
Biological **C**urators **G**roup

Newsletter
Number 1
Dec. 1975



Following a preliminary meeting held at the Department of Museum Studies of the University of Leicester on 18th April 1975 it was agreed that a Biological Curators Group be formed with the following terms of reference :-

1. To facilitate the exchange of information between individuals concerned with collections of specimens and records, their conservation and interpretation.
2. To present the views of biological curators to the Museums Association and to other bodies.

Membership of the Group is open to any interested individual or organisation at an annual subscription of £1 p. a. It is hoped to arrange a series of seminars and meetings at different locations in the United Kingdom and to produce a quarterly newsletter. The first general meeting of the Group is to take place at the British Museum (Natural History) on 10th December when officers of the Group will be elected. Until this date all correspondence, applications for membership and copy for the Newsletter should be sent to G. Stansfield, Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, 152 Upper New Walk, Leicester LE1 7QA.

It should be made clear that it is the intention of the Group that it should complement existing organisations such as the Museums Association, the Museum Assistant's Group and the Geological Curators Group.

One of the functions of the Group will be to help to coordinate activities and to act as a forum for the views of curators concerned primarily with biological collections. It is intended that the Newsletter will be primarily concerned with short notes describing new museum developments including new exhibits, preparation and mounting techniques, storage etc. Notes about new publications will be included together with requests for information, offers of exchange of specimens etc.

Other organisations

The Museums Association, 87 Charlotte Street, London W1P 2BX

Museum Assistant's Group. Hon. Secretary, Charles Steel, Booth Museum of Natural History, Dyke Road, Brighton BN1 5AA.

Geological Curators Group. Hon. Secretary. Mike Jones, Keeper of Geology, Leicestershire Museums, Art Galleries and Records Service, 96 New Walk, Leicester LE1 6TD.

Association of Systematic Collections, Museum of Natural History, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, U. S. A., 66045.

ICOM International Committee of Natural History Museums, Chairman, Louis Lemieux, National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa, Canada.

THE CONSERVATION OF WILD CREATURES AND WILD PLANTS ACT 1975

Stephen Flood, Keeper of Natural History, City Museum, St. Albans

The main purpose of this Act is to give special protection to six species of rare wild animals and twenty-one rare plants. It also restricts the uprooting of all wild plants.

Restrictions on Killing or Possessing Protected Species

Under Section 1 of the Act it is an offence to kill, injure or capture, without reasonable excuse, Greater Horseshoe Bats, Mouse-Eared Bats, Sand Lizards, Smooth Snakes, Natterjack Toads and Large Blue Butterflies. Section 1(b) also makes it an offence to possess 'any protected wild creature which is not shown to have been killed or taken otherwise than in contravention of this Act.' The purpose of this is to put the onus of proof of legality on the person possessing the protected animal (as opposed to a special provision in the Badger Act (1973) which requires the prosecuting authority to prove contravention of the law). However it may mean, in theory, that all museums with any of the protected species in their collections are technically guilty of an offence under the 1975 Act.

This matter has been taken up by the Museums Association with the Nature Conservancy Council and when the position has been clarified a note will be published in the 'Museums Bulletin'. In the meantime it would be worthwhile for curators to check that they have full data on all protected species in their collections. It may also be useful for the Curators Group to draw up a central register of these collections.

Restrictions on Sale and Exchange

The Act forbids dealing in protected creatures, live or dead. Section 2 (2) goes on to say 'any reference to sale shall be construed as including a reference to barter and exchange, and any reference to dead creatures shall be construed as including the skins or skeletons of such creatures'. Thus any curator purchasing protected species should ensure that the dealer is in possession of a valid licence whatever the age of the specimen. Any museum exchanging or selling these species should, similarly hold a licence (see below).

Restrictions on Marking or Ringing

Some curators may undertake marking procedures as part of research projects. They should be aware that licences are required for tagging any of the protected species, and all Bats.

Protection for Plants

It is an offence to pick, uproot or destroy any of the scheduled twenty-one plants or parts thereof (see Appendix 1) unless under licence. It is less known that the Act also makes it an offence to uproot any plant without authorisation. There are obviously exceptions for good agricultural reasons, and it may prove in practice that the owners of land may be 'authorised persons' under the Act, This, however is still to be tested in the Courts, and care should be taken in publicising this provision, for obvious reasons. (Picture some landowners you know 'selling off' their orchids!)

