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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Biology Curators Group Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries. Working Party on a National Plan

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Biology Curators Group.

Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries.

Working Party on a National Plan.

I believe that although the Editor has outlined some aspects of this study a few comments on the history of the B.C.G. involvement will serve to underline the importance of work being undertaken and will let members know the history of our involvement and why the committee have taken the actions they have,

1. A committee meeting of the B.C.G. met in November to discuss evidence for the working party but at that time the deadline for submission had effectively passed. As a consequence no action was taken.

Subsequent discussions with Hugh Wakefield, Secretary of the Working Party showed that problems were being encountered with the natural history section and that their analysis was behind schedule. As a result they welcomed any attempt the B.C.G. could make which would help them. In particular they wished to know the pattern of collections geographically and whether within each collection there was a comprehensive range of material. The latter question had been asked in the Working Party Questionnaire to Area Services but no guidance was given as to what constituted a comprehensive range.

The actual terms of reference are quoted in Chapter 4.9 of the Wright report :-

In any area the population should have access to important museum collections which, taken together, should cover as far as possible the four major fields Fine and Applied Art, Archaeology, Natural Sciences, Industry and Technology.

Archaeology and Ethnography were often split on a provenance base and it is suspected that more basic information is available here than in Natural History, although the returns from the area services to the Working Party have not been seen.

Other aspects on staffing display etc. were dealt with in their questionnaire and it was decided to concentrate upon an analysis of collections with the axiom that anymore information could only improve on that at present available.

Time has been extremely short and a special meeting of the committee was held. Although reservations were expressed about the production of a questionnaire and the problems of completion and return within a month it was decided to go ahead. The returns will give useful information anyway but if returned later will provide material for the newsletter and subsequent work, fulfilling one of the most basic aims of the B.C.G. The committee fully realises the problems however, and is under no illusions as to the problems it presents to every curator, we only hope that the ideals and enthusiasm which formed the springboard for the establishment of the B.C.G. will be manifested in the work needed to fill the questionnaire.

2. Reinforcement of the need for B.C.G. involvement came after close consultation with the Geological Curators Group. They had been in contact with the Working Party and had received an assurance, after evidence, Geology would be considered separately. This meant that the botanical and zoological sides were not being dealt with whilst Geology was. Information from their questionnaire is available and they have established a panel of assessors to summarise results and conclusions. Close liaison with the G.C.G. is being maintained and it is hoped that within the original broad spectrum of Natural Sciences that data will be available separately for Geology, Botany and Zoology.

3. The majority of written and oral evidence from other bodies on natural history and 'centres of excellence' has concentrated upon recording schemes and record centres. Some of this has been detailed recently in "Biological Surveillance" which includes a list of museums acting as record centres. It is felt therefore that this information can easily be combined later with the collection information.

4. The Committee felt it was necessary to subdivide Botany and Zoology.

The ratio of distribution of botanical collections in museums and universities is different to that in Zoology, some information on herbaria and botanic gardens (living material) being already available thus necessitating a separate analysis.

Living collections of animals in Zoos tend not to be associated with universities and museums and as a consequence have been conveniently left out, not falling within the terms of reference of the Working Party.

5. After compilation of the newsletter and questionnaire the following approach will be adopted.

a. A copy of the newsletter containing the history, instructions and questionnaire will be circulated to every B.C.G. member, so everybody knows exactly what is happening. To the 61 institutions represented by B.C.G. members will be sent a separate questionnaire. In the interest of time and expertise needed to complete the questionnaire they will be sent direct to members for completion.

It is realised that in some cases members will have to consult Directors etc. before completion and in the event of problems please contact the Secretary.

b. Copies of the newsletter will be circulated to the Area Services and we hope to obtain their co-operation where we have no members but where natural history material is held.

c. Letters, questionnaires and newsletters will be sent to all museums housing biological material.

d. Universities will be circulated as far as possible to obtain comparative data.

e. Liaison with other surveys, i.e. Ron Cleevely's index will be maintained and in late May the situation can be reviewed as to progress or lack of it. In any situation the B.C.G. still has to give evidence.

The final approach may have to be determined at a special meeting but it would be extremely useful to have comments on the whole situation from members, constructive or otherwise or even complaints.

Once again it must be stressed that the committee felt there was a void which needed to be filled, that the B.C.G. was established to fill the void and should be available to help. Any information obtained would serve the long term interests of museums in general and the basic data could be referred to by biologists interested in collections.

Finally do not forget that committee members have to fill in the questionnaire as well ! Any returns marked confidential will not be used in any analysis published in the newsletter.

P.J. Morgan.
Hon. Secretary.