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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

full with the preservative and the lid is secured with acrylic cement. After the cement has dried completely all remaining air bubbles are removed before final topping up. The nylon screw bound with teflon tape to avoid leakage is then placed in position.

We started using this method about eight years ago and have found no adverse effects since. In fact some enhancement of colour has been achieved by the use of phenoxetol which I must point out is a preservative only and not a fixative. Specimens presented as described are visually much superior than in the old system, enabling an uninhibited all-round view of the object. They are also much stronger and far easier to store as their boxed shape facilitates stacking, unlike their glass counterparts.

As this method is only used when specimens are required for display purposes, we have recently begun using 'Grathwol' glass jars imported from Copenhagen for long-term storage of specimens. These are available in a variety of sizes and come complete with tightly fitted plastic lids. Evaporation of fluid from these jars is negligible and other workers have reported no loss of fluid after five years of use. They are particularly suitable for our situation as specimens can easily be removed for close examination if required.

Yours sincerely,
Martyn Linnie
Dept of Zoology,
Trinity College, Dublin

More views on the RSPB's policy on the use of stuffed birds.
(Newsletter 4(3) p.61 and 4(4) p.92)

Dear John,

Following Steve's request for views on the use of stuffed specimens (BCG Newsletter, 4(3) can I offer a rather belated reply?

I confess that I am not familiar with the actual terms of the agreement to which the RSPB, amongst others, are signatories. I am, however, very familiar with the symptoms - i.e. the refusal to use mounted specimens - as a group of the Young Ornithologists Club (YOC) meets regularly at Woodspring Museum. It is a subject that I have often debated with YOC leaders

I would say that no-one has yet explained to me why wings are acceptable, but whole animals are not. Indeed the idea that dismembering a corpse makes it more respectable seems to be more the product of muddled thinking than of serious consideration of the issues at stake. I suppose the argument is that it is unlikely that anyone shooting a bird illegally is likely then to rip its wings off.

My concern, however, is with displays of such specimens although my comments below could apply equally to the use of specimens in displays, lectures or educational services.

Without claiming that mounted specimens are 'real things' I think that it is still valid to argue that such specimens can communicate certain kinds of information much more effectively than, for instance, photographs, diagrams and/or cine films or videos. (Equally there are other kinds of information for which the other media are more suitable.) Mounted specimens for instance, apart from their obvious three-dimensional quality, might be considered most suitable for illustrating size, form, structure and to some extent, colour (obviously some pigments are transient after death). For instance, most people who have studied pictures of buzzards in books, and seen the same birds soaring high above them, are still genuinely surprised when they see the size of the actual animal. Similarly, the structure of wings, bills, claws, feathers etc. is better seen and appreciated 'in the flesh' as it were (no pun intended). It is surely preferable to use accidentally killed animals for this purpose rather than captive live ones (I realise that the Agreement outlaws the use of live birds and I think that this policy is more easily defended).

Apart from what the specimens can teach about the animals themselves, they can also teach observational and reasoning skills - one of the most important attributes of the budding naturalist. "What shape is the bill/foot/wing etc)" "Why might it be that shape?" If we discourage the asking of these questions we risk producing endless generations of book-fed naturalists incapable of applying principles of reasoning to their observations and believing everything that has been written by their predecessors who were lucky enough to have access to Museum displays to develop their own critical skills.

In my view, to ignore this potentially valuable educational resource is foolish. Surely both the cause and science of conservation is advanced by the dissemination of information. A better knowledge of birds may convince people that they are in fact worth conserving.

Having considered the study of specimens, it does beg the question as to where one draws the line: if it is wrong to exhibit dead specimens, is it equally wrong to publish data obtained from carcasses in popular publications (e.g. NEW NATURALIST Series etc.)? What at first sight seems a simple division between public presentation and scientific research is possibly not so clear cut. Furthermore, when licences can be obtained to photograph schedule 1 birds at the nest and even to shoot birds for scientific purposes, does it not seem rather elitist to attempt to deny public access to specimens that have died a quite innocent death?