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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Letter: More views on the RSPB's policy on the use of stuffed birds

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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?

Another factor to bear in mind is whether, or not, members of the public would be as likely to bring in victims of weather, traffic, windows or pets, given that there would be no apparent tangible public benefit in doing so. The result would be not only the loss of much scientific data (locality records, measurements etc.) but also a reduced likelihood of discovering illegally killed animals and acting accordingly.

The argument of the signatories to the agreement seems to be based on two premises: firstly, that some people on seeing stuffed specimens will want to go out and acquire their own. As far as I know, there is no evidence to support this and I would contend that would-be collectors would find their way into such activities without any prompting from museum displays or examples at lectures.

Secondly, that schools (and Museums?) are likely to indulge in trading in specimens. If the continued adherence to this agreement is really because of a threat from "...collecting and trading in eggs and stuffed birds for use in schools", then the signatories not only ignore the weight of legislation to prevent such activities, but appear to have a very low opinion of the integrity of both schools staff, and, by implication, natural history curators. I suggest it is time for some active lobbying.

Yours sincerely,
Alec Coles
Assistant Curator
Woodspring Museum, Weston-super-Mare

P.S. I can honestly say that in the last five years I have come across no-one either in the Museum, at lectures or anywhere else who has believed we kill for our displays (and I have done hand counts at WI's etc.). Despite this Steve's point is well taken and notice to this effect in our Natural History Gallery might be a good idea. I know that Bristol Museum produces a handbill explaining what should be done if animals are found dead, and how they use specimens brought in.

Committee News

AGM

The AGM was well attended this year and there were several changes in committee membership. This is the new line-up.

Chairman: Tony Irwin, Norfolk Museums Service
Secretary: post vacant
Treasurer, Membership Secretary and Advertising Officer: Adam Wright, Coventry Museum
Editor: John Mathias, Leicestershire Museums Service
Special Publications Editor: Steve Garland, Bolton Museums

Committee:

Geoff Stansfield (1984) University of Leicester
Geoff Hancock (1985) Glasgow Museum
Graham Walley (1985) Nottingham, Wollaton Hall Museum
Phil Collins (1986) St. Albans Museum
Gordon Reid (1986) Horniman Museum, London
Steve Moran (1986) Inverness Museum
Howard Mendel (1986) Ipswich Museum
Derek Whiteley (1986) Sheffield Museum
Di Smith, GCG representative (co-opted)

Committee business has been rather fragmented this year with Penny Wheatcroft stepping down as Secretary after the AGM and no-one else volunteering for the job; despite the election of five new committee members we still have one vacancy.

PUBLICATIONS

There is no news of the publication of the CARDIFF CONFERENCE REPORT (was it really four years ago?) or the BERNICE WILLIAMS REPORT. I understand that Peter Morgan spoke on the Williams Report to the MA Conference in Aberdeen, so the Conference Proceedings should bring us up to date. Still in Aberdeen, Peter Davis gave a rousing talk on the achievements of BCG over the past ten years and highlighted some of the problems we face during the next ten. I hope to publish the text in the next Newsletter.

COLLECTIONS

The dispersal of some of the natural history collections from the Grosvenor Museum in Chester has gone ahead as planned and the position there is now stable. Fiona MacKenzie will summarise the movements in the next Newsletter. Some concern was expressed at the last Committee meeting about the current