Licensing

Specific licences are available to allow taking or dealing in protected species,

and uprooting plants, for scientific, educational or conservation purposes. Unless for the purpose of preventing the spread of disease, these can be obtained from the licensing Section of the Nature Conservancy Council, 12 Hope Terrace, Edinburgh EH9 2AS (031-447-4784).

Publicity

Circular 86/75 from the Department of the Environment (155/75 from the Welsh Office), as well as summarising the main provisions of the Act, points out that the Act is primarily educative - a prosecution can obviously do nothing to restore an animal or plant which has been destroyed. The fines (up to £100) will 'discourage the small minority of over-enthusiastic naturalists and collectors who take a particular interest in rarities and constitute a threat to our native flora and fauna' (N.C.C. circular) but museums, especially those run by local authorities, have a very important role to play in preventing offences against the Act through ignorance of the law, and ignorance of the importance of rare species.

After indicating (inevitably) that 'any expenditure incurred under this Act should be accommodated within existing budgets' the D. o. E. circular goes on to suggest a variety of means of publicising the provisions of the Act. A number of bodies have produced posters etc., and these are listed in Appendix 2.

But probably most important is contact with local County Naturalist Trust, and the regional officer(s) of the Nature Conservancy Council who can indicate whether any of the protected species are in fact found in the region. The museum can then notify their local authority of the rare species, and indicate their own interest in the Act. It should be noted that all local authorities, including parish and community councils as well as national park committees, are authorised to institute proceedings under the Act. Curators may also wish to contact local schools or societies and to offer advice or talks.

Further Notes

1. Section 15(2) reads 'Any fungus or alga shall not be treated as a plant for the purposes of this Act unless it is a composite of fungus and alga in the form of a lichen'. There is no further indication as to how it is possible to 'uproot' lichens !
2. The Act does not apply to Northern Ireland.
3. The Nature Conservancy Council are obliged to review the Schedules of protected species in the Act every five years, and at any time may add any species which 'has become so rare that its status as a British Wild Creature or Plant is being endangered by any action designated as an offence under this Act'.

Appendix 1

Species of Protected Plant

Common name

Alpine Gentian
Alpine Sow-thistle
Alpine Woodsia
Blue Heath
Cheddar Pink
Diapensia

Scientific name

Gentiana nivalis
Cicerbita alpina
Woodsia alpina
Phyllodoce caerulea
Dianthus gratianopolitanus
Diapensia lapponica

Appendix 1 (continued)Species of Protected Plant

<u>Common name</u>	<u>Scientific name</u>
Drooping Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga cernua</i>
Ghost Orchid	<i>Epipogium aphyllum</i>
Killarney Fern	<i>Trichomanes speciosum</i>
Lady's-slipper	<i>Cypripedium calceolus</i>
Mezereon	<i>Daphne mezereum</i>
Military Orchid	<i>Orchis militaris</i>
Monkey Orchid	<i>Orchis simia</i>
Oblong Woodsia	<i>Woodsia ilvensis</i>
Red Helleborine	<i>Cephalanthera rubra</i>
Snowdon Lily	<i>Lloydia serotina</i>
Spiked Speedwell	<i>Veronica spicata</i>
Spring Gentian	<i>Gentiana verna</i>
Teesdale Sandwort	<i>Minuartia stricta</i>
Tufte saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga cespitosa</i>
Wild Gladiolus	<i>Gladiolus illyricus</i>

Appendix 2Relevant Literature

The Act itself is published by HMSO, price £0.20p. ISBN 0 10 544875 3

The COUNCIL FOR NATURE are to publish a short leaflet describing the Act together with a longer pamphlet on wild plants and the law. Details of publication dates etc., are not yet known but information on these can be obtained from the Council at Zoological Gardens, Regent's Park, London NW1 4RY (Tel 01-722-7111).

The FRIENDS OF THE EARTH have produced a poster

'Hands off these animals : Britain's rarest animals'
(60 x 43 cms 24" x 16")

which illustrates the six creatures protected under the Act. This is available, price £0.50p (plus £0.13p postage), from 9 Poland Street, London W1V 3DG (Tel 01-437-6121).

