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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Letters

The justification for charging for specialist services at the BM(NH).

Dear Sir,

I understand from the Keeper of Entomology here that considerable interest is being expressed by curators in the practice of this Museum in charging for some of the services it provides.

I am responding on behalf of the Museum because the subject applies to all departments. I trust that this letter will serve as a guide to your Group on the Museum's past and current practices and possible future changes.

Treasury regulations have always required this Museum to charge at least the full cost of the services it provides (and higher market rates for commercial enterprises) unless there are clear reciprocal benefits for the Museum in which case Museum managers have discretion to waive all or part of the charge.

Until recently we levied charges only when (a) outside bodies provided funds to pay for our services or built bench fees into grants for visiting scientists or others, and (b) outside bodies declared that they required the Museum's services for commercial purposes. The current rates of charges are £2,000 per annum plus VAT for bench fees and a minimum of £12.90 plus VAT for each identification with higher assessed rates according to the amount of staff time and level of expertise necessary for the service. These rates of charge are reviewed annually and adjusted in line with the cost of the services.

We have not charged scientists or other staff of other museums or research institutions, or members of the general public - unless payment was offered - for our facilities and services as we have assumed that there will be reciprocal benefits in kind for this Museum in the longer term and that the services were required for non-commercial purposes. However, Government funding in support of this Museum is no longer sufficient for our facilities and services to be provided free of charge to everyone.

Therefore, we now ask staff of public bodies and members of the general public the purpose for which they require our services and we charge when we are told that the applicant is involved directly in, or as an agent for, a commercial or other adequately funded enterprise. In such charge cases we expect either the financiers, including publishers, to provide funds to pay for the highly specialised services of this Museum or the researcher, author or artist to pass on the charge to the financier.

This recent measure may produce insufficient additional income for the Museum to continue to provide free services - including loans from the national collections which are very costly in terms of manpower and postage - for professional curators and research scientists employed in other public bodies and for amateur biologists and geologists. A thorough review of the situation will be made later this year and it is possible that the Museum may have to interpret "clear reciprocal benefits" much more precisely than now and to charge in full or part where there is no real reciprocal benefit or the benefit is very much less than the cost. I will let you know in due course the outcome of this review.

Yours sincerely,
R. Saunders
Secretary
British Museum (Natural History)

One solution to Jenny Clack's problem on sealing museum jars.
(Newsletter 4(4) p.89)

Dear John,

I read with interest Jenny Clack's letter in the recent edition of BCG Newsletter regarding her problems with the storage and display of spirit preserved material. This museum faced similar problems some years ago when we decided to phase out the traditional method of storing specimens in the old style museum jars. Our substantial collection of spirit preserved material had badly discoloured over the years, obscuring the details of the specimens and in the majority of cases the labels were barely legible. Also the true shape of the specimen was somewhat distorted by the quality and design of the old glass jars. As many of these specimens are continuously used in student practicals for teaching purposes, a high standard of presentation was required. Our problem was solved by the use of 5mm thick acrylic boxes. These were manufactured to our specifications by a local supplier. Three different sizes were selected to suit our needs and to simplify production. These were supplied with tightly-fitted centreplates and lids with a filling hole drilled in one corner. This hole was threaded to accommodate a 2BA nylon screw.

The actual technique involves removing the specimen carefully from its glass jar and washing it in water overnight. The specimen is then placed on the acrylic centreplate and a rough outline drawn. Small holes are then drilled around this outline to facilitate the use of strong cotton thread for securing the specimen if required. A 1% solution of propylene phenoxetol is used as the preservative fluid as we found that alcohol severely damaged the acrylic. The box complete with specimen is filled to about 3/4