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In the Press

MUSEUM is a glossy quarterly published by UNESCO which occasionally has articles of interest to biologists. Volume 150 is a review of museums of science and technology, and it carries an article by Genevieve Meurgues (National Museum of Natural History, Paris) called 'The Preservation of Natural History Specimens'. It is no technical treatise, but takes the form of a dialogue between a museum biologist and a visitor/user critical of natural history display standards. The biologist is, naturally, on the defensive and explains the problems associated with the preservation of the major groups of animals and plants. It provides a broad, non-technical summary of methods which members might find useful.

One snippet of advice: to stop colour deterioration through oxidation in freeze-dried plants, keep them in an atmosphere of inert gas. Does this mean sealed display cases full of anhydrous argon? I should think this makes changing temporary exhibits tricky, but it would keep the pests out! There are one or two nice quirks of translation; quote: 'certain kinds of fish were preserved in herbaria'. Your guess is as good as mine!

Volume 151 has a photograph on the cover of one of those cranky nineteenth century botanical collections which crop up occasionally and are irresistible. What looks like a series of seven books, each with the name of a tree embossed on the rough spine, turns out to be a series of boxes full of material associated with the species. The 'book' is made from the wood of the tree, the rough 'spine' being a section of bark. The open 'book' shows specimens of fruit, leaves, sections of various kinds and objects made of the wood. The 'spine' is hollowed on the inside to take a written account. They are called 'Xylotheques', and are clearly meant to be kept in a bookcase. There is nothing further about them in the issue, except that they are in 'The Joanneum', Styria's Provincial Museum (Austria).

For those members whose curatorial duties include the supervision of museum botanic or period gardens, MUSEUM NEWS (the Journal of National Heritage) no 37 includes a background article on the new Museum of Garden History, opened recently in Lambeth on the site of John Tradescant's tomb. A knot garden has been planted near the tomb and a museum opened in the old church (St. Mary-at-Lambeth). It is run by the Tradescant Trust. Incidentally, the same issue reports extensively on the current financial plight of University Museums, which was also the subject of Alan Warhurst's address to the Museums Association Conference, reported in the latest MUSEUMS JOURNAL (vol 86 no 3, December 1986).

The Humanities Exchange, is an American company which runs a TRAVELLING EXHIBITION INFORMATION SERVICE. Its NEWSLETTER is quarterly and contains information on museum travelling exhibitions under a series of headings, including Natural History. The first European edition is available and has details of natural history travelling exhibitions in France and GDR which could be booked for UK circulation. It's a good idea, but expensive: a £20.00 subscription buys four Newsletters.

THE WILSON BULLETIN vol 96 no 4 (December 1984) carries a paper by Ned Johnson et al called 'Suggested Techniques for Modern Avian Systematics'. It is lengthy and full of technical detail, but the message is clear: the traditional methods of bird skin and skeletal preparation are inadequate for the demands of modern avian systematics. More of the specimen should be preserved so that a greater range of phenotypic and genotypic characters (using electrophoretic techniques) can be assessed for each individual collected.

In order to preserve more from each specimen than is the current practice, what are termed 'skin-skeleton' preparations should take the place of traditional cabinet skins. A full range of tissue samples should be removed during preparation and stored in ultra-cold freezers. Various methods of preparing skin-skeletons are discussed as are the problems of low-temperature tissue storage and liquid nitrogen handling.

I'm not sure how practicable these procedures are for provincial museums in the UK with their limited resources, but we ought at least to be aware of them.

For those curators who rely on Vapona for pest control in their collections, there is an article by M.L. Johnson and E. Kritzman in ACTA ZOOLOGICA FENNICA (vol 170, pages 75-76) reviewing its use over an eighteen year period in the Natural History Museum, Tacoma, USA: 'Vapona for Pest Control in a Museum, 1964-1984'. It is deemed safe and effective and the most appropriate concentrations are discussed.