The BOTANICAL SOCIETY OF THE BRITISH ISLES have produced a poster

'These endangered plants are protected by law'
(60 x 40 cms 24" x 14")

which illustrates the twenty-one species of plants protected under the Act. This is available, price £0.35p (including postage), from Oundle Lodge, Oundle, Peterborough (Special discount on orders over 100).

Codes of Conduct

There are a number of 'Codes of Conduct' relevant to nature conservation which are available from the following addresses :-

- 'Coastal Code'
Natural Environment Research Council, Alhambra House, 27-33,
Charing Cross Road, London WC2H 0AX.
- 'Code for Insect Collecting'
Joint Committee for the Conservation of British Insects, c/o Royal
Entomological Society of London, 41 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5HU.

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SERVING YOUR LOCAL COMMUNITY

Bernard Walker, Curator of Natural History and Geology, Scunthorpe

Early this year the Scunthorpe Borough Museum and Art Gallery opened its new extension to the public. This consists of a small Geology Gallery and Curator's Office for Natural History and Geology on the ground floor, and on the floor above a picture store, a de-humidified archaeology store and the Museum Curator's office. The extension sounds quite small in scope but the visual effect created within the building is unique and offers exciting possibilities for the public and for display. The extension now encloses within the gallery a fine example of an Ironstone Workers cottage, the living room of a Victorian Vicarage, and gives an excellent panoramic view out to the Vicarage Gardens and the first view ever into the Museum for the passing public, from a busy road.

In effect the extension has been wrapped around the southern end of a modern Art Gallery at first floor level to enclose the re-erected cottage and part of St. Lawrence's Vicarage, thus creating a most unusual collection of highly fossiliferous ironstone facies within a new Geology Gallery as well as a very pleasing Ironstone and matching brick exterior, blending beautifully with the existing architecture. The measure of the architect's success was very evident when the builder's screens were finally removed and one regular passer-by was heard to say "Fancy putting all those boards up just to put a new window in!" She had not even noticed the extension!

For the official opening of these revitalised galleries it seemed appropriate to the occasion to produce for the visiting public and Schools using the Museum's facilities, as well as the Councillors, a brochure saying very clearly what the functions of this modern Museum Department are in 1975, covering Museum Work, Education, Conservation and Leisure in the Countryside. The Department does not employ any special technicians or display staff but relies upon part time and voluntary workers to help with its projects. This paper is therefore presented as a contribution to the first Newsletter of the Biological Curators Group in the hope that similar papers will follow from other museums showing how they are adapting to the needs of the local community and therefore making the best use of their special skills and the unique possibilities and facilities available to them.

Request for Information

The Scunthorpe Museum collections are certainly enriched by the fine specimens donated by Adeline L. Sich. The collection includes over 500 fossils and minerals. It is part of a much larger collection which includes many seashells. The fossils are chiefly Jurassic (Cotswold and Yorkshire) and Cretaceous. Some minerals and polished specimens were donated by the collector in February 1940.

Bernard Walker at the Borough Museum and Art Gallery, Oswald Road, Scunthorpe, South Humberside would be glad to receive information concerning the whereabouts of other material or data relating to this collector.

Wanted

Mrs Anne Frankish at Scunthorpe Museum (address above) would like to hear from anyone who has copies of Parts 1 and V11 of the Drawings of British Plants by Stella Ross-Craig published by G. Bell and Sons for disposal.

REPORT ON THE SYMPOSIUM ON BIOLOGICAL RECORD CENTRES
held at Oxfordshire County Museum, Woodstock, 25/26th September 1975.

Stephen Flood, Keeper of Natural History, City Museum, St. Albans.

Session 1. Leader Simon Davey, Hampshire Museum Service.

Following an introduction by Miss L. Ball, Director of the Area Museums Service for South Eastern England (sponsors of the symposium) and a welcome by Mr. R. Foster, Director of the Oxfordshire County Museum Service (hosts) there were contributions from session leaders and delegates outlining their interest in or experience of, running biological record centres.

Session 2. Leader Stephen Flood, St. Albans Museums.

John Campbell of the Woodstock Museum showed slides of Oxfordshire, giving an impression of the wide range of wildlife habitats and potential changes in the countryside. Stephen Flood reviewed the sources of information available to anyone starting a regional record centre.

