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COLLECTING POLICIES

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An Introduction to the subject

A casual look at almost any natural history collection will reveal anomalies and inconsistencies which reflect the haphazard way in which collections have been assembled. Some groups such as butterflies may be well represented - probably with drawers and boxes of a single common species like the small tortoiseshell. Other groups such as diptera may be entirely absent. The reason for this is obvious, a large proportion of the collections have been acquired from private collectors and very little initiative has been taken by the museum itself. Fashions in collecting linked to the availability of identification keys have meant that more attention has been given to some groups than to others.

For some time now it has been clear that more attention must be devoted to the question of what to acquire. On economic grounds alone the availability of resources in terms of specialist natural history curators demands that we do not waste these resources by collecting duplicate or unwanted material. The processing of one specimen (collecting, mounting and documenting) may well cost several pounds and the storage of one specimen in a drawer or on a shelf for the period of one year may also be in the region of several pounds.

There are however more important considerations. Until very recently there has not been a single museum in the U.K. which has set out in meaningful terms and made freely available a statement of objectives within which a collecting policy could be formulated. Most statements which do exist are couched in terms which are of little guidance to the curator. The increased attention which is being directed towards the cost of publicly supported institutions has encouraged museums to think more objectively although there is still a long way to go.

One point which must be borne in mind is that the function of the museum is not static. The natural history museum in particular needs to redefine its role taking into account the urgent need to document the natural and semi-natural environment and the changes taking place in order to be able to advise planning authorities and other bodies when decisions are being made about various kinds of development.

What can we expect to get from the policy statement for the museum? In the first place there should be some statement of the geographical area to be covered - whether this is a local government administrative boundary in the case of a local authority museum, or a more arbitrary boundary in the case of (say) a University museum. Ideally from the natural history point of view

it should be a natural boundary - life would be very much easier if we were all curators of island museums. It is common sense that the geographical boundary must reflect the presence of other museums with similar functions and one would hope that there would be some informal agreement with neighbouring museums to prevent duplication of effort.

The policy statement should also give some indication of subject coverage. Should museums accept material of a kind for which there are not apecialist curators or facilities available in the museum? The rationalisation of museum collections between museums presents almost insuperable problems and a more practical solution might well be the appointment of peripatetic specialist curators.

One can look to the policy statement for guidance on the question of the public to be served by a museum. Local authority museums have in common their role of service to the whole community but National, University and private museums will in general have more specialised roles reflecting their particular research and teaching.

One point which has received very little attention is that the collecting policy to fulfil the documentation function and the policy for exhibition and education might be quite different. It might be perfectly logical to restrict the natural history collecting to a limited area surrounding the museum whilst at the same time having an exhibition policy which aims to show how the area related to the region and which in consequence must draw on a much wider range of material.

Some of our difficulties arise from museums trying to fulfil too many roles and one wonders whether a more specialised role may not be of some advantage. The United States National Park Service in its Handbook for Curators (1967) includes the following paragraph in the Chapter on 'What to Acquire' -

> The Study Series consists of the specimens not on display in the exhibit room but needed for any of several other purposes. Some specimens need to be gathered and preserved for research into park resources or the park story. Some provide permanent documentation of the park's resources, or of data used in research. Some are for reference - to guide administrative decisions, to instruct seasonal interpreters and other park employees, to assist visiting specialists, and to answer questions from the public. Some form a reserve for future exhibition, for illustrating talks, and for other interpretive uses. You measure the value of such a study series by its utility and not by its size. To build a useful collection you must follow an active, planned acquisition programme based on the scope of collections definition. It requires selective, purposeful collecting to build up and round out the series, supplemented by the careful elimination or replacement of inappropriate specimens to refine it. A well-balanced collection, fitted to the park's needs, will not be achieved by passively acquiring only what happens to be offered or, on the other hand, by promiscuously gathering whatever can be obtained.

I have always though this a useful statement and one which could be the starting point for most museum policies by substituting 'museum' for 'park'.

Even when we have tackled the broader problems there are many factors which place restrictions on our collecting.

The Law and in particular the Protection of Birds Acts and the Conservation of Wild Creatures and Wild Plants Act place legal restrictions on some aspects of collections. There are other less binding but just as important ethical considerations which must be considered. Natural history curators would now subscribe to the general principles of the conservation of fauna and flora and would in consequence wish to follow the Codes of Conduct set out by such organisations as the Royal Entomological Society and the Botanical Society of the British Isles.

Arising from our professional allegiances we should also wish not to accept material where the accompanying documentation is of doubtful accuracy or does not meet the standards which we now demand. We should not accept new material unless we have appropriate specialist staff, adequate conservation and storage facilities, adequate equipment and libraries to enable us to study the material adequately and finally adequate facilities to receive and supervise specialist visiting researchers or to pack and despatch material at the request of other researchers.

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'Censure would be his due who should be perpetually heaping up of natural collections, without design of building a structure of philosophy out of them, or advancing some propositions that might turn to the benefit and advantage of the world. This is in reality the true and only proper end of collections, of observations, and natural history.'

From the preface to John Woodward's catalogue (1729).