site, it should be recorded as coming from the site. Unless this rule is rigidly adhered to endless trouble and confusion could be caused in years to come.

Ideally of course, these precisely localised artifacts should be the only ones we record. In practice however, this is not possible. New Zealand does not yet have a sufficiently large body of precisely localised material to allow an absolutely pure approach to recording. Besides this, there may be much to be learned from studies of regional variations in artifacts, and imprecise localisation may serve adequately for this.

Lastly, there will always be some artifacts which are worth recording simply because they are unusual or especially fine specimens of their type.

Numbering these imprecisely, or unlocalised specimens is a problem. Obviously any system must be easily understood and easy to handle in the peculiar circumstances of artifact recording mentioned above. The method arrived at to overcome these difficulties is to begin numbering the artifacts in each collection at "1", but to place before the number the first three letters of the name of the person or institution holding the collection. Thus artifacts belonging to a collector named Jones, would be labelled JON 1, JON 2, etc. This can be very flexible and in some cases it may be better to write out the full name. The method certainly has faults, but I am convinced that it is the only one suitable to ensure that artifacts can be linked up with their record forms. It is, I believe, already in use in some places.

Local file keepers will always accept artifact records, provided they are properly filled out. They will not be absorbed into the ordinary Site Record Files, but may be housed separately. They may however, be included with site records when it is clearly established that the artifact or artifacts have come from the site concerned. In these cases a copy of the artifact record will be sent to Central Files.

If artifact recording "catches on", it will produce a large bulk of records. Although these will obviously contain much of value, I rather fear that they will pose problems of assimilation to future researchers, and of practical administration to our present-day file keepers. For these reasons I hope that those who have made extensive use of this scheme will not be slow in laying down guide lines for other recorders, and in helping to form standards of judgement as to what types of material are and are not worth recording.