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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE
SOUTH HAMPSHIRE 9 - 13TH JULY, 1979

'HOT NEWS SESSION'

BIOLOGICAL CURATORS GROUP

About 12 BCG members attended this specialist session which commenced with a tour of the galleries and reserve collections at Cumberland House Museum Portsmouth and a discussion concerning a £70,000 proposed development. Delegates were then transported to Farlington Marshes which is a nature reserve managed jointly by Portsmouth District Council and the Hampshire Naturalists Trust.

The afternoon session comprised three talks followed by a discussion entitled 'Displays and Collections in the Leisure Age' held in Portsmouth Polytechnic. The first speaker was Chris Hill from the Public Services Division of the B. M. (NH). He initially gave a break down of expenditure between the Public Services Division and the remainder of the Museum's expenditure.

80% of all resources are allocated to Taxonomic Research. The recent display techniques employed in the Museum were to be viewed as an experiment albeit a rather expensive one. An undertaking was given that future display plans included more extensive use of genuine museum specimens. Long term plans would be formulated as a result of returns from visitor surveys. Primarily the BM (NH) will remain a taxonomic unit.

Peter Morgan of the National Museum of Wales continued on this theme. He outlined museum development since the 2nd World War and pleaded that curatorial work should overtake display work when establishing priorities. Ancillary to curatorial work is the establishment of supporting systems such as field data banks and environmental advice and interpretation. He contended that one of the difficulties museums now faced was the lack of taxonomically trained staff due to the change in emphasis in university teaching. Natural history curators were expected to be jack of all trades and the pressures exerted by the public and governing bodies was to the detriment of our primary function namely curation of the collections. Much natural history material was lost by the inadequate provision for university and polytechnic research material in the parent institutions.

If these collections were to be transferred to the appropriate museum, storage and curation facilities would pose problems.

The use of the environment in the leisure age must have protection as the first priority. The final speaker of the afternoon was Peter Sewell of Portsmouth who concentrated on the role of natural history collections in Leisure Services departments. He intimated that Natural History displays had to be seen to be cost effective in terms of visitor numbers etc. Rate-payers only see the public face of the museum and any resources for curation were inexorably linked with display funding.

Good display techniques were essential to compete with the impact of film and television. Was there any purpose in collecting further local natural history material when most of the essential information could be stored in an information file? Rare and extinct natural history material poses a problem for curators in that if subjected to the rigors of display it will have a finite life. He summarised the situation by expressing the view that the public face of museums must have good display techniques, lots of specimens and animation where appropriate.

The general discussion which followed was wide ranging and therefore almost impossible to summarise. However the following recommendations to the Association were agreed.

1. That provision should be made at a future conference for the presentation of papers dealing with the value and use of natural history collections to be received by the whole conference.
2. That the Museums Association become members of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, thereby acknowledging the role of environmental conservation as part of the museum profession.

John R. A. Gray
Principal Officer, Museums
Bolton Museum

WORKING PARTY ON TRAINING OF NATURAL HISTORY TECHNICIANS

At the BCG Committee Meeting of September 13th it was decided to set up a Working Party to consider the training of Natural History Technicians working in Museums. As a first stage the group has been asked to produce a discussion document outlining general areas of expertise in which Natural History Curators can expect trained technicians to be proficient. Particular reference will be made to points of possible overlap with taxidermy training and the responsibilities of the Taxidermist as opposed to the Natural History Technician. The syllabus of formal courses available for training Natural History Technicians will be examined and their shortcomings in respect of Museum requirements will be defined.

Will anyone with strong views on this subject or who can offer information on training courses in their region please contact me within the next two or three weeks.

John Mathias,
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