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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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## THE 'ECOLOGY' EXHIBITION AT THE B. M. N. H.

Geoff Swinney will be reviewing the Ecology exhibition in the Museums Journal before too long so, in response to the Editor's request for some first impressions, June Roberts has written an outline and I have contented myself with a few scattered thoughts and comments. SF

First impressions of the new ecology gallery are favourable by comparison to recent changes elsewhere in the same building. A mammal gallery on the first floor has been sacrificed, and certainly the exhibition has been designed to enhance the interior architecture rather than conceal it. An expanse of soft green carpeting lures one in and, with the use of coarse-grained wood exhibition structures, harmonise well with the theme. A pleasantly high level of natural lighting has been retained.

The exhibition extends along either side of a pillared gallery, with extensive space and seating in between. The topics are numerically linked leaving the visitor no choice to wander. The first concept, energy, continues as the linking theme of the exhibition. Plants, animals and their feeding methods are taken next in turn. Throughout the exhibition examples are demonstrated from two purposely chosen habitats - an oak woodland and sea shore. Familiarization with these two is taken to questionable lengths in a large diorama on food chains, where the visitor may ponder at an oak woodland implanted on a rocky shore. However it appears to communicate the concept of food chains to a hopefully enlightened audience. A few food chains later, there follows another large impact display with a giant marine food web, composed of encased specimens interlinked by threads and a niche inviting the onlooker to step in and complete the web. This leads on to trophic levels, and lastly ecosystems. The final gimmick also has the last word in visitor participation - enabling a person to sit before a screen with push-button responses to 'participate' in solving an ecological problem - which is to account for the population explosion of winter moth caterpillars in an oak woodland.

The use of push-button responses and "What the butler saw" peepshows in the exhibition are used to better ends than the gadgets in the Human Biology exhibition and to provide test points of absorption - by relating the questions to the preceding topic. It is refreshing to see so many dioramas and so few models, and a high proportion of back-lit transparencies add to the quality of presentation.

As a relative newcomer to biology I was able to view through the eyes of the proverbial 11-13 year old. Nonetheless, I felt that a higher tier of information ought to be included in a National Museum exhibition on such an 'in' subject. JR

In comparison with the multi-coloured light show downstairs, the displays are better (with some very pleasing case design), the education is much better, but I am still not convinced that they have got their museum approach right.

It starts with audio-visual presentations again - and the audience capacity is so limited that many slip the first part; something you cannot have if you are adopting a strictly sequential approach.

Indeed the use of interdependent displays assumes that visitors want to follow a story even if it means queuing to see some labels. Not many that I watched had either the patience or the inclination.

Some of the specimens (yes, there are specimens!) seem a little tatty, and the modelling is not always up to the standards of some provincial museums.

Good to see acknowledgements of help from a number of provincial museums - dare one wonder what cooperation there was with the staff at the B. M. (N. H.)?

There is a very well constructed diorama showing an oak woodland with its roots in a seashore (literally), complete with deep water species. I do hope schoolkids and foreign visitors appreciate the stylisation or they are going to have some very funny ideas about the British countryside.

Finally, the crowds are much bigger and the models much more communicative to the wide-eyed excited kids elsewhere in London this Christmas - so do visit Selfridges window and see the superb scenes from 'Wind in the Willows'. There is also a rather nice quotation which might be thought to have some little relevance in the present context: 'Once it was nothing but sailing ..... whatever Toad takes up he gets tired of it!'

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