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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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BCG Activities 1979

In preparation for the AGM the Committee are considering a number of activities for next year. These are almost certain to include a follow-up to the 1977 collection survey and a membership drive, but other suggestions from members would be most welcome, addressed to the Chairman please.

International Conference on the history of museums and collections in natural history

London April 4-6 1979

There has been a most encouraging response, following the circulation of the leaflet on this conference, sponsored and organised by BCG, GCG and the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History. Already 170 replies asking for further details have been received, and as it will probably be necessary to restrict attendance to 200, anyone who has not replied is encouraged to do so as soon as possible (to Mrs. Judith Diment at the Palaeontology Library in the BM (Nat. Hist.), the organising secretary).

Even more pleasing has been the arrival of some 60 abstracts of papers for the Conference. They have a truly international coverage, with over 20 papers from the United States alone. A summary of titles is given below to give some idea of the scope of the conference but, as the organising committee has not yet undertaken the difficult task of selecting a programme, this is no guarantee that a particular paper will be read at the Conference, although we do hope to publish all suitable papers.

Summary of synopses submitted:

Species covered include Woodlice, the Large White, 18th and 19th century ornithological collections, Brazilian grasses and South African snakes.

Collectors dealt with are Lyell, Bright, Bradford Meek, the Sowerbys, Sloane, Banks, Buckland, Hooker, and Darwin's plant collections from the Beagle voyage.

Among museums surveyed in this country, The British Museum (Natural History) York, Liverpool and Edinburgh are prominent, with foreign contributions from Poland, Egypt, Canada, Spain, Germany, Vienna and many American museums.

Request for Information

W. Harcourt Bath, W. H. Nunney and J. Mearns collections

Any information on the whereabouts of the insect and other collections of these Naturalists would be welcome. Also any information on the men

themselves. Bath resided in Birmingham and formed extensive collections of Lepidoptera, Dragonflies, shells, crustacea, birds eggs and nests. Nunney resided in London and had collections of aquatic insects especially dragonflies. Mearns was from Aberdeen and formed collections of insects especially Odonata. Please contact K. G. V. Smith, Department of Entomology, British Museum (Natural History), London, SW7 5BD.

Restitution and Return of Cultural Property

The following paper was presented at the Professional Members Meeting at the Museums Association Edinburgh Conference, and, as reported in the August 'Museums Bulletin', specialist groups have been asked to comment on the contents. Natural history material is included in the proposed negotiations.

Although the majority of biology curators would regard any return of foreign material as unacceptable, there appears to be a danger that this problem will become 'political' and solutions could be imposed upon museums in this country. Apparently Scandinavian museums have already embarked upon large scale return of specimens. Ethnographers in this country are establishing an 'exchange club' for two-way traffic in collections.

It is hoped that the subject will be given a suitable airing at the AGM, and it would be wise to consider drawing up guidelines and conditions for such material as will not affect research and education programmes in this country and will be secure and available when returned.

THE RESTITUTION AND RETURN OF CULTURAL PROPERTY

A note by Geoffrey Lewis

1. UNESCO, at its 19th General Conference in 1976, adopted a resolution (4.128) which inter-alia provided for all necessary measures to be taken for an inter-governmental committee to be established (at its next session) to facilitate bilateral negotiations for the restitution or return of cultural property to those countries having lost them as a result of colonial or foreign occupation. The resolution also sought technical guidance in this matter from ICOM which was available at a meeting of experts in Dakar, March 1978.
2. A mass media campaign to promote this programme and influence public opinion towards it will be organised on a world-wide basis this summer and will be intensified during 1979-80. This is also intended to encourage cooperation between museums to establish inventories of material existing in collections abroad. UNESCO has already initiated a world-wide inventory of representative objects of Oceanic culture and a UNESCO consultant is currently in this country for this purpose.
3. To date the British Government has opposed or abstained from voting on