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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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## CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

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It is customary in any society for the chairman to present an annual report but I feel that the pages of the 'Newsletter' have informed member very clearly of the Group's activities during the past year and it would be superfluous for me to reiterate this information.

Nevertheless, I feel that the opportunity to write a report is one I should accept so as to highlight particular features and to present a personal view of the future and problems facing biologists in museums.

The BCG is a small society and whilst the Committee has representatives of most kinds of museums and covers most parts of the United Kingdom, the Group has not attracted many members from the national museums in London. This reflects a fundamental difference in the work between these major institutions and most other museums in the country. However, the Group is anxious that it should be representative of all museums and accordingly close links have been maintained with the British Museum (Natural History).

The common feature of all museums (as distinct from say interpretative and educational centres) is that they possess collections. The size and importance of the collections at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew and the British Museum (Natural History) readily distinguish these institutions as something very special, not only in this country but in the world as a whole. However, many of us feel that collections elsewhere are undervalued although a few large collections (e.g. the national collections in Edinburgh and university collections at Cambridge and Oxford) are recognised as being important for scientific research. To try and focus attention on provincial collections, the BCG has helped arrange conferences, organised collection surveys and responded to various official reports. The result of this work indicates even more clearly that our suspicions are confirmed. A vast resource of information lies largely unknown to our employers, whoever they may be, to government, to research workers and even to ourselves and the museums profession. Having done this work, the BCG is actively trying to make the newly discovered information available but this takes time.

Much is being made of the impending leisure age and the annual conference of the Museums Association had this as its theme for 1979. The attention of BCG was therefore focused on this topic during the specialist session and I feel sure it is an area where a great deal more thinking needs to be carried out.

Another topic that was considered during the year was the question of training. In particular the problems of technical training and the training of taxidermists. It is apparent that there are serious difficulties. Professional training has received less attention but the BCG should look carefully at the consequences of changes in connection with the Diploma of the Museums Association and the lack of systematic topics in degree courses.

It is probably dangerous to speculate on what may happen in the future, but I feel that biologists in museums should consider carefully what may be their future role in society. Continuing financial problems are likely to be an ever-present difficulty. If museum biologists want more financial resources, not only must the case be carefully presented and argued but consideration must be given as to where the cash is to be obtained. There are, it seems to me, only two alternatives. Either it must be taken from someone else's pocket or else it must be earned. This seems to leave biologists in an impossible position but if the widest view of museums and their role in society and the leisure industry is taken, this may not be so. However, beyond bearing this fundamental problem in mind, I do not feel we should consider it further at the moment. Of much greater importance is to consider the role of museum biology itself.

Biology and natural history has enormous public interest. There are probably more people seriously interested in natural history (admittedly mostly ornithology) than in any other subject. Quiet countryside pursuits, including bird watching and natural history, are amongst the most popular of all "sporting" and recreational activities. Natural History programmes on television are similarly amongst the most popular and a new natural history book is frequently a best seller. Wild plants and animals together with environmental considerations are clearly of great interest to millions of people.

However, the large, systematically arranged collections of dead natural history specimens may seem to have little relevance to the interests of our public. Yet, if we are to survive, let alone prosper, in our profession, we must make these collections relevant. We must bridge the gap of understanding.

On the one hand it is necessary to make our employers fully understand the enormous public interest in natural history. I fear far too many do not appreciate this fact and consequently a good deal of money is spent on vocal, but comparatively minor interest groups in the arts. However, care is needed as an immediate response might be a demand for yet more displays - arguably one of the most inappropriate ways to interest people in living plants and animals! Certainly more interpretation is needed but displays are only one medium; publications and direct interface between curator and public may be much more effective. Indeed one of the most striking and rewarding activities is to demonstrate to an audience in the field the diversity and nature of wildlife.

On the other hand there is the need to demonstrate the scientific value of natural history collections and their importance for research. Nobody questions the importance of the collections at the British Museum (Natural History) but conversely few believe that there is much of value in smaller museums elsewhere. Furthermore these attitudes influence future collecting policies and research.

I believe it is a comparatively easy matter to demonstrate the large public interest in natural history but so far as I know this has not been demonstrated or quantified. This needs to be done. The BCG is exposing the fallacy of considering provincial museum collections as of little scientific interest but their importance tends to be historic rather than contributing to contemporary research. Indeed, the level of understanding of this historic scientific interest outside the BCG membership appears to be low. To get museums involved with contemporary research close links need to be developed between them and the research councils, universities and polytechnics. The BCG hopes that the first steps can be taken towards this goal at its proposed conference in September 1981. Its success will depend not only on attracting senior people to read major papers, but also on attracting an audience from outside the Museum's profession. Demonstrating the contemporary as well as historic scientific importance of museum natural history collections and attracting an appropriate level of research from outside the museum's profession is an immensely difficult task. Yet I am convinced that, so long as one believes that collections are the essence of a museum, this must be done to insure that there is a long-term future for museum natural history collections.

Perhaps, therefore, the most important requirement is to demonstrate convincingly why the research that should be done in association with provincial museum collections is of relevance to the man in the street in the leisure age.

Eric Greenwood