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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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COMMENTS ON "FRAMEWORK FOR A SYSTEM FOR MUSEUMS  
AND GALLERIES".  
REPORT BY A WORKING PARTY. STANDING COMMISSION ON  
MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES, 1978

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1. The Biology Curators Group (B. C. G.) welcomes the report and hopes that the recommendations will be implemented. However, the B. C. G. does have a number of more specific comments which it is hoped the Standing Commission will find useful.

2. The B. C. G. recognises that the report covers all museums and their collections but, in so doing, the report does not recognise that there are different requirements for different subject based collections.

3. Nevertheless, the proposals for financial support are especially welcomed but the B. C. G. fears that, even if fully implemented, they will only enable a start to be made on solving the many problems facing biological collections in provincial museums. The B. C. G. notes particularly that central government grant will be available only if matched, at least to some extent, by local funds. The B. C. G. also feels that the criteria on which grants can be made available to provincial museums need to be strengthened and clarified.

4. Chapter 14 of the Report raises important issues concerning the way in which local authority museums receive central government grant aid through the Rate Support Grant. The B. C. G. would like to support the comments made in the Report and to point out that plants and animals do not conform to administrative boundaries. As a consequence most biology curators serve areas extending beyond the boundaries of their employing authority into areas of local authorities which frequently do not maintain a biological museum service.

5. The report points out that many collections are not displayed adequately, if at all. It does not indicate, however, that many collections, as in biology, should not be displayed and that other interpretative methods, e. g. publication, can be used to make them available to the public.  
(Para. 3.12)

6. The report stresses the importance of local authority museums being able to purchase specimens for their collections but, unlike so many museum disciplines, biology specimens are not usually acquired by purchase. Initially, all biology specimens are collected as a consequence of research and field work. Unfortunately, funds

for research and field work cannot be obtained from local authority purchase funds although most authorities do make money available through travel allowances. Similarly the purchase funds for local museums administered by the Science Museum and the Royal Scottish Museum are not available for research and field work. The B. C. G. feels it would help greatly if these funds could be used to help finance the acquisition of specimens through field work and where no purchase as such is involved. (Para. 3.13).

7. In biology many museums are now collecting and acquiring far fewer specimens than in previous years. This trend is likely to continue but in place of the more traditional specimens, or in support of them, museums are acquiring large data banks of biological records. This development is not noted in the Report and the B. C. G. would like to stress that these new two dimensional collections should be regarded in exactly the same way as the more traditional three dimensional museum specimens.

8. Furthermore, biological field work and subsequent work on the collections (both two and three dimensional) does not attract central government grant aid, yet similar work in other disciplines, notably archaeology, receives substantial aid. As the information gathered and the expertise necessary to interpret the data is analagous to the situation in archaeology and is widely used by planning departments and conservation agencies, the B. C. G. feels that there should be central government recognition of this work in the form of specific grant aid. The B. C. G. is aware of the work of the Nature Conservancy Council and the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology, but their work is essentially of a national nature whereas at a local level museum biology curators usually provide the service, including giving advice and information to the Nature Conservancy Council and the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology.

9. The report recognises that provincial museums require improved staffing but it does not highlight the need for improved scholastic standards. In particular, the curation of biological collections requires research in systematics (taxonomy and related branches of other disciplines, e.g. ecology, history of science etc) in order that the acquisition, documentation and interpretation of collections can be properly undertaken and fully appreciated by the public. The development of research programmes linked to work in national museums, universities and polytechnics is viewed by the B. C. G. as a much needed development.

10. The B. C. G. would like to point out, however, that in a recent report (Advisory Board for the Research Councils (1979) Taxonomy in Britain: Report by the Review Group on Taxonomy H. M. S. O.)

the role of provincial museums in taxonomic research is hardly mentioned, yet this is a fundamental use for which museums, especially large ones, acquire biology specimens. The B. C. G. suggests, therefore, that the function of museum biology collections should be reviewed at a high level so as to take account of the full opportunities presented by provincial museum biology collections, the expertise available in provincial museums and the research needs of the research councils, universities and polytechnics, etc.

