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SOME THOUGHTS ON COLLECTING POLICIES

A review of British museological bibliographies reveals a surprising absence of debate on the question of collecting policies. Is this accident or design? Certainly I have had many discussions with colleagues about policies but few seem willing to formulate or publicise policies for their own institutions, though no one yet seems to have listed museums which have policies and those that do not. However, as more attention becomes focused on the role of museums and their relationship to each other the matter of policy, which has too often been avoided in the past, will come more and more to the fore. Here then are some comments from a self-confessed supporter of collecting policies which may (as the Editor hoped) provoke some debate in future issues of the newsletter.

A collecting policy is not simply a 'hit list' of specimens required to complete series. It should be a reasoned statement of the aims and functions of the museum or department and the type of material which it is necessary to collect in order to carry these out. Many institutions have still not sorted out the first of these let alone the second. What are they doing?

Provincial museums are not centres of taxonomic research nor are they rest homes for 'curators' who want some time to indulge their own interests. They should be places where details, i.e. specimens and data of the local flora and fauna are collected, collated, stored and made available. If the museum is well staffed it may be possible to initiate a field work programme. If the museum is small it is up to the curator to find out who is doing the fieldwork in his area, make contact and try to ensure that records and vouchers are preserved while at the same time extracting information from the collections which he already has in his care.

Museums have a responsibility to their community which they can best serve by the accumulation and presentation of facts (specimens and records) from their own area. If the curator wants to study the morphology of tropical butterflies let him visit the BM(NH) and not waste valuable time and money acquiring such material for his local museum. As for display, the local theme can be varied by the staging of temporary exhibitions involving exotic material if necessary. This can usually be found in the reserve collections of most museums and if not present it can be borrowed. What I would not advocate (as yet) on practical as well as political ground, is the reallocation of existing collections to other museums. This is fraught with difficulties.

Collecting policies are a must. If you haven't got one - beware! Sooner or later it will catch you out.

Policies are essential because a) they make the role of the institution clear to the public, the staff and (perhaps most importantly) to the people who hold the purse strings b) they make you think twice when you acquire items as to the type of acquisition you make. It's true that 'you cannot collect everything' - some people still try. Why? because they say a written policy restricts the exercise of your professional expertise and judgement. Fine - that is what it's meant to if you think that the only guidelines one needs when assessing an imminent donation or purchase are those carried in your head. What happens when you move or have a confrontation with a number 9 bus? All too often museums or their constituent departments have completely changed direction when a new member of staff has appeared. This is not good for the institution or the collections and a written policy can help to prevent it.

When formulating a policy think about the content of your policy statement - draft and redraft it until you feel that it is right - then try your best to get your elected members to accept it. It can be a useful tool when competing for resources. Roles once defined and accepted are easier to maintain. Some

councils have twigged to this and have not approved policy statements because they fear being bound to future financial/staff commitments. If this happens, keep trying - don't use it as an excuse to do nothing. If necessary operate it as a part of the internal management practice of the institution. Redraft the statement and keep any comments on staff size etc. for separate reports. Policy statements are about aims and guidelines not staff resources.

Finally make sure that your policy is known to all staff. Lodge copies with the Area Council, the Museum Association and neighbouring museums and don't forget that the M.A.'s draft Code of Conduct requires the curator to take "all possible steps" to produce an acquisition policy and, if a registration scheme for museums gets off the ground, written policies will be required from all museums wishing to register - with the possibility of 'no registration - no grants'!

Don't forget policies can be changed. Policy reviews can be built in (say) every 5 years and if a policy is seen to be to the detriment of a department it can and should be amended.

So, if you have not yet drafted your collecting policy get on with it. If you think its not important, I think that history will prove you wrong.

Michael A Taylor
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The History of Provincial Museums

Many of the national museums have had their histories written, but the history of provincial museums and their collections has been almost ignored.

Stuart Davis of the Local History Department at Birmingham and I are interested in holding a one-day seminar on the subject in Birmingham in the early part of 1984. I should be interested to hear from anyone

a) who would like to attend (no deep commitment necessary at this stage)

and

b) feels they could contribute a talk on some aspect of the history of provincial museums and their collections. We would also be interested in brief reports on work in progress.

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