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THE MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION
WORKING PARTY ON RECORD CENTRES IN MUSEUMS

Report of the first meeting of the Working Party held in Room 211, Department of the Environment, Fortress House, 23 Savile Row, London W.1 on Friday, 29 April 1977.

Present: Mr.K.J.Barton (in the chair)
Mr.Alan Aberg National Monuments Record
Mr.N.Cooper "
Mr.Henry Cleere Council for British Archaeology
Dr.F.R.Perring Biological Records Centre
Mr.Andrew Roberts Museum Documentation Association
Mr.J.A.Cooper Geological Curators Group (Leics.Museum)
Mr.S.R.Davey Hampshire County Museum Service
Mr.S.Flood Biological Curators Group (St.Albans Museum)
Mr.E.Greenwood " (Merseyside County Museums)
Mrs.P.Pottinger Hampshire County Museum Service
Miss B.Capstick Museums Association

Apologies:Mr.J.Bond Oxon County Museum Service (Archaeology)
Miss Laurel Ball AMSEEE (Social & Economic History)
Mr.Gareth Davies S.M.A.
Mr.Stuart Smith Ironbridge (Industrial History)

1. Introduction

The Chairman reminded members of the discussion at the meeting called by the Museums Association on 11 March at which the Working Party had been proposed. The Policy Committee of the Association had authorised this preliminary meeting to examine the recommendation that guidelines be prepared on museums as record centres and to report on the likely programme of work involved. The Chairman hoped to achieve agreement on the remit and avoid lengthy discussions.

2. Proposed content of guidelines

Attention was given to the various headings listed on the agenda.

(a) Coverage

AGREED that three levels of recording were required: local, county and national in the following areas of study: Archaeology, Geology, Biology, Social & Economic History, Industrial History, Military History and Historic Buildings, Sites and Monuments.

Problems of omissions or inadequate cover were identified as follows:
Biology (Birds covered by B.T.O) - Dr.Perring stated that the recording structure had been established but was not effective overall. One major omission being marine biology.

Geology - no structure for national record repository had been determined.

Social History - Museum of English Rural Life, Reading, undertook certain responsibilities but had no national remit

Underwater archaeology - dealt with to certain extent by National Maritime Museum.

Industrial History - CBA register of industrial monuments and NMR recording involved degree of duplication. Science Museum also acted as record centre.

(b) Level of Recording

AGREED that minimum data requirements for each discipline should be compiled, incorporating species and location data, utilisable both at intensive and non-intensive level and for inter-disciplinary, environmental usage.

Reference was made to the work already undertaken by the CBA/CS, the Biological Curators Group, the Geological Curators Group at a disciplinary level. Members were asked to supply information as soon as possible.

(c) Location of Record Centres

AGREED that record centres should be county-based and, wherever possible, located in the appropriate museum service.

It was recognised that there were areas where museum coverage was patchy, particularly in areas of high recreation pressure such as Wales and Scotland, where another organisation, possibly the Information Centres of National Parks, should act as the record centre.

The proposals jointly prepared by the Society of County Museum Directors and County Planning Officers Society were endorsed.

(d) Retrieval and consultation

AGREED that data must be integrated on a location basis and therefore

- (i) that inter-disciplinary consultation was necessary at county level to achieve satisfactory compatibility for environmental data purposes;
- (ii) that annual meetings to monitor and co-ordinate retrieval for each discipline be arranged by the national record centres;
- (iii) that an annual meeting be held to co-ordinate inter-disciplinary recording.

(e) Terminology

AGREED

- (i) that responsibility for adopting and reviewing recording terms should rest with the disciplines.
- (ii) that agreement should be reached on environmental descriptors (see also d above)

(f) Confidentiality of Records

AGREED that all data should be available for consultation but that special data, e.g. on rare species, should be at the discretion of the record centre. The location of record centres in museums should guarantee unprejudiced access by statutory bodies, research workers and the public.

(g) Finance

It was acknowledged that local authorities should be responsible for record centres at county level, although agency arrangements might be set up, e.g. West Yorkshire Data Bank. The resolution passed at the meeting on 11 March calling on central government to make grant-aid available through Area Museum Councils was endorsed.

It was AGREED that information should be provided as a free service, costs being charged for copying facilities and requests involving a major retrieval operation.

3. Existing Schemes or Proposals.

(a) Report on Environmental Data Centres prepared by SCMD/CPOS

Those members who had seen this paper recommended its adoption into the Association's statement and guidelines. It was proposed that copies be made available to the other statutory bodies represented on the Working Party.

(b) Geological Site Recording System

Mr. Cooper reported that recording formats had been agreed but record centres had yet to be designated. A documentation committee had been set up by the Geological Curators Group comprising representatives of the major geological societies, the Association of Teachers of Geology and the GCG. A disciplinary method of categorising information was used but data would be accessible for environmental retrieval.

(c) Archaeology

Mr. Aberg reported that a further meeting had been convened by NMR/CBA to which the Society of Museum Archaeologists, Standing Committee of Unit Managers and Association of County Archaeological Officers were invited to obtain agreement on terminology and compatibility between the different recording systems already in use.

4. Conclusions

AGREED to produce an interim report based on the Working Party's discussions to form a statement of policy for submission to the Museums Association conference in July 1977.

AGREED that the Museums Association should act as the co-ordinating body for the operation of environmental record centres and that a further meeting to review developments be arranged early in 1978, possibly March at the D o E.

Following this meeting a series of "Guidelines for Record Centres" was produced and circulated to members of the Working Party. At the same time the Council of the Museums Association discussed the problem and produced the resolution on Record Centres which will be presented at the Museums Association Annual General Meeting (reproduced below for non-members). The final version of the "Guidelines" will be discussed at Conference and, if agreed, will be included in the next Newsletter. Meanwhile a "flow chart" has been produced and is included below, together with current B.R.C. notes on recording schemes and atlases available.

Motion, proposed by Council of the Museums Association, for the 48th Annual General Meeting at Bradford on 16th July, 1977.

"That the Association in Conference considers that Environmental Record Centres should be established on a county-wide basis and, wherever possible, located in the appropriate museum service:

that the Museums Association be responsible for the co-ordination of such interdisciplinary recording in liaison with existing national organisation responsible for co-ordinating data collection in their fields of interest:

that the Guidelines being prepared by the Working Party on Record Centres in Museums be circulated to all interested parties".