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THE BCG AND EDUCATION

As a member of the BCG working in a Museum Education Service I should like to comment upon the report (as it appeared in the December newsletter) read by Geoff Stansfield to the general forum at the Museums' Association Conference at Bradford in July 1977 regarding museums and conservation of wildlife. In addition I wish to respond to the Hon. Secretary's request for articles "to increase debate about the role of the BCG and the area which it should be examining".

The general conclusions reached by the Specialist Group at Bradford are under three main headings: Research and recording; Planning and management; and Education.

Under Education the meeting identified 'a shortfall in conservation orientated exhibits'. Whilst agreeing that this is an area which requires improvement, one must ask: "Is that all?" Was it lack of time which prevented greater elaboration or is it that the only educational tool considered to be of importance in Museums is the exhibition on public display? I hope not.

The recommendations are also in three parts: Affiliation to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature; an increase in research facilities; and production of indices of specimens of endangered and recently extinct species held in Museums. Again, one must agree that all of these are required, but surely the BCG should press for these and more.

Exhibitions showing aspects of conservation can be tailor-made but, as the meeting found, these are few and far between. There are, however, a relatively large number of natural history exhibits in existence which could be biased towards conservation in various ways. Addition of appropriate labels, or rewording of existing ones can change the emphasis of an exhibition without major structural alterations being necessary. Interpretive literature aimed at the general public and the various levels of formal education can also achieve this, if couched in suitable language.

Museum Education Services can add greatly to the bias given to wildlife conservation without necessarily even having a public display, although this obviously helps. Use of the reserve collections intramurally, especially when tied in with appropriate fieldwork, can serve an extremely important function. Children are able to inspect specimens before seeing them in the field and their importance can be emphasised. Animals which are likely to run away from school parties on site can be seen at the Museum and the diversity of life appreciated. Habitats apparently containing little life can be shown to be important by describing where the specimen being shown would live. 'Out of season' plants can also be appreciated in this way, and extinct animals with their emotional impact can be seen.

Loan specimens with appropriate supporting literature, in-service teachers' courses and lecture programmes can also help to spread the conservation message to schools, colleges and the general public. Unfortunately manpower and facilities for interpretation and research (as mentioned by the group) are too often not available. I see one role of the BCG, together with other professional groups such as the GESM, to be to campaign for more interpretive facilities as well as research facilities.

Sverre Bakkevig in the December (1977) newsletter said that he felt that "they talked too much about the history of the collections, and too little about the functions ..." at Liverpool in September 1977, and I notice that on the formal agenda, at least, there was no mention of

Natural History collections specifically as educational tools, particularly for children and students below post-graduate level.

There are, of course, many problems involved in allowing groups to handle reserve collection specimens and the ultimate decisions to accessibility must always lie with the curatorial staff caring for the collection. Nevertheless, the educational benefits of such an approach are immense and expansion of Museum Education Service roles is essential. I believe that the BCG should actively help in the expansion of the number of Museum Education Services and that it should also become involved with in-service training of staff in contact with these.

This involvement could take two forms. First it could provide background information either through seminars or information leaflets to help in the safe care of specimens used in the Services' programmes: What signs are there that a specimen needs attention? Usually, but not always it is obvious. Why can I not give that particular specimen to an eight year old, however well-behaved he may be? After a few years the basic principles become clear; but it would have been pleasant to have known them early on.

Secondly BCG members might consider finding out in more detail what the roles of Museum Education Services are so that a mutual understanding of the problems faced by biologists working in educational and curatorial fields can be reached. One example is that it is difficult to persuade the upper levels of the secondary schools (O and A level GCE) to come to the Museum to study anything which is not on the syllabus. Conservation of wildlife rarely is (although a way may be found through 'Ecology'), and so even a large-scale, purpose-built exhibit may not draw them in. Should the BCG approach examination boards, or at least support those who do?

I should be interested to hear from any other BCG members who are involved in Museum Education Service work to discuss the above points and other issues of mutual interest.

Stephen Horne,
Merseyside County Museums
December 1977

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MONKS WOOD MEETING ON LOCAL RECORDS CENTRES, 1/2 DECEMBER 1977

This meeting was attended by 66 delegates from Local Biological Records Centres throughout Britain, when a variety of topics relating to biological recording were discussed. The principal aim was to comment on the Draft 'Handbook for Local Biological Records Centres'. Throughout the course of the meeting a number of amendments were suggested, and work has now been completed on the final copy for the Handbook, which has now been passed on to the printers. Final version available shortly!

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