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An Open Letter on Exhibition in Natural History Museums.

"Consternation" is certainly the most appropriate way to describe response to recent changes in the exhibition galleries of the Natural History Museum, London, as debated by Dr. Miles and Dr. Halstead (Nature Vol. 275, p. 682 - 3, 26th October 1978). But the implications of the new exhibition policy spread far more widely than among interested scientists: it will set the seal of approval on a trend which already has influenced many provincial and city museums. Its effect is to make the exhibits subservient to the story and therefore to use specimens (or substitute models or photographs) as adjuncts to a dominant theme.

Two of the clearest consequences may be mentioned. One is that the content of exhibitions no longer reflects the strengths of the collections and the development of "displays" independent of the collection resource can lead to questioning of the need to maintain the latter. This danger is more significant in provincial and local museums where the entertainment function is accorded a high priority and the collection function is less well understood by the managing committee.

The second consequence is that such highly structured exhibits can only be read in one way, i.e. in the intended context, and often it can only be viewed meaningfully by following the prescribed sequence. This precludes the visitors' option to view selectively and his freedom to interpret facts for himself and to extract information in a context of his own choice.

The obsession to educate, in terms of a "message" usurps the role of a museum as a place of exploration and discovery. Dr. Miles should ponder on statistics he offers us to realise that the style of earlier exhibitions had not deterred the flow of visitors to the Natural History Museum nor will his innovations increase the enthusiasm of the "most common" age groups among the museum audience.

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