11. The need for close links between museums is mentioned several times in the report. The B. C. G. would particularly like to stress the need for close links to be forged between:- a) the national museums (including the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and Edinburgh) and provincial museums and b) the universities and polytechnics and their local museums. At a personal and group level these links are being strengthened but there is no financial or administrative framework within which to develop these contacts fully.

12. Many institutions and research bodies undertake extensive field collecting in connection with environmental monitoring and other research programmes, but often the specimens acquired are subsequently destroyed despite their importance as reference or voucher material. Together with collections already held by museums they could form a unique record and where they have survived they have been shown to be of considerable importance (e.g. the use of eggshell thickness in pesticide research). In this obvious area of collaboration central government recognition of the museum's role and funding where appropriate would be invaluable.

13. The proposal to form countywide museum consultative committees is particularly welcomed. These committees should provide the necessary liaison and forum for discussion on museum matters within a county but the B. C. G. stresses the importance of universities and polytechnics (not mentioned in the report), whether or not they have museum collections, taking an active part in the work of these committees. The universities will no doubt continue to be the main centres for research and it is important that local museums should be closely associated with any collection-based research so that at least the future safekeeping of the collection can be assured (see para. 12 above). Topics for research could be suggested by countywide committees but it should be noted that, at present, Area Councils would not be able to grant aid research projects under their existing rules.

14. The report stresses the importance of Area Councils in administering government grant aid and in the work of museums generally. However, they frequently do not have the academic expertise on their own staff to advise on biology collections and access

to such advice for the more scholastic needs of the collections is especially variable.

15. The problems of conservation are stressed by the report and, whilst these are recognised by the B. C. G. , it is suggested that they can be best solved by first tackling the underlying academic difficulties which will then lead to a clearer definition of the technical and conservation requirements. In particular, no suggestions are made for solving the problem of collections not curated by qualified biologists. However, Area Councils should be able to give grants to staff in their area, or outside, who are suitably qualified to look at and advise on collections in the Area Council's region and this would, to some extent, help solve the problem of uncurated collections.

16. There is also a serious shortage of both biology technicians and taxidermists. Biology technicians, though essential for the proper curation of biology collections are rarely employed and no training facilities exist whilst taxidermists are gradually declining in number. The situation is now so serious that special facilities have been made available for the training of taxidermists, but the B. C. G. would like to point out that this contributes little to solving the conservation problems of biology collections where the position is even more critical. At present technical expertise is scattered amongst various university and polytechnic biology departments and in the national museums. Very special measures are now required to solve both the training and employment problem. The Area Councils could help. They are achieving considerable success in their conservation work generally, which is particularly appreciated by the small museums. If, however, all the Area Councils employed a small staff of both biology technicians and taxidermists, it might be possible to give a basic service to all provincial museums and provide the necessary continuity of employment.

17. The B. C. G. is conscious that it has not yet been able to define fully the problems of biology in provincial museums. It can, however, indicate the following broad areas of need:-

- i) improved documentation of collections
- ii) improved levels and standards of staffing
  - a) academically
  - b) technically
- iii) implementation of research projects in various fields of systematics, including ones linked to the acquisition of specimens.
- iv) improved conditions for conservation, storage and study of collections.

18. The B. C. G. has organised conferences and commented on various professional matters; see for example Conference on the functions of Collections, Museums Journal, 77:129 (1977); Recommendations to the Museums Association on Environmental Conservation, Museums Journal, 77:185 (1978) and Recommendations to the Museums Association on proper curatorial care, Museums Journal, 78:80 (1978). Perhaps its greatest contribution, however, has been to the documentation of collections through its own survey of biology collections in museums (Hancock, E. G. and Morgan, P. J. (eds) in press. A survey of zoological and botanical material in museums and other institutions of Great Britain B. C. G. Cardiff) and through its encouragement of regionally based surveys of collections (see Hancock, E. G. and Pettitt, C. W. (eds) 1979. Collections and Collectors in N. W. England. Manchester Museum Computer Produced Publications). The variability of existing staffing situations in relation to the needs of different museum collections is, however, so great that a detailed survey is required before the difficulties can be defined and suggestions made for improved staffing. Similarly, the research needs of biology collections and problems of collaboration with other organisations should be defined on a wide basis and here the work of the Advisory Board for the Research Councils could be particularly useful.