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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 1980/81

During the course of the year the committee have been active in a number of fields, most of which have been reported in the pages of the "Newsletter".

As in last year's report, I see little point in reviewing the year's work, but it is perhaps worth highlighting one or two features. The Easter meeting of the Group was the main meeting of the year, and with its emphasis on techniques, was found to be a most useful and informative meeting.

During the summer and autumn, the Group has been surveying jointly with the Biological Records Centre, the present position of local biological record centres, and by December, 1980, there had been a most encouraging response to the questionnaire. It is expected that the results will be published during 1981, probably in two parts. However, from the response to the questionnaire, it is hoped that it may be possible to advise museums on how best they can contribute to the national recording pattern for natural history. In order to do this, it is necessary to know the present position in detail, and with this information, it is intended that a tripartite meeting involving the BCG, BRC and the Nature Conservancy Council can be arranged.

Members will recall that the Group responded in some detail to two recently published reports ("Framework for a System for Museums" and "Taxonomy in Britain") and whilst there has been little comment from the profession, the Natural Environment Research Council has responded favourably to a request to discuss how best museums can co-operate with their work. However, it was suggested that the discussions should also include the GCG and whilst the necessary consultations have delayed the meeting, it is expected that this will take place early in 1981.

Concern about the state of natural history collections in British museums has continued to be expressed publicly, and reports have been taken to ICOM at their meeting in Mexico in October 1980 and to the European Science Foundation. In both instances, the positive approach and achievement of the BCG was praised, but in September, 1980, at the Museum Association Conference in London, less favourable comments were voiced in some circles.

Certainly the problem of acquisition, care and maintenance of scientific collections has been aired, but there is not likely to be any finance made available to do anything about it in a climate of economic squeeze, and when the politicians cannot see the relevance of these collections to the vast majority of their electors. I raised this problem last year,

as a major issue facing biologists working in museums, and so far, this difficulty has not been solved. It is an issue that has been given a great deal of thought by the Association of Systematics Collections in North America, and they have demonstrated the relevance of their collections through an environmental role. However, the level of taxonomic and ecological knowledge of the North American flora and fauna is so much less when compared to that of the British Isles and hence the importance of systematic collections is that much greater.

In this country, Peter Morgan of the National Museum of Wales is also demonstrating through the environmental role, the importance of museum collections (see *BCG Newsletter*, Vol. 2 No. 8, 1980), but I wonder to what extent this concept can be extended to local authority museums. Most local authorities will not be able to obtain the resources to tackle a project of the size of the "Christos Bitas" whilst it will still not satisfy the politicians demand that most of the collections should be readily available to and used by most of their electors. The indirect importance to the public through scientific research of such an environmental role for collections, I fear will have little impact upon them. What they require is a display or educational role, but is this realistic for primarily scientific collections?

It seems to me that all museums including the British Museum (Natural History) and other National Institutions with museum collections should take part in this debate. I hope therefore that these institutions and their staff will in future become more involved with the work of both the BCG and the Museums Association so that their expertise can be utilised and so that the present good relations which exist informally can be strengthened.

It is with some of these problems in mind that the BCG still hopes to hold a conference in Cardiff in 1982 on policies relating to museum collections. It is hoped that those that determine research policies, those that carry out collection based research and those that curate collections, i.e., the products of research, will come together and discuss ways in which a more co-ordinated or co-operative approach can be made towards a national scheme for natural history collections.

Although it is clearly important that all concerned with museums and collection-based research should contribute to the conference, considerable difficulties have been experienced in developing these themes and many problems remain to be overcome. Further details will, of course, be published in due course.

There is much for the Group to do in the coming years, but your officers have all got full time jobs which leave little time for BCG activities. Nevertheless, I feel the BCG is providing a service to its members through its 'Newsletter' and meetings and is making itself known more generally.

E. F. Greenwood
January 1981.

Editor's Report 1980-81

With this, the third issue for which I have been responsible for obtaining copy, pasting up, etc., the production has also become transferred to Bolton. Although this means more work it is more satisfying to be able to be in complete control from the manuscript stage to posting the complete printed newsletter. Astute readers have noticed that we have decided on three newsletters per year but that about the same numbers of pages are produced in that time. This saves on labour and postage, envelopes, etc., an important consideration. Similarly, attempts at obtaining advertising revenue and selling offprints are decreasing the costs of production, albeit marginally.

The last editor's report appealed for more membership comment on the newsletter in the realms of philosophy or practicality but none has been received. In the absence of any such criticism (or even praise) we can only carry on in the same vein and format. Initiating such ventures as "Featured Institution", "Collections and Information Sought and Found" and "Handwriting" relies on the members sending in material to keep these sections going. Little snippets of interest to fill up the bottom halves of pages are also difficult to find single-handed. Many thanks to those who have responded to requests for material or even sent in copy completely unsolicited over the last year. Keep up the good work!

E. Geoffrey Hancock
27 January 1981.

SURREY BIOLOGICAL RECORD CENTRE

The Surrey Biological Records Centre (covering the whole of v.c.17) has recently been established as an independent unit of the County Library Service at Leatherhead and we are at present attempting to compile a list of existing material and records in our county establishments so that the record can be as complete as possible.

We would be grateful to hear from curators of biological collections who have any relevant Surrey material in their care or have during the course of their investigations come across material or records in other collections or institutions.

This coverage should ideally state:-

- 1) Nature, range and dates of collection of the material or records (if known).
- 2) Condition and degree of risk they would attach to it (i.e. seen in garage or loft, unlikely to survive more than five years, or whatever).
- 3) We are especially interested in tracing manuscript notes of unpublished work. The area includes much of the present Greater London area south of the Thames and it would be invaluable to know of old records from this area which is now largely built over.

Telephone calls are welcome: J. A. Keefe, Surrey Biological Records Centre, Biology Centre, Chipstead Valley Road, Coulsdon, Surrey. Tel: 633-8881 or Caterham 43727).