MUSEUMS JOURNAL vol 86 no 2 (September 1986) contains a fascinating report by Don Steward on the tracking down and prosecution of a thief of geological specimens from museum stores: 'A Case Study of a Museum Thief'. In the same issue Geoff Stansfield examines trends in museum natural history displays - a discussion based on reviews of new exhibits at Devizes, Manchester, Inverness and Bagshaw museums. This is also Geoff's theme for the evening session at the next BCG meeting in Sheffield.

'The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it.'

E. FitzGerald: Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

An apt quote for another look at inks - this time the felt-tipped pen variety. Following the paper in CURATOR on ink permanence noted in the last Newsletter, I have had two further articles brought to my attention: CONSERVATION NEWS no 27 (July 1985) has the results of a comprehensive marker-pen trial carried out by archaeological conservators at York (Artline, Berol, Edding and Pentel products recommended); CONSERVATION NEWS no 30 reports on marker pen tests for light-fastness carried out at Glasgow Museum when the Staedtler Pan Color range came out best (consult the references for full details). Incidentally, nearly all the reds are notoriously impermanent, but one, Staedtler Pan Color 303 red, is reported to be very stable. Mind you, I don't know if they tested it against Piety, Wit, or Tears!

One small but valuable publication which appeared in December 1986 is the BSBI NEWS (no 44) SUPPLEMENT by JR Press (BMNH). It is an annotated list of botanical identification manuals covering the general areas of Western Europe and the Mediterranean. Aimed at people like me - the interested amateur on holiday - it gives a two-line run-down of the more popular botanical identification guides, some in English to buy here and take with you, others to look for when you arrive.

The current ASC NEWSLETTER (vol 14 no 6), December 1986) has two major articles: 'Collections of the Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences' is a detailed account of the Buffalo Museum of Science biological collections; 'Third World Perceptions of Scientific Imperialism' is concerned with the view from scientific communities in the third world that natural scientists from developed countries act in a high-handed way by collecting and describing native species (which are then held in a small number of foreign museums and herbaria) with little or no reference to the scientific and educational establishments in the country of collection. The legal niceties are complied with but there is no commitment involved. The article has a code of conduct for visiting scientists which any future 'expedition' members would do well to follow.

Two papers in STUDIES IN CONSERVATION (vol 31 no 4, November 1986) may be of indirect interest to biological curators. The first 'The Yellowing of Thymol in the Display of Prints' by V. Daniels and B. Boyd notes the yellowing effect on paper caused by thymol in the presence of daylight (even when u-v screened). Thymol is widely used as a fungicide in natural history collections and displays; we know that natural history

objects fade in light; could the thymol effect noted for paper also occur with specimens? Would anyone like to find out?

The second paper 'The Yellowing of Epoxy Resin Adhesives: Report on High-intensity Light Aging' by Jane Down is concerned with the tendency of room temperature-cure epoxy resin adhesives to yellow under high intensity light. These adhesives are widely used by biological conservators (skeletal repair is one example that comes to mind). A wide range of commercially available products were tested and those with less tendency to yellow are recommended.

Although not in a current publication, I recently came across the paper by Tennent and Baird which re-examines Bynes disease in mollusc collections: 'The Deterioration of Mollusca Collections: Identification of Shell Efflorescence' in STUDIES IN CONSERVATION vol 30 (1985). This paper dispels several myths about the 'disease', laying the blame for the shell efflorescence firmly with the acids (acetic and formic) liberated into the atmosphere in closed hardwood storage cabinets (mainly oak). It is a classic paper of its kind and should be read by anyone curating a marine mollusc collection (or sitting the MA Diploma examinations).

