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Title: The Work of the Museums North Natural History Panel

Author(s): Middleton, H.

Source: Middleton, H. (1979). The Work of the Museums North Natural History Panel. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 2 No 5*, 201 - 203.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1724>

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THE WORK OF THE MUSEUMS NORTH NATURAL HISTORY PANEL

Most B. C. G. members will be familiar with the various panels which provide, on a voluntary basis, specialist advice to the various Area Museum Services, and many will probably be members of their own area Natural History panel. This panel "System" dates from the formative days of the Area Services, back in the early 1960's.

In North East England one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the North of England Museum Service was Museums North, the Northern Federation of Museums and Art Galleries. The Federation carried out a survey amongst museums in the region to discover what they would like to see provided by an area service, and it was instrumental in getting Durham County Council to convene a meeting of all interested local authorities, to which the Federation's findings were reported. One of the recommendations of the report was that a number of advisory panels (with membership drawn from specialists working in the region's museums) should be set up. An important feature of this system, which was accepted, was that the panel chairmen would be full voting members of the Area Council.

A number of technical officers were appointed to the new service. They were all hosted by various member museums, the Natural History Officer, Beverley Christopher, being based at the Hancock Museum at Newcastle upon Tyne. The job of the panels in those days was, broadly speaking, to help the officers to determine their priorities of work.

The North of England Area Museum Service did not, however, become established on a really firm basis until 1974, at a time when Local Government re-organisation had brought about a number of major changes in museum organisation in the North-East, particularly in the Tyne and Wear and Teesside areas.

Whilst some area natural history panels play a more passive role, giving advice and providing information for their area services only when asked, the members of the Museums North panel felt that it should take on a more active role, the major objective being to improve the status of natural history collections and recording in the region, by providing a platform for the exchange of information and ideas, and a pool of resources and expertise. It was thought that as fair a balance as possible should be achieved between the care and research of collections, biological recording, and the involvement of members of the public with the wildlife of the region and the work of the museum natural historian. In effect the Panel was taking upon itself the mantle of a regional biological curator's group.

Early meetings were taken up in finding out more about the extent of each others collections and about their relative strengths and weaknesses, work was done on compiling a register of experts (both in and out of museums) around the region, and in discussing collecting policies and arriving at common boundaries for collecting areas. Biological data banks were established or extended to cover Northumberland and that part of Tyne and Wear north of the River Tyne (based at the Hancock Museum) and for Durham, Cleveland and Tyne and Wear South of the River Tyne (based at Sunderland Museum - with the Gray Art Gallery and Museum, Hartlepool, and the Dorman Museum, Middlesbrough acting to a limited extent as sub-centres).

It was at a meeting held in August 1975 that the then Panel Chairman, Fred Woodward, suggested that as the Panel now had coverage throughout most of the North East it should be possible to organise some sort of regional investigation, and he offered as a possible topic the status and distribution of amphibia and reptiles in the region, using school children for field observations. This was to set the tone for much of the Panel's activity over the following years.

'Spot the Frog' was the cry which echoed around schools throughout the North East in the spring of 1976, as the publicity for the survey got under way. Members of the panel appeared on local radio and television, and the local press followed. Despite its title, the survey was aimed at recording amphibia generally, and involved the distribution of duplicated leaflets with identification information on the five species concerned. Response to the survey was excellent, and by the end of July 417 sightings from 334 habitats had been received.

Emboldened by the success of the project, a 'Squirrel Search' was instituted in 1977/78 to try to determine to what extent the red squirrel had been displaced by the grey squirrel since the latter's introduction into the North in 1906 and 1913. Using similar methods to the 'Spot the Frog' campaign, a total of 235 records were received from 152 contributors - these records suggest that whilst the red squirrel retains Northumberland as a stronghold, its range is declining in the south of the region.

However, the greatest success so far is the 1979 'Hedgehog Survey', helped, no doubt, by the offer of a free colour-printed hedgehog wallchart (provided by the Tyne and Wear County Museum Service) in return for records, and by the excellent publicity gained for it by panel members Tony Tynan, Sue Turner and Peter Davis on B. B. C. tv's regional natural history programme 'Look's Natural'. Much work still remains to be done on collating the information which has flooded in - a total so far of nearly 2,500 sightings!

And what for the future? Either 'Spot the Frog II' (to give improved coverage and record changes in status and distribution since the 1976 survey) or else a regional wetland survey, using a specially-commissioned limited edition natural history print as 'bait' for (confirmable) reports, are being planned by the Panel for 1980. The possibility of producing small travelling exhibitions on subjects such as natural history photography, traps and trapping, whales and dolphins and field sports have been discussed, and at the time of writing the first and last of these seem to be getting going with the aid of the Area Service.

It might be argued that the activities which I have outlined above are not those of an Area Service panel. But while the North East is rich in wildlife it is not, regrettably, over rich in museums - especially in the realm of natural history. So those of us with natural history responsibilities feel that by combining these various activities we have benefitted all concerned, whether it be the area service, our museums and their collections, the wildlife of the North East, or, perhaps most important of all, the general public - upon whose interest and support we all depend.

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