Session 3. Leader Jill Royston, Bucks County Museum.

Miss Royston outlined filing systems used for storing and retrieving biological data.

Session 4. Leader John Campbell, Oxfordshire County Museum.

Representatives of the Oxfordshire County Council, The Nature Conservancy Council Regional Office, the County Naturalist Trust and local Natural History Societies, discussed their attitudes towards regional record centres, particularly with regard to confidentiality of records and the use of data for planning. The necessity for impartiality in record centres was stressed, and all were agreed that the existence of regional record centres was fundamental to conservation, planning and education.

Session 5. Leader Eric Philp, Maidstone Museum.

This session consisted of short contributions on a number of topics related to the running of record centres. J. Bond of Woodstock Museum explained the filing and retrieval system of the Oxfordshire Monument Record. Jill Royston spoke on collaboration with schools to obtain records and guide field studies. John Ismay gave details of ecological evaluation systems. Simon Davey showed how colour slides could reveal seasonal and long-term changes in habitats.

Session 6. Leader John Ismay, Norwich Museums.

A draft paper was presented to the meeting dealing with Objectives, Terms of Reference and Suggested Duties of Regional Record Centres. Following discussions a final version of the document was produced.

Session 7.

After outlining the work of the Biological Records Centre at Monks Wood, Mr. G. Radford (standing in for Dr. F. Perring) spoke of meetings to be held with the Society of County Museum Officers and other bodies with a view to proposing a case for Regional Record Centres in museums. He also gave details of a booklet being prepared which would be a guide to the operation of a record centre.

The meeting resolved that :-

1. A report of the proceedings should be prepared by the A. M. S. if possible and that a summary of matters discussed should be submitted to the 'Museums Bulletin'.
2. The Museums Association be encouraged to incorporate the running of record centres in its Diploma training schemes.
3. The Biological Curators Group should continue contacts and take up some of the topics raised at this symposium.
4. Every effort should be made to encourage cooperation between record centres and to achieve recognition for regional centres in museums.

NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS - A CASE FOR 'ROVING' CURATORS

Peter Morgan, Keeper of Vertebrate Zoology, Merseyside County Museums

The deteriorating state of many biological collections, frequently associated with inadequate storage has come to be fully recognised in recent years. In most cases too little money, staff-time or space have been allocated to deal with the problem. The extension of the traditional role of the curator to include that of data recorder and coordinator, although vitally necessary, leads to difficulties over the allocation of staff time and resources. General curatorial duties and especially research into the history of collections, nearly always receives a low priority.

Mounted bird collections illustrate well the problems to be faced and suggest a possible way in which they might be overcome. In an attempt to stimulate the use of collections, Stansfield (1956) published details of a bird study skin survey. A wealth of material and data also exists, however, in mounted bird collections, a very underworked field. Most museums have, at some time, been presented with such material as a collection or in individual cases. The older collections are most important and it must be remembered that at that time, little distinction was made between scientific study or display. Indeed, the more important the specimen, the more likely it was to be mounted for display. Important scientific specimens would now be made into study skins but older material may be in the form of fading and 'tatty' specimens which on the face of it have little or no useful purpose.

Many museums have 'rationalised' their collections, an increasing trend resulting from the strong commitment to local areas and faunas. Foreign material especially, has, and is being sold, given away or destroyed, isolating it from any relevant data (often stored in forgotten archives or old stock books). Too often old mounted material is appraised for its educational and display potential, the scientific value which is just as important now if not more so than formerly, being overlooked. How many Cook specimens are extant, and how many have been destroyed? Old, faded or 'tatty' specimens must be checked very carefully, but where is the expertise to cope with the volume of work involved? Where does the responsibility for these collections lie, beyond the immediate scope of the institution housing them? Nobody appears willing to accept responsibility for checking and coordinating the data from these collections. The national museums, especially the B.M. (Nat. Hist.) appears fully committed elsewhere. Other museums, including the larger provincial museums do not all have the relevant specialists or travel facilities to undertake this function and the Area Services are concentrated on the preparation of new material. Perhaps one should question whether the latter would be necessary if a comprehensive list of extant material were available and if museums had a more open transfer policy.

