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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Biology Curators' Group. Secretary's Report for 1977.

The second full year of the B.C.G. has been busy and productive but its activities have stretched money and time to the limit. A fifty percent increase in membership has allowed the group to survive financially but available time of the officers and committee has been directed to liaison with other bodies, the preparation of reports and conferences and a full newsletter. Member liaison has therefore suffered to some extent for which I must apologise. An analysis of our involvement over the year and the appearing trends should allow some projection of the work involved during the forthcoming year. It has become apparent that workloads and projects need to be divided amongst more people and to this end the committee numbers have been increased and two new officer posts created. The latter posts of Membership Secretary/Treasurer and Assistant Editor should improve the groups personal contacts with individual members ensuring at the same time updated membership lists and a more regular supply of articles for the newsletter. Although membership has increased this year no concerted membership drive for more institutional members has been possible but this can be remedied next year. The new committee contains a biological curator from every Area Council region, hopefully each area will discuss issues leading to a more efficient structure for the group. A full discussion on future policy and projects should involve all members at the A.G.M. followed later by comments in the newsletter.

B.C.G. members are all heavily involved with their own collections and record centres, tasks which leave little free time for instant action often requested by other bodies with full time secretariats. This primary commitment to their own work by curators is the B.C.G.'s strength but is also its weakness, available time being restricted. It is encouraging to see that enthusiasm and spirit has not waned over the past year and that all members have responded well to any task allotted to them. This has been well reflected in the excellent response to the questionnaire on collections. Only three of the museums circulated did not submit returns and the depth of information contained in the returned questionnaires exceeded all possible expectations especially considering the

vital time factor.

A report of fifty four pages was submitted to the Standing Commission's Working Party on a National Plan. It was an objective assessment of holdings with no recommendations thus allowing a direct comparison with geological holdings submitted by the G.C.G. The report has been well received and because of the interest shown, not only by the Commission, a proper report on the Zoological and Botanical holdings based upon the report will be published by the B.C.G. during the forthcoming year. The report, apart from a numerical table of holdings, also contained the lists of material in eighty zoological groups and seven botanical groups, many of which are more comprehensive than anything previously published or available. The numerical holdings have been broken down into County, British and Foreign with an indication of Type, Figure and Voucher material held. The report has illustrated well the interest and dedication of all biological curators in their work and without the group it is likely that this project would never have been attempted let alone finalised in time. In this work alone the B.C.G. has justified its formation and role in museums throughout the country.

This last activity linked well with the major conference of the year at Liverpool on the Function of Local Natural History collections. The conference actually dealt with the importance of provincial natural history collections and in doing so brought together the Systematics Association, who also sponsored and arranged it, the British Museum(Natural History) and provincial museum curators. This conference enabled each to assess the others problems but more importantly a baseline for future cooperation was developed. This meeting was a springboard for future development which will be of benefit to all curators and taxonomists whether in provincial, national or university museums. The work involved in maintaining communication and improving contacts will be high, but it is apparent from past experience that this must be done and that the B.C.G. has established itself as the group to do it. The interest of members made the conference the success it undoubtedly was with no less than fifty one members, one third of the total B.C.G. membership attending from all over the country. At another level it is encouraging to see more of the curators from national museums joining thus making the B.C.G.

a truly comprehensive body. It is a development which can only lead to greater involvement and strength. If this trend continues there may yet be an intergrated and common approach to biological collections in Britain. The B.C.G's involvement in these developments has come quickly after the B.C.G's formation but the demands upon it must be met for there appears to be no other body established to carry out the task. In order to develop after the conference and questionnaire and to continue the momentum will require the B.C.G. to adopt more detailed policies. These will have to be based upon data not yet available and the B.C.G. will have to instigate other surveys obtaining financial assistance from elsewhere. We have proved over the past year that the expertise is available within our ranks to undertake such work but the full burden of finance as well as time should not fall solely on the group when the results are of such value and so essential to a wider audience.

The two main activities related to collections have occupied a large proportion of B.C.G's time but the group has been very active in another major field during the year. Record Centres, their formulation, running and development have seen members involvement in museums, in committees, and conferences. The newsletter content alone attests to the degree of committment in this area, Stephen Flood represented B.C.G. on the Museums Association Working Party on Record Centres in Museums with another of our members, Eric Greenwood, invited to attend. The B.C.G. Committee early in the year supported the production of a guidebook on the establishment and running of Record Centres. An outline draft was included in the newsletter and the full draft is now available for comment. The B.C.G. has paid for this but after discussion and amendments the final version will probably be published by the N.C.C. The discussion and involvement continues with a meeting at Monks Wood where members are speaking and contributing to discussions concerning the future. The guidebook itself will probably be used by the M.A's working Party as a basis for other disciplines not so well advanced in terms of national cooperation. The vital ingredient is still the individual emphasis shown by each record centre, often dependent upon resources and staff, but still within an overall policy,

which is linked closely with other organisations in many fields.

