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Title: A National Plan for Systematic Collections - View from a mini-national

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For this contribution there seemed little purpose in producing a resumé of the content of the presented papers as these will shortly appear in print. Hence the following is a personal view of a participant with deeply held feelings on systematic collections and a sincere hope that at some time in the future a rationalisation in the form of a national plan will emerge.

The conference in Cardiff was extremely informative on aspects of systematic collections held by various institutions in Britain and further afield. Unfortunately however most of the papers appeared as prepared statements outlining the work and policies of the represented bodies. By my recollection only two speakers were prepared to set their notes aside and speak "from the shoulder". This produced an effect of relative sterility on the actual conference floor. However I should not in any way wish to suggest that the conference was a failure. It was in fact a great success in that, people from a very wide range of institutions were brought together and actually talked. People working in small municipal museums saw that senior staff from the British Museum do not actually have horns and a forked tail and vice versa.

A great deal of discussion in groups took place off the conference floor and it was here that true feelings began to become evident. People did have views on national plans and from these discussions I now wish to attempt a synthesis of at least some of the ideas put forward, ideas stimulated by the papers but not drawing on any one in particular.

1. The totality of all systematic collections held within the U.K. should be seen as a single entity and managed as such in the ideal situation.
2. There seem to be three basic functions for systematic collections; vis
 - a. As a permanent and unassailable taxonomic resource on a world wide basis.

- b. As a permanent and unassailable faunistic and floristic resource, principally for the British Isles.
 - c. As an educational resource in the broadest sense.
3. To manage the totality of collections as a single resource involves decisions, accommodations and agreements on the commitment and allocation of finance, from whatever source, to an agreed balance of these three in each 'member' institution.
 4. A formula for this might be as follows:-
 - a. The British Museum (NH) is and should remain THE Major INTERNATIONAL Taxonomic institute. It must then be asked, should other institutions hold type material or should all types reside in the BM? The only arguments heard against this are all variations on the "all the eggs in one basket" theme, and to me do not outweigh the major benefits of having all type material, at least within a taxon, on one site. Major accommodations would of course have to be made with other current large holders of type material like Kew, Manchester and to a lesser extent Edinburgh Cardiff and Brighton. Some movement towards decentralisation on the Tring pattern may have within it the germ of a solution to this problem.

The BM would then act as a first tier resource serving as its top priority the taxonomic needs of Science and acting as an advisory body and taxonomic resource for lower tiers in the system.
 - b. The "mini" Nationals should have as a prime responsibility the building and servicing of collections for the country or region in which they are sited. For example, the Ulster Museum should be a resource in terms of data and specimens for the geographical area of Northern Ireland principally and should only commit financial and staff resources to other aspects where they have a direct bearing on Northern Ireland, for historical comparative or educational reasons. The Royal Scottish Museum and the National Museum of Wales would also occupy this role acting as

a link to the international taxonomic resource and servicing more localised tiers in the network. Unfortunately England does not have at present a "National" museum in this sense although it is well served by museums carrying out the same function on a smaller geographical scale - the County and Municipal museums.

- c. The county, municipal and university museums have a wide range of commitment, staffing and available resources. They are all however united, or should be united, on one aspect of their work - the commitment to maintain and service their collections to the best of their ability.

The major 'provincials' differ from the mini-nationals only in the geographical region for which they are responsible and in England in many cases they fulfill an identical role for major areas of the country. If resources are managed within the limitations imposed and their position within the system is coordinated we start to see rationalisation emerging.

- d. The small and very small institutions would also be incorporated by accepting their limitations and only attempting to do what they can do well - servicing the area for which they are responsible. Problems and even collections can be fed up through the system. Help, advice and even finance would come down through the system. There will be no need for someone to feel isolated simply because he appears to be out on a limb and does not personally have the expertise to deal with collections for which he is responsible.
- e. Some degree of specialisation will eventually become necessary if and when funding again becomes available. The major institutions outside the BM should, after achieving their "basic" coverage, specialise in terms of where they devote any further resources. Logically this should be done on taxonomic lines with, for example, one institution being appointed as the "Mollusc centre". This would not entail this body holding all mollusc material but it would be responsible

Knowing
for where that material was, to advising other bodies on the
curation of that material and to being the primary centre for
direction of mollusc enquiries.

- f. The final realisation of this "plan" can only start to emerge when we can begin to relinquish territoriality regarding our collections. The argument, "Try to convince my Trustees/Councillors", will start to break down when they realise that they are part of a bigger system. A local museum will NOT only have to rely on its own collections for its displays but will be able to call on material from further up (?) the system. Councillors will take an interest when they see a display in "their" museum exhibiting prime material from their area, which up until then was "inaccessible" in the "National".

The plan as outlined is extremely 'raw', and is simply the gleanings and distillations from conversation. However it does start to suggest that a "National Plan" might be possible. Even within the present system there are enough benefits both "up" and "down" the network to make people examine what can be done. Cardiff represented a major first step in this movement but a great deal more talking MUST be done. We should stop referring to the National Museums and start pushing for the concept of the NATIONAL COLLECTIONS. We shall then be moving towards our target. Tangible next steps are now being taken in that a cabal of National Museum Directors with an interest in systematic collections is being put together and in the very near future a conference of Keepers of Nationals and major provincials is to be set up. It is our duty to ensure that the spirit of the Cardiff conference is not permitted to become quiescent.