Until recently I had not seen the serial publication MUSEOLOGY from Texas Tech University. It is an irregular series of monographs on natural history curatorial subjects. No 6 (1984) is 'The Care of Tanned Skins in Mammal Research Collections' which includes preparation, storage, labelling, documentation, pest control etc; an excellent, readable and practical booklet. No 7 (1986) is called 'Guidelines for Managing Bird Collections' and covers about everything you can think of associated with bird collection management: from ethical standards and acquisition policies through preparation, documentation and storage to use of computers for data retrieval. There are even examples of invoice forms to accompany specimens in transit and sample exchange agreements. It is an excellent guide/handbook (available at \$16.00 from the Texas Tech Press Sales Office, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas 79409, USA) and should be in every museum library.

Also from America, the AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY, TECHNICAL REPORT No 4 is a review of fumigation procedures called 'A Current Status Report on Fumigation in Museums and Historical Agencies' by R.F. McGiffin. Although not aimed specifically at natural history museums it is a useful round-up of fumigation methods in use in the USA with notes on health hazards and possible specimen damage resulting from each of the chemical treatments examined: ethylene oxide; methyl bromide; sulphuryl fluoride (Vikane); PDCB; naphthalene, dichlorvos (Vapona). There is also a bibliography.

On a very different subject, the following is taken from the August NEWSLETTER of AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL (letter writing section). The AI Information Officer has no further information and so it is reproduced here at face value.

Pavel Krivka, an ecologist who worked in the District Museum in Jicin, was sentenced on 21 November 1985 by the District Court in Hradec Kralove to three years' imprisonment under Article 98 of the penal code ("subversion").

The charge followed a letter he had written in February 1985 to a friend in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) criticizing the Czechoslovak authorities for their neglect of ecological problems. He gave the letter to a friend to post from Yugoslavia, but it was intercepted by the State Security Police. He was also accused of putting up maps indicating places where ecological problems were neglected, inventing crossword puzzles which "vilified" the government and its representatives and writing a parody on a Czech Christmas mass in which, the authorities said, he defamed the President and expressed hostile criticism of official policies.

His friend, Pavel Skoda, who worked in a college of further education as a science assistant, was sentenced under Article 100 ("incitement") to 20 months' imprisonment at the same time for being co-author of the parody.

Please send courteous letters appealing for their release to:

JUDr Gustav Husak
President of the CSSR
11 908 Praha - Hrad
CSSR

The price of fossils

Angela Milner and Ian Rolfe are collecting information on historic and present prices of fossils, as a guide to current pricing practice (and thus to insurance and indemnity values of museum collections). To make this study reliable, they would welcome dated examples of prices that museums and others have paid for fossils, or for collections of them. They need examples of expensive, mid-range and cheap fossils; copies of old priced lists of fossils are particularly welcome, as are illustrations of priced specimens, references thereto, and references to discussion of this topic. Results will be presented at a Geological Curators Group/Palaontological Association/Geological Society meeting in London in early October 1987, and published thereafter.

Please contact them at the Palaeontology Department, British Museum (Natural History), Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD (01-589 6323 ext 27) or the National Museum of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh EH1 1JF (031-225 7534 ext 239).

ICOM



International Council of Museums
14th General Conference - 15th General
Assembly
Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1986.
Draft Resolution No 3

The Threat to our Natural Heritage

Whereas there is a grave and immediate threat of the loss of a great proportion of our people's natural heritage through the rapid destruction and degradation of our natural environment, particularly in those regions of the world that have not yet been significantly altered, and

Whereas the quality of all peoples is reduced and endangered by the continuing indiscriminate and unplanned elimination of great numbers of plant and animal species, and

Whereas little is known even today of the great majority of plant and animal species with which we share this globe, and

Whereas the responsibility for discovering, describing, and preserving examples of this biological diversity rests today almost exclusively with the world's natural history museums and their scientific personnel, and

Whereas the university training of young scientists has changed focus so that the number of those who are able to understand and record this diversity of life has rapidly declined in the past decade;

Therefore this, the 15th General Assembly of ICOM meeting in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on 4 November 1986, urges natural history museums and zoological and botanical gardens and nature reserves throughout the world to work together and with both public and private entities to train young scientists in the essential research of documenting the earth's biological diversity and to develop mechanisms for preserving sufficient habitats for this diversity to continue to exist and flourish for future generations.

