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NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MUSEUMS SERVICES

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Your ref. :
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Date : 26 July 1985

Dear Steve,

It was interesting to read Bill Ely's article in the BCG Newsletter, if only because it showed that someone else reads the Museums Bulletin!

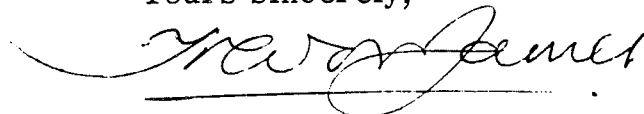
I am afraid I could not be bothered to make the perhaps obvious rejoinder to the Bulletin editor's rather sarcastic, yet uninformed comment on my original letter, and was only too pleased that Geoff Hancock did it for me. Jonathan Cooter also wrote to me and urged me to do so, and I must apologise to him for having failed to take up the cudgels.

The whole question of natural history as a recognised discipline within regional and local museums, and its regard by the politicians, is one which we need to bear in mind and work on. From this problem stems most of the difficulty so many institutions find themselves in. To my mind, it is not just one of the relative economic value of natural history specimens compared with fine art or whatever. It is to do with the ultimate perceived relevance of natural history within a community. In days when descriptive natural history was recognised nationally to be of prime scientific importance, then smaller local or regional museums were able to take part in the general work. Their relevance both as collectors of 'new' information and specimens was justified by the subject's general appeal. Now, when almost all scientific, taxonomic work is beyond the scope of such institutions, the perceived relevance in this area has been lost. At the same time, with the rise in nature conservation and its emphasis upon the living animal or plant, the general public have, in some ways rightly, seen museum collections as an irrelevant hang-over from an earlier epoch. The final nails in the coffin are being administered by the rise of the "countryside interpretation" centres, which are taking the museums' heretofore last main role of "interpretation" out to the woods fields and fens where the action is. This leaves museums, especially the smaller ones with, nevertheless, important (to our eyes) collections, in the invidious position of trying to justify why a large part of a building in a town should be given over to the housing of thousands of old, dry, very dead specimens.

As far as I can see, this leaves us one main role, apart from the usual one of trying to give town people a glimpse of the natural world through displays. This role is the supply of information, and the concomitant maintenance of accurate, verifiable data. If our taxonomically perhaps less-than-important collections are regarded as primarily a vast information resource, then we have a major reason for existence. Our aim has been to maximise this resource by its use in such work as the preparation of site management plans, the production of local papers on the history and status of flora and fauna, etc. etc. I know several other museums do the same, and these will be the ones which are recognised as being of at least some use in the community. At the same time we make absolutely sure that every enquiry to the collections or the records centre associated with them is recorded. Statistical data on use of the collections is irrefutable evidence of value, especially to local councillors (our Department, for example, is shown to be dealing with as many enquiries as the rest of the museum put together). Most of these enquiries concern outside field work, including our own. Conservation organisations, county councils, government bodies, colleges etc. need reliable information. It is our business to collect it, and our business to maintain the collections which verify it.

The value of museum natural history work in these terms is beginning to be recognised by the bodies who use us most, such as the planning officers, the conservation staff of local trusts etc. The lack of appreciation remains with other bodies and individuals, not least many councillors, especially those for whom "conservation" is, so far, a media term. But, perhaps most dangerous of all is the lack of appreciation of this role within the Museum profession itself, not least by Museum Directors and the Museums Association itself. Our status will not improve until that recognition is given.

Yours sincerely,



Trevor J. James
Keeper of Natural History