What is needed is a formal system to ensure that all collections and collectors are well documented, enabling the curator to fulfil his/her obligation to their institution and to the scientific world. IRGMA may assist with this but where is the high input time and the relevant expertise? How will the small museum curator, already overworked cope with demands from all sides? It becomes obvious that IRGMA will function more efficiently if the cards are completed by specialists. Surely it is preferable that the person compiling the data be familiar with the material than have someone attempt to decipher the 'polyglot' output when it reaches the computer. The classified identifications pose the main problems with many names having been used for the same species over the past century, most of them appearing somewhere on museum labels.

As an interdisciplinary locality index, the IRGMA system may work well, but for a small branch of natural history, such as birds, the inter museum indexes will need a separate programme to fully analyse the data. If the input is prepared by specialists the data should be compatible, and the researcher's task will be easier. At the present time collections are neglected and both museums and IRGMA need specialists. Central government is the only possible source of money on a formal basis and the niche for this specialist surely lies with the Area Services. Why cannot they and the Biological Curators Group work out an integrated plan for the appointment of specialist 'academic' curators who would work on the collections of a region? Their appointments could be full-time or on contract. It is no use arguing that nobody would want such posts, names of people in each discipline can be supplied if necessary. Collections can not be conserved until they are known to exist. When their importance has been established, priority for conservation work will be higher.

This system has been used once to my knowledge to catalogue a mollusc collection and similar proposals are being considered in Scotland. It is essential however that such developments be coordinated on a national as well as a regional basis. The British Museum (Natural History) and other national museums may not have the expertise to spare for the actual task of checking and cataloguing but their help in drafting a plan could be invaluable. It could also form a concrete link between national and provincial museums thus strengthening the informal personal contacts which exist at present. National museums might then take more interest in the hidden collections and the problems of the provinces. The 'roving' curators would form a link between the two systematically sorting through the collections of each museum whilst producing indexes for IRGMA if required. Complaints that the task is too large only serve to show the scale of past neglect and the urgency of the situation. Mounted birds are only one example and it must be realised that as Mayr states :- 'Dissent and controversy will inevitably result if specialists in one group of organisms are oblivious to the needs of specialists in other groups'.

The problem of neglected collections and loss of data is common throughout the biological world and the BCG is ideally placed to ascertain the scale of the problem and to suggest methods of dealing with it. It must be stated that all opinions expressed here are my own and not necessarily those of the institution in which I work.

References.

Stansfield, G. 'Bird Skin Collections and Local Museums' Bird Study 12 ii (1965) 129-132

FUND FOR THE PRESERVATION OF TECHNOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC MATERIAL

J. C. Robinson, Assistant Keeper at the Science Museum, South Kensington, London SW7 2DD (Tel 01-589 6371 Ext 414) would like to draw the attention of members of the Group to the availability of grants from the above fund for the acquisition of specimens in the natural sciences including both biological and geological material. A leaflet giving details about the Fund and the procedure for applications is available from Mr. Robinson.

Codes of Conduct (continued)

3. 'Country Code'
Countryside Commission, John Dower House, Crescent Place, Cheltenham
Gloucestershire GL50 3RA.
4. 'Nature Photographers' Code of Practice'
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire
SG19 2DL.
5. 'Outdoor Studies Code'
Council for Environmental Education, 9 Devereux Court, Strand, London
WC2R 3JR.

Existing Legislation

Protection of Birds Act 1954-67.

Deer Act 1963.

Conservation of Seals Act 1970.

Badgers Act 1973.

Further information from Nature Conservancy Council Library Service, 19/20
Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PY. (Tel. 01-235 3241).

UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER BOOKSHOP

The University Bookshop at Mayor's Walk, Leicester LE1 7RD (Tel 0533 26514)
will send on request a stock list of titles relating to Museum Studies. Of particular
interest to the BCG might be the following :-

- Anderson, E. Methods of Collecting and Preserving Vertebrate Animals
Queen's Printer, Ottawa, Canada
- Biological Society of Washington. Natural History Collections, Past, Present and
Future. Smithsonian Institution Press. 1969.
- Knudsen, J. Collecting and Preserving Plants and Animals Harper and Row. 1972
- Engstrom, K. Natural History Museums and the Community
Scandinavian University Books. 1973.
(Papers presented at a symposium in 1969 to mark the 150th
anniversary of the Swedish Museum of Natural History)