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A National Plan for Systematic Collections -
Dr. Ian D. Wallace, Merseyside County Museums

My initial fears that the conference would be only a succession of lectures about the history of peoples institutions or collections was immediately dispelled upon reading the extensive abstracts issued at registration. The conference was intended and I think may have taken, the first few tentative steps towards a national plan for systematic collections by looking for common ground among the diversity of types of collection holders and their users. Working in a provincial museum you might get a rather restricted idea of what constitutes a systematic collection so it was stimulating to hear representatives from the National Culture Collections and the Welsh Plant Breeding Institute, describing their living collections. It was also salutary to discover that even in these days of the forthcoming biotechnology revolution and the continuing green revolution, that these bodies already had or foresaw financial problems in carrying out their vital work. What chances of finance for my little-used historical collections I thought. Yet finding a useful role for traditional systematic collections, such as the Oxfam funded search in the Kew herbarium for plants which might be suitable crops for arid lands, was the optimistic note struck by Mr. Lucas of the Kew Herbarium. (If there had been a clappometer he would have been the winning speaker.)

The over-riding impression I got from the conference was an emphasis upon roles. The British Museum staff saw theirs quite correctly as workers in the national centre for taxonomic research - a role clearly defined for them by the Advisory Board for the Research Councils. It was also interesting to have their frank admission that a lot of their collections are no longer of use in fulfilling that role. Are ours fulfilling our role? I feel that it is about time we in provincial museums faced up to the fact that people do not flock to use the reserve collections not just because they do not know about them but principally because they are irrelevant. Bearing in mind this dubious scientific value of much of our collections, there was talk about what to do with material resulting from modern ecological research projects, and what uses such material would have in the future. It was interesting in this respect to hear that the extensive ecological samples collected many years ago by the 'Discovery' voyages to the Antarctic had been retained. It has obviously always been easy to justify this because of the enormous expense and time involved in repeating the work. Yet, as Alan Stubbs of the Nature Conservancy Council pointed out, many of our own neighbourhood unique habitats and sites are disappearing, making it as impossible to have samples from them for the future as to repeat the 'Discovery' voyages. A clear role for local museums to rescue samples being collected locally by universities and government research bodies - and a goal for our own field work.

Provincial museums were asked several times to define their roles more clearly and to emphasise what they did well and if necessary abandon what they did badly. This inevitably led to the thorny problem of rationalisation of collections, and transfer of material between institutions. We could see this

as the "all types to the B.M. call" and admittedly for convenience in taxonomic research that might be no bad thing but what would we get in return? For if, as was clearly stated but not defined, there was a role in the national scientific community for provincial museums, and their staff and collections, then there must be material currently in the British Museum which would be most appropriate in the provinces.

There certainly does seem to be a need for us to carve ourselves a niche in the scientific scene and in these difficult times show that we are serving a useful purpose and avoiding duplication of effort and waste of resources. The Natural Environment Research Council clearly sees the waste of material from its funded research projects as a bad thing but there are feelings that the University Grants Council do not think it appropriate to finance the long-term storage of material in university departments or even university museums. Perhaps there is a crucial role for provincial museums and universities to co-operate over the curation of research generated specimens. Certainly the only long-term hope for our collections seems to lie in us convincing a funding agency that they have a well-defined national role.

The conference did give us a chance to think of each others political and financial restraints but I wonder if there was real understanding. The informal and friendly discussions in the evenings and at mealtimes did provide opportunities to exchange experiences and problems. Perhaps I was wrong but there did seem a reluctance for British Museum and provincial curators to meet. You do not often get a chance to talk to British Museum Keepers and their deputies, and although we are clearly doing very different jobs it was gratifying to find that they do seem to think some of what we do worthwhile. I did feel that the provincial nationals - Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast were much more on our wavelength and they would seem to have a crucial role in bridging the B.M. / provincials gap.

It was indeed very interesting to hear the views of people involved in policy making in important organisations. I would like to have heard the director of the British Museum (Nat. Hist.) but he was unable to attend. The scientific director of the Natural Environment Research Council considered it worth four days of his time to devote to the future of systematic collections. Disappointing therefore, that the Museums Association considered the subject of insufficient importance to sponsor a delegate or submit a statement.

Inevitably it was agreed that the dialogue would continue, and another meeting convened in a few years time. In the meantime perhaps more effort should go into role definition and establishing 'Morton' type agreements - this is the agreement which defines areas of responsibility between the botany department of the British Museum and Kew Gardens Herbarium. The conference proceedings will be published and on the basis of what I heard, I think they will make thought provoking reading for all curators.