WAHERB: An herbarium milestone reached

LAST December CALM's Western Australian Herbarium completed the initial phase of databasing its 350 000 plant specimens.

This is a major achievement and is the culmination of an eight-year program, resulting in the establishment of a significant national database, the WAHERB Specimen Database.

The Herbarium collection is a 'plant museum' with the specimens representing the results of taxonomic research on the flora of this State, dating back to the 17th century.

The collection is in a constant state of change. Each year more than 10 000 new specimens are added to it; 6000 specimens are sent on loan to researchers in other institutions, nationally and internationally, many new species are described (almost 250 in 1994-95), and the names of species are often changed.

The specimen labels contain

By Bruce Maslin and Alex Chapman

invaluable information on the names, ecology, biology, ethnobotany and distribution of the species.

The WAHERB system is the tool that allows us effectively to manage the flow of specimens while providing fast access to invaluable label information and providing a dynamic link to other departmental databases.

The WA Herbarium was one of the first Australian herbaria to begin databasing its specimen collection, and was certainly the first to introduce an innovative method of barcoding specimen sheets, which greatly facilitated specimen management and processing.

1990 saw the beginning of major development of the system with the appointment of a database administrator and the acquisition of significant external funds to input data.

These factors contributed to a doubling of the annual rate of specimen insertion to 45 000 in 1991.

Other advances included the automated production of specimen labels and the automation of herbarium loan procedures.

The data is captured in WAHERB in line with national standards and this, in turn, facilitates the exchange of information between herbaria.

WAHERB is now a most valuable tool helping in the research and management of the rich flora of this State.

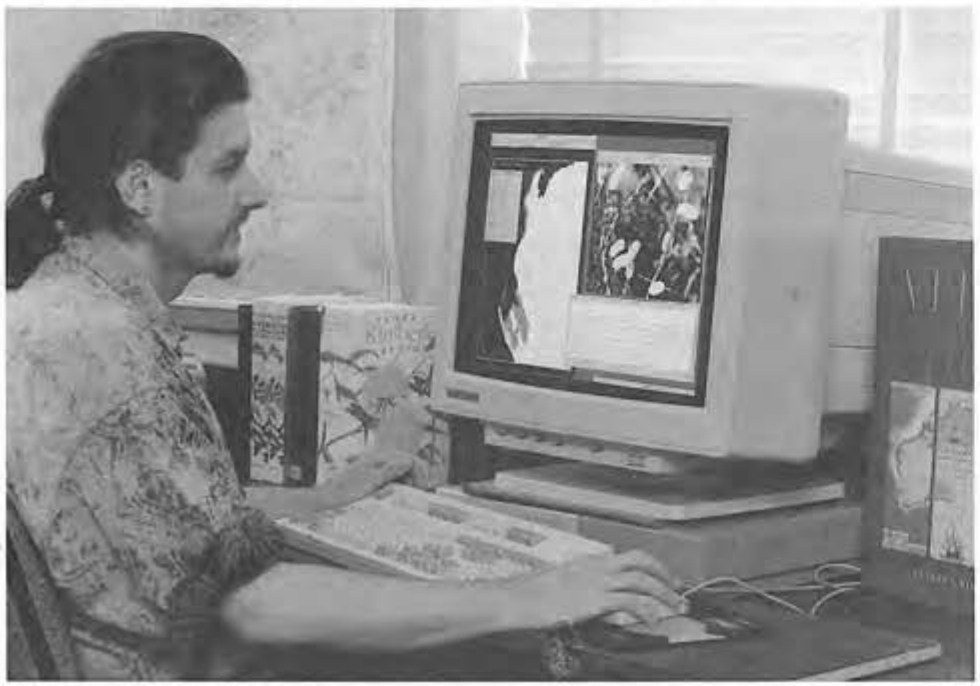
Planning for improving and developing the system is now under way.

The future holds exciting prospects, particularly the full integration of the WAHERB system with other departmen[illegible] databases and the interfaci[illegible] with powerful Geographic Information Systems.

The WAHERB database team deserves high praise and can be justifiably proud of its fine effort in bringing to a close this phase in the development of an important national database.

Database operators, (left to right), Kaye Veryard, Meriel Falconer and Christine Casey; with Evelyn McGough in the background. Photo by Donna Swan

Volunteers Ena Webster, Gwen Abbott and Nora Best, (at rear), mounting specimens for incorporation into WAHERB collection Photo by Donna Swan.



Research scientist Alex Chapman integrating the production of species distribution maps with other specimen data, descriptive information and images. Photo by Donna Swan

Adelaide State Herbarium expert on the genus Eremophila *Bob Chinnock, working under contract with CALM, determines specimens of the genus for updating the WAHERB data base.* Photo by Donna Swan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