Save the museums

Italy's curators must band together to preserve their valuable collections.

Fausto Barbagli's first curation job was at the University of Pavia in northern Italy. It was the end of the 1990s, and the university was finally starting to pay attention to its valuable but long-neglected zoological collections.

Barbagli is passionate about birds, so he was distressed to find that the labels had fallen off 700 precious taxidermied specimens, devastating their scientific value. A well-intentioned but untrained staff member had decided to spruce up the collection, gifted to the university three decades earlier. He had painted the birds' pedestals — onto which species names had been inscribed — and had fixed neatly typed labels to their feet with rubber bands. As any professional curator knows, rubber perishes.

This story is emblematic of what has happened in historic scientific collections in universities and museums around Italy — some of the oldest and most valuable in the world. Now, there is a chance to improve the situation. It must be taken.

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To preserve history, one must sometimes fight against it. Recent years have not been kind to such collections. When taxonomy went out of fashion in the 1970s, universities pushed aside physical specimens to make room for modern biology laboratories, and lost interest in paying for proper curatorship. Museologists in Italy estimate that at least one-third of all biological specimens — and items in other scientific collections such as geology or old physics instruments — have been lost to rotting or bad practice.

The past decade of financial crisis has only made the situation worse. Many of the remaining specialized staff retired and were not replaced. Some important collections have no curators at all, including the Regional Natural History Museum of Terrasini in Sicily, home to 10,000 stuffed birds and 1,500 entomological cases. The country has no professional courses that could train the next generation of curators. Special funding for small museums is close to zero.

Last month, Barbagli helped to organize a meeting of museum and scientific-collection experts in Rome, to work out how to turn the situation around. He did not have to look too far. Collections in Germany have also suffered neglect, but researchers there seem to have a solution.

German museologists organized themselves into a united front. They catalogued their collections and began a protracted lobbying campaign — until the Wissenschaftsrat, Germany's national science-policy advisory body, understood what would be at stake if collections continued to be lost. In 2011, it issued a report that described collections as an "indispensable basis" for research from anthropology and

archaeology to geoscience and the history of art. This report — essentially declaring collections to be a valid research infrastructure — smoothed the way for change. A national coordination centre has now been established that offers resources and advice to any researcher, directing them to materials kept around the country.

Italian museologists have now started to organize themselves in the same way, cataloguing collections. They have wisely decided not lose time asking their cash-strapped government for financing, but to call instead for a better organization to protection their scientific heritage at a national level.

In 2004, Italy legally recognized the value of its scientific heritage and placed it under the control of the ministry of culture, alongside objects of art. But that ministry lacked the scientific experts who might have established a meaningful protective organization.

Responsibility for scientific heritage would be better embedded in the ministry for science. Ideally, small museums would organize into a network, grouped according to scientific field rather than location. This network would be headed by a few ministry officials who would make sure that resources and academic expertise are shared appropriately.

Italian museologists should unite to push for such a structure, which would cost next to nothing but be highly effective. They need to move quickly, and to argue with a single voice. As their colleagues in Germany have shown, the rot can be stopped.