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Working Party on Scientific Importance of Natural Science Collections

Aim To produce a report for the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries.

Those Present Ms G. Woodward (Institute of Geological Sciences); A. C. Howell (Geological Curators' Group); R. Perry (National Museum of Wales); G. Swinney (Royal Scottish Museum); G. Hancock & P. S. Doughty (authors of recommendations); P. J. Morgan (FENSCORE); E. F. Greenwood (Biology Curators' Group); T. Besterman (Museum Professionals' Group); Ms J. Chamberlain (Museums Association; Chairperson) 10 June 1981.

The convening of this Working Party is the result of Phil Doughty and myself delivering papers to the Museums Association 1980 Conference which contain recommendations (see below) adopted by the conference. These were taken to the Standing Commission by the M.A. as noticed in the *Museums Bulletin* (March 1981), p.219, and they asked the M.A. to produce a report and hence we have a Working Party for same.

Such a report will be of use in soliciting support, hopefully in financial terms, from H. M. Government in that it will highlight considerable shortfalls in the curation of scientifically important collections. It should also make the point that our collections need more lobbying for which art collections appear to have more effective champions.

The terms of reference of this Working Party are being drawn up and a preliminary report will be given at the 1981 M. A. Conference in Manchester.

The following recommendations, if carried through, would establish a framework within which a national museum service might be brought into being.

1 Legislation defining museums, their functions and responsibilities, based on national, local authority and university institutions, should be introduced.

2 Minimum standards of curatorial care should be determined to include the environment, furniture organization, documentation and conservation, of museum collections, and their staffing, and written into the same Bill.

3 An organization should be established either as an agency of DES or directly controlled by them, with a brief to establish the contents of all UK museums, the prevailing conditions in museums in relation to paragraph 2 of these recommendations, and to frame a national plan for museums accordingly.

4 It is imperative that the Council of such an organization should include among its membership prominent practising curators at least in proportion to the administrators appointed. Without such a balance the reality of the professional situation could remain as remote, and the decisions taken as unreal, as at present.

5 A small full-time secretariat working in close collaboration with specialist panels of professional advisers should be able to take, and act on, decisions requiring special expertise without the necessity for a larger bureaucracy.

It is an incontrovertible fact that there will be no significant improvement in the museums situation without legislation placing well-defined responsibilities on the authorities which maintain or create them. To do nothing would not maintain a *status quo*. There is no stability in the present situation: outside the national museums there is rapid deterioration and decay on a grand scale.

When this recession is over there may be an opportunity to provide a national service at the academic level which, with a little vision and adventurous planning, could make a reality of those much-mouthing ideals of personal enrichment and spiritual fulfilment so often linked with museums and which are now almost discredited political platitudes. The possibilities in its realization may even exceed our boldest vision, but as organized curators we shall first need to be able to speak with authority on the situation which exists in museums now, with the facts and the figures, and, as with all political cases, we shall have to be patient, relentless and prepared to fight on for how ever long it takes to convert an unanswerable case into positive, corrective action.

P.S.D.

Recommendations

1 That the recommendations in the ESF Report¹² in the zoology and botany sections (pp 67-70, 75-78) be endorsed and supported by the Museums Association and the Biology Curators' Group. These cover in part some of the following recommendations.

2 That a complete survey of the state and status of biological collections in the British Isles be initiated and supported at a national level. This could be achieved by postgraduate research grants being awarded for the purpose at Leicester University Department of Museum Studies. The Collection Research Units and the BCG are voluntary organizations covering only a small part of the required field. Full surveys are necessary in order to formulate future policy.

3 To explore how collections gathered in the process of research can be assimilated into public institutions with the appropriate finance being made available before the research programme is initiated.

4 That the Museums Association endorses

and supports Recommendation 6 in *Taxonomy in Britain*¹¹ which says that 'we urge that all non-living collections of specimens of taxonomic value for which adequate curation is difficult or impracticable be offered to one or other of the major national institutions. If such collections cannot be offered by gift or loan, resources for their curation *in situ* should be provided on the advice of these institutions.'

5 That the remaining areas of the country not already covered by Collection Research Units initiate such a body in order to produce a British Isles union catalogue of museum holdings at a named collection level.

6 That based on these areas union catalogues of primary type specimens (at least) be initiated.

7 That collecting policies and preservation techniques be adapted for current research needs.

8 That collections be made available under better conditions for the visiting specialist.

These recommendations are designed to have the effect of increasing the usage of collections. At the moment there is an impasse, in that researchers are not using the collections because they are under-publicized and inaccessible; yet governing bodies are not increasing expenditure in this area because very few people are utilizing the specimens in their research. With effective lobbying in these directions larger grants towards the cost of caring for and maintaining our heritage of natural history reference collections will be forthcoming. The recommendations should be taken as complementing those of the Geological Curators' Group as the aims of both BCG and GCG overlap to a great extent.

¹¹Advisory Board for Research Councils (1979), *Taxonomy in Britain*, HMSO, London 126pp.

¹²(1977) *European Science Foundation report*, European Science Research Councils, Strasbourg.