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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Comments on 'Taxidermy in Britain'

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The committee are very grateful to your chairman for his single-handed labours in drawing up these comments. An essential function of a specialist group such as ours is to ensure that we are not under-represented in the fields in which we are active and, more importantly, are consulted when future wide-reaching reports, white papers, etc., are being drafted.

2nd April, 1980.

The Secretary,
Advisory Board for the Research Councils,
c/o Natural Environment Research Council,
Alhambra House,
27-33 Charing Cross Road,
London,
WC2 OAX.

Dear Sir,

I am enclosing some remarks prepared by the Biology Curator's Group on the ABRC report on 'Taxonomy in Britain' (HMSO 1979) in which the Board might be interested.

At the time the Review Group was carrying out its survey work, the Biology Curator's Group (BCG) was only in its formative stages and was not able to contribute to the survey.

The BCG was formed in 1975 and consists largely of professional curators working in museums. It is representative of all museums throughout the U.K. but has paid particular attention to the problems of museums and their biological collections outside London. It is particularly anxious to see that museums in the provinces work closely with Universities, Polytechnics and the Research Councils to ensure that collections acquired in the course of research are adequately curated. Consequently in making comments on the ABRC report, the BCG would like to see a positive response from the Board that might lead to a closer relationship between museums and the Research Councils and especially the Natural Environment Research Council.

For the Board's information, I am also enclosing the BCG's comments on 'Framework for a System for Museums' (HMSO 1978), prepared under the Chairmanship of Sir Arthur Drew.

Yours faithfully,

E.F. Greenwood
Chairman

Biology Curator's Group

Comments on 'Taxonomy in Britain' Report by the Review Group on Taxonomy set up by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils under the Chairmanship of Sir Eric Smith, FRS, HMSO 1978.

1. The Biology Curator's Group (BCG) notes the recommendations the report makes concerning the priorities for taxonomic coverage and user needs (R11 - R13).
2. However, in so far that the Report reviews the position of collections in museums the BCG notes that the Report is based largely on the situation as it relates to the British Museum (Natural History) and the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew and Edinburgh.
3. References to provincial museums' collections, especially those administered by local authorities and universities, are at times inaccurate (Par. 420 and 512) and there seems to have been a general lack of information on which to base remarks.
4. The importance of the collections at the British Museum (Natural History) and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, is rightly stressed. Nevertheless, the size, historical and taxonomic significance of the larger local authority and university museum collections deserve considerable attention. (Over 5 million plant and nearly 7 million animal specimens). In addition, the taxonomic significance of collections in small museums should not be overlooked, especially where specialised collections have been assembled.
5. Almost all these collections are underworked and may create severe curatorial problems (Par 528 and 908). Yet research is almost always rewarding with the discovery of much that is of historic or taxonomic significance. The BCG feels, therefore, that positive recommendations should have been made rather than the negative reaction embodied in recommendation R6. Perhaps it should also be pointed out that British Museum (Natural History) spokesmen have indicated that they could not accommodate and curate adequately large collections from the provinces. Furthermore, some of the important collections held by provincial museums are ones that were once turned down by the British Museum (Natural History).

6. The Report comments on where taxonomic research is carried out, often in universities and on those that make use of taxonomic resources, e.g. the Research Institutes. These organisations are scattered throughout the country and the BCG feels that provincial museums have an important role to play in their work. (See recommendations of NERC Working Party on the Role of Taxonomy in Ecology.) These museums can provide a repository for collections acquired in the course of research (taxonomic and some ecological research) and at the same time also provide local reference material. In addition, the major provincial museums should be able to provide the necessary expertise for providing courses in identification; skills that are sometimes severely handicapping ecological work.
7. The Report comments on the need to provide post expedition finance to provide for the taxonomic study of material gathered (R10). However, when research grants are awarded for taxonomic research or finance is given to expeditions, the long term storage of collections should also be considered. This is an increasingly expensive consequence of research involving collection acquisition, which is often overlooked.
8. The BCG welcomes the recommendations to prepare inventories of taxonomically important specimens (R14). The BCG has adopted a regional approach to this problem and sees no reason why preliminary listings of collections, collectors and type specimens held in provincial museums (i.e. all collections held by institutions outside London) cannot be prepared in a fairly short period of time, given the injection of modest amounts of finance.
9. Whilst the BCG agrees with the comments in Chap. 8 on the training and recruitment of taxonomists, it regrets that no mention is made of curatorial training other than the vague recommendation (R23) to publicise more extensively existing opportunities. The BCG feels that the report should have commented specifically on the role of curatorial courses that lead to the only professional qualification available: the Diploma of the Museums Association
10. Finally, the BCG would like to draw the attention of the ABRC to the report by a Working Party of the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries under the Chairmanship of Sir Arthur Drew entitled 'Framework for a System for Museums', HMSO 1978. This report covers, or is of relevance to, many of the topics covered by 'Taxonomy in Britain' and the BCG regrets that the authors of these reports do not appear to have met at any time, although both were involved in their preparatory work at much the same time.

April 1980