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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Title: The Type-Concept: Steady State or Big Bang?

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Source: Heppell, D. (1978). The Type-Concept: Steady State or Big Bang?. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter*, Vol 1 No 10, 34 - 35.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1608>

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This will often be the most involved part of the work and therefore time-consuming, but is obviously the most important. A collection has to be known and proved to be of value, as well as in some danger, before a rescue need be effected. Although the members of the Northwest Collection Research Unit include a cross-section of disciplinary interest, and have recently been joined by the geologists, outside help has to be solicited from other specialists. Involvement with biographical, historical, handwriting analysis, taxonomic and other related topics arises. The single most important reason for action being taken regarding a collection will be the presence of primary type material. This is usually defined as holotype, neotype, lectotype or syntypic series. Naturally, the presence of other type categories will have some importance. Otherwise, collections containing specimens with full data, determined or not, could find a home in any reference collection and older material may have an historical value which can be equally important.

It can be said that the NWCRU are already rescuing collections- from obscurity. The physical rescue, i. e. removal to a better place, of some collections is currently being considered and the best means of achieving this investigated.

E. G. Hancock  
July 1978

(The commentary on the various 35mm slides which accompanied the various headings as examples is not included here).

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### THE TYPE-CONCEPT: STEADY STATE OR BIG BANG?

Understanding of the term "type" has been confused by its use in two opposing, though related, concepts. Both are derived from the pre-Darwinian beliefs that each genus represented a separate act of creation within which one species more fully expressed the "essence" of that genus than the others grouped around it. This central "ideal" species was the type, but could be displaced if a more "typical" species was discovered. Likewise within a species the type was subject to successive replacement by specimens which more perfectly "typified" the species than did the original specimen.

From these early practices arose on the one hand (the "steady state") the nomenclatural concept of the type as an unchanging and unique reference point governing the application of the name of a taxon and objectively defining it, and on the other hand (the "big bang") an ever-expanding galaxy of "types" radiating out from the primary type, through the type-series, to topotypes, specimens named by the author of the species name, specimens subsequently compared with the primary type, voucher reference sets, and so on. This stemmed from a reluctance to base the taxonomic concept of a taxon on a single, and possibly atypical (in the statistical sense) unit.

To reconcile these two extremes the concept of nominal taxa was introduced for the concept denoted by the name and objectively defined by the unique type,

with which the remainder of the taxonomic concept denoted by the same name is subjectively associated. The type thus represents the static component of the dynamic state which is limited taxonomically only by the requirement that the static type component must be contained somewhere within its limits.

A comprehensive summary of the history of the type-concept and the categories now recognised has been written by Robert Nash and Helena Ross and republished in the BCG Newsletter No. 9.

David Heppell

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Unfortunately it has not been possible to obtain the text of the remaining lectures from the Edinburgh Conference in time for publication in this issue. It is hoped to reproduce these in the December Newsletter, but meanwhile below is the Report prepared by Geoff Stansfield and published in Museums Journal, September 1978, which some members may not have seen.

#### REPORT OF THE BIOLOGY CURATORS GROUP SPECIALIST SESSION

Over 40 members attended the Biology Curators Group specialist session on 4th July, more than half of whom had travelled to Edinburgh especially for the meeting. The morning visits to the herbarium of the Royal Botanic Garden and the collection stores of the Royal Scottish Museum provided a valuable opportunity for the exchange of information and demonstration of techniques for the practical management of botanical and zoological collections. Both institutions were complimented on the high standards achieved.

The afternoon session was devoted to four short-papers followed by a general discussion. Phillip Ashmole of the University of Edinburgh considered the usefulness of museums for research. Geoff Hancock of Bolton Museum gave an illustrated account of the collection rescue operation in the North West, David Heppell of the Royal Scottish Museum discussed the 'Type concept' in zoology and E. C. Pelham-Clinton, also of the Royal Scottish Museum, considered the special problems of insect collections. In the main these papers were concerned with matters of interest only to biologists. They will be printed in a future issue of the BCG Newsletter. There are however a number of matters arising from the general discussion which are of interest to the general membership.

As a preamble it should be noted that the BCG now has a membership approaching 200 and that the Newsletter, now in its ninth issue has become an important medium for the publication of papers describing important historic collections and matters concerning the maintenance and use of collections. A great deal of the work of the Group has been centred on research into the history of collections in order to locate and identify important historical material. In addition to the survey of collections carried out to provide evidence for the Standing Commission (to be published in 1978),