The B.C.G. has over the past year, kept contact with many organisations. Affiliation has been maintained with the American Association of Systematic Collections whilst exchanges are made with the Fauna Preservation Society and the Geological Curators' Group. The group has now taken over the liaison with the Council for Nature's Natural History Societies Committee from the Museums Association and an application to affiliate to the Biological Council of the Institute of Biology is still pending. The most recent development will be close liaison with I.C.O.M. on their proposed natural history newsletter and survey of world natural history museums.

The links with the Museums' Association continue to be maintained at several levels. The specialist session of the M.A.'s annual conference at Bradford was organised by the B.C.G. who took the opportunity to invite a speaker from the Fauna Preservation Society and the I.U.C.N. Committee on Trade in Wildlife. This session along with those of other disciplinary groups were generally agreed to have contributed to a successful conference, with the result that groups have been invited to arrange next year's session. Geoff Stansfield our M.A. liaison officer reported details of the session back to the main conference with three recommendations to be considered by Council.

The B.C.G. has been asked for its views on all Museums Association surveys and requests during the year but it has not been possible to put forward a B.C.G. line. Time has not been available to gather information and it has been thought best for B.C.G. to concentrate upon those issues only it was undertaking and to allow curators to submit their own views through the normal channels. There may be more time through newsletters next year to obtain information on Volunteers etc. than previously, and members' comments would be appreciated.

The ad hoc Professional Services Committee became the Professional Groups Committee of the Museums' Association following a motion passed at the Bradford Conference. This committee has provoked a lot of debate within B.C.G. and is not without controversy. The committee is a consultative one composed at the moment

primarily of disciplinary groups. The B.C.G. has resisted any direct affiliation to the Association, as have other groups, and the whole question of affiliation and the relationship of each group within the P.G.C. and the Association is still being discussed. Strictly speaking affiliation is not possible as under fifty percent of the B.C.G. are members of the Association, and for a new type of affiliation to be instigated the Association may have to change their statutes or rules relating to the differing types of affiliation. The composition of the committee is still under consideration and the B.C.G. has maintained that to be of real value membership of the P.G.C. should be restricted to disciplinary groups and not widened. This would also be in accordance with the original feelings and aims in establishing the Professional Services Committee. The group is still evolving and its strength lies in the direct contact of the B.C.G. with the President of the Association who is Chairman and with the Chairman of other M.A. committees who also attend. These links must be retained and in return for calling the meetings the B.C.G. offer the Association free reports, newsletters and advice on matters at a disciplinary level which hopefully contribute to an overall picture. It is unlikely as the years go on that this information freely given would be available from elsewhere; the B.C.G. contributes financially already by using its membership fees and time to obtain the required information. It is hoped that B.C.G. can continue to contribute to the Committee and is pleased that such a forum exists to discuss issues such as reserve collections, record centres, and museum policy.

The organisation of meetings and conferences this year have brought curators together and it is difficult to envisage more meetings per year given the shortage of funds for travel and subsistence. The B.C.G. may serve as a forum at a regional level in the future, placing links between curators on a more regular basis at a local as well as the more infrequent national level. It is essential that members, as they have done this year continually raise points to be discussed and decided upon. Technical aspects of natural history work have been raised less this year but groups of curators together can easily remedy this.

The next conference is the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History. G.C.G. , B.C.G. one in April 1979 and thought should be given now to a possible conference in 1980 which would attract more European Biologists and university biologists especially following the success both academically and financially of the Liverpool Conference. Summaries of the papers from the latter conference are being included in the December Museums Journal and perhaps some longer articles from Biology curators could be submitted in the future raising points to be discussed by other curators and directors in museums. The newsletter is achieving a balance but more articles are needed both to stimulate and to increase debate about the role of the B.C.G. and areas which it should be examining. The past year has been a demanding but fruitful one and the next year must see a period of consolidation as well as development, the aims of the group as originally proposed are being fulfilled but events often overtake us. It is necessary to take stock after this year and plan, the better organised we are and the more we all contribute the less chance we have of being swamped by unexpected demands. There appears no shortage of work for the group to do! and on the evidence of the past year I have no doubt that the continued spirit and zeal of members will achieve all that is required.

Peter Morgan,
Hon.Secretary.

25th November 1977.