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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

May I be permitted comment on Mr. Locke's response to my Open Letter on Natural History Exhibition?

I have no objection to reasoned criticism and indeed my letter was written with the intention of stimulating discussion. However, Mr. Locke's contribution leaves me profoundly disappointed by the standard of debate so far. Furthermore, I admit some resentment at being bracketed with Mr. Doughty whose remarks were so outspoken in condemning the Hall of Human Biology. Mr. Locke offers no constructive argument for the changes in display which he supports but instead merely denigrates my expressed opinion: this lack of a positive view is worrying if his thoughts are shared more widely. Dr. Miles has presented his credo in *Museums Journal* (Vol. 78, No. 4, March 1979) and his challenging ideas deserve our attention.

As a matter of fact I find much to applaud in the BMNH Ecology gallery. The problem is that the content and the presentation of this exhibition widens the gap between the curator's role as a manager of collections and his function as an exhibitor, which now takes on a new independence. Indeed, it is fair to say that natural history museums serve not one public but two and this clientele is divided into those who visit our galleries and those who visit our collections. The Natural History Museum in London has the staff and resources to serve both but I have knowledge of situations where curating and gallery work compete uneasily for staff time and effort.

The more structured and elaborate the display then the more time is needed for its production.

This difficulty is particularly acute in natural history because we make the task more exacting (and perhaps rightly so) by aiming to present a "subject" and not simply a set of "objects". In this respect, natural history exhibition is becoming progressively more distinct from display as seen in museums concerned with objects of material culture. This in itself is no bad thing, for the trend is always towards innovation and relevance.

However, there remains the underlying question that if a trend-setting gallery will pull in the visitors what need have we for all those store-rooms crowded with specimens, especially when they occupy expensive city-centre space? This question has been asked before - in summing up proceedings of a Biological Society of Washington Symposium at the Smithsonian Institution (1968) - but when it is asked by local councillors we need to have answers that are demonstrably practical and realistic. Councillors' suggestions that collections or saleable items "that are never on display" be disposed of are not unknown and natural history stands to lose as much or more than does the world of art. That is why I suggest that a conscious effort may be needed to produce exhibits that do relate to and illustrate the strengths of our collections where this is feasible. After all, no other

policy would be considered by our museum colleagues in historical, industrial and art subjects!

Nowhere in museums are the dual functions of acquisition and exhibition more distinct than in natural history, where the one does not often provide justification for the other. In provincial museums we may need to champion the values of our natural history collections to ensure their continued use and survival - for these values are not self-evident as they are in a gallery of artefacts. It could be that if suitable reference to the collections were made in our gallery displays, it would increase public awareness of their scientific interest and of the purposes they serve.

I hope that the point of these remarks will not be missed or misinterpreted on this occasion as they were in my previous letter. I do not advocate a return to the 19th century or first-half 20th century exhibition, but I do believe that the time is ripe for a reappraisal of gallery objectives. The options have been so widely expanded and, as I say, the current trend has already brought about a divorce between exhibitions and collections in natural history which is not apparent in other subjects. This is a situation to be reckoned with because its consequences, especially for the future of collections may not all be foreseen. The British Museum (Natural History) clearly has a unique mandate for the recent developments in its galleries but I question whether we should all make haste to follow the trail that they have blazed.

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