This resolution was passed unchanged by the General Assembly and now becomes part of ICOM's policy statement.

ICOM advises UNESCO (and therefore the UN) on matters concerning cultural and, to some degree, natural heritage and through these organisations (and, of course directly) can have an impact on governmental policy makers. This resolution, therefore, is to be welcomed by everyone concerned with the conservation movement and with the maintenance of systematic collections (which are vital tools in the '... essential research of documenting the earth's biological diversity ...'). Unfortunately, the British Government has withdrawn from UNESCO.

Important Seminar on The Disposal of Museum Collections

Organised jointly by the Museum Professionals Group and the Social History Curators Group, this major seminar is to be held at The Yorkshire Museum, York on 12th March 1987.

The subject is the disposal of museum and art gallery collections, a contentious issue which crosses all disciplinary boundaries and which the profession has to confront. Bulging stores full of ill-documented, duplicated, deteriorating materials are the symptoms of an oppressive problem which has yet to be solved. Do we need to dispose of collections, and if so, how?

Speakers will address a variety of issues, including cultural restitution, the legal framework for disposal, the Code of Conduct, and regional co-operation. Specialists will assess the state of their own disciplines, and propose ways forward. Ultimately, if the profession cannot tackle the problems in a rational way, will others make the decisions for us?

Cost £6.00 (£4.00 to members of MPG/SHCG). Forms available from David Fleming, Town Docks Museum, Queen Victoria Square, Hull HU1 3DX.

Countryside Commission Grants for Interpretive Displays

The Countryside Commission recently gave a 50% grant (amounting to £2,400) towards the cost of showcases, graphics and equipment in the interpretive display at Coombe Abbey Countryside Park, Coventry. The Park is owned by Coventry City Council and is run by the Leisure Services Department, which also controls the City Museum Service. The site is of great interest as an important SSSI.

The display was mounted, devised and researched by staff at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry, and covered the following topics:

The making of the landscape at Coombe
Habitats at Coombe
The Fishery
Animal tracks, trails and signs
Biological recording
Insects at Coombe
A key to insect orders found at Coombe

The Countryside Commission were most eager to assist in funding the displays (perhaps because the exhibition tries to encourage active visitor participation) and indeed they asked whether we wished to do similar displays at other sites. Their money was used for a variety of functions, including:

purchase of microscopes
purchase of entomological cabinet
purchase of wood and perspex for display cases
purchase of reference books for public use
lighting
photographic enlargements and photosetting

Whilst I believe that the fact the display was undertaken at a local Country Park was the

reason that we originally gained grant approval from the Countryside Commission, there are many other museums who have (or may wish to have) "outposts" at their local Country Parks and who may wish to exploit this route of grant-aid.

The next question is whether or not the Countryside Commission would consider part-funding of exhibitions in a town or city centre museum?

Adam Wright
Herbert Art Gallery and Museum
Coventry

Dodgy offer from the Philippines

Some members may have received a letter from PETER CUA, a taxidermist working in the Philippines, offering for sale study skins of Philippine birds. The letter has no mention of import/export licences or any other legal restrictions which may apply to the transport of natural history specimens from that part of the world.

Derek Foxwell, Natural History Conservator based at Bristol Museum, checked the legal implications of the offer with Mr. P. Lewis of the Endangered Species Branch of the DoE at Bristol and was told that the Philippines operate a total ban on the export of their wildlife (including parts and derivatives) and so no licences would be granted by the Department for imports from the Philippines; this covers all species, not just those on CITES lists.

So, be warned if you were thinking of responding to the letter.

Subscription rates are £6.00 for individual membership and £10.00 for institutional membership. Contact Adam Wright, Herbert Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry, for application forms.

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