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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Aquaria in Museums

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Source: Murphy, M. D. (1977). Aquaria in Museums. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 1 No 5*, 9 - 10.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1505>

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EXTRACTS FROM AND ADDITIONS TO A TALK GIVEN TO THE
BIOLOGICAL CURATORS GROUP A.G.M. 3rd DECEMBER 1976 - BOLTON.

AQUARIA IN MUSEUMS

M.D. MURPHY
MERSEYSIDE COUNTY MUSEUMS

The talk, which was to take approximately forty minutes, was to be primarily concerned with a demonstration of a cheap method of producing all-glass aquaria, using materials not necessarily originally intended for this purpose.

However, before doing this, a brief description of the size and scope of the aquarium and vivarium at Merseyside Museum was thought to be appropriate.

The present aquarium was opened to the public on 26th March 1966 and formed part of Phase 1 of the re-construction of the Museum which was necessary after an incendiary attack caused extensive damage during the last war.

Originally designed for the display of living fish and invertebrates inhabiting tropical and temperate freshwater and marine environments, it has never fully achieved this aim, although admittedly some representatives of each of these ecological niches are on display at present. The reasons for this short-fall were (and still are) lack of sufficient money.

Given the present grim financial position local government finds itself in, we are, obviously, not likely to be able to improve this situation in the aquarium for some time to come. However, this does not mean that considerable growth of the department has not occurred since its inception. On the contrary, many improvements and additions have been made since 1966, not least of which have been the development of tropical marine quarantine, experimental and display tanks; refrigerated systems for temperate displays; cold room facilities for holding living food and the inclusion of a vivarium. To act as 'back up' facilities, a whole range of sophisticated equipment has been added over the years, some of the most important items include air turbines, water sterilizing equipment, up-rated water pumps and seven of the original 26 mild steel exhibition tanks replaced with G.R.P. (fibreglass) tanks of improved design. Advances have also been made in the field of water storage and filtration. Currently the display area consists of 27 exhibition tanks in the aquarium, having a total volume of approximately 14,000 gallons of saltwater and freshwater; and 10 small aquaria and Museum jars in the vivarium.

There are 60 all glass aquariums behind the scenes which are used for quarantine, breeding and 'growing-on'; these range in size from 20 gallons to 150 gallons; Fifteen of these are maintained at 52°F in a large cold room and function as storage tanks for very large quantities of living food - shrimp, prawn, crab etc. all of which help considerably to defray the annual cost of food. An automatic topping-up system draws water from any one of four 3,000 gallon reserve tanks containing either saltwater or freshwater and dispenses it, on demand to any of the 90 tanks in the aquarium.

The role of the aquarium plays in the Museum context is important and highly successful; as a visit to the exhibition gallery soon proves. It is the most frequented area in the Museum being particularly popular with children and causes many people to re-visit again and again throughout the year. Records show that over the last 12 month period, aquarium staff dealt with over 200 enquiries made by members of the public visiting the aquarium. This figure does not include casual enquiries taking less than a couple of minutes to answer, or those made by telephone and letter which together would be well in excess of this figure. The bulk of these enquiries were concerned with problems of maintaining a wide range of living material. Fish, reptiles, aquatic invertebrates, amphibians and insects were all dealt with and the commonest questions pertained to - correct diet, control of disease, provision of correct environment, species compatibility and identification of the entire animal or part of it. Frequently specimens were presented to the Museum and, after a period of quarantine, were placed on display.

Part of the Museums Education Service programme for schools is based on the aquarium and includes in its work sheets many of the more important species on display.

The potential of the aquarium and vivarium and their impact on the public, particularly via the Education Service, has not yet been fully realised. It is hoped, however, that when the financial climate allows completion of equipping and an improvement of staffing levels, the service these departments can offer will be dramatically increased and result, hopefully, in greater public awareness of our environment and the vital role aquatic life has to play in its continued well being.

There then followed an open invitation to the assembled members of the B.C.G. to visit the aquarium and vivarium at Liverpool.