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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: In the Press

Author(s): Not Listed.

Source: Not Listed. (1987). In the Press. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 4 No 8*, 156.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1186>

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In the Press

The current issue of STUDIES IN CONSERVATION (Vol 32 No 4) contains two articles of interest to biology curators although not specifically written for them. The first 'Protection of museum textiles and leather against the dermestid beetle by means of antifeedants', is by a Russian conservator, GA Zaitseva, and gives an account of experiments to determine which of a wide range of compounds are the most effective 'antifeedants' for the larvae of a range of dermestids. 'Antifeedant' is a new word for me, but it is defined as a substance which prevents a dermestid larva from feeding.

The 50 substances tested were derived from four chemical groups (details are in the paper) which included known repellants of blood-sucking insects. The test material was wool, soaked in various dilutions of the chemicals, and conclusions are drawn on the most suitable chemical, its threshold value and the duration of effective protection.

'Carboxide' demonstrated a high antifeedant activity combined with sufficient persistence to allow its consideration for practical application. But BEWARE, this is not the highly toxic fumigant sold under the 'carboxide' trade name in the UK and USA; in the USSR, carboxide is the common name for the insect repellent hexamethylene carbamide.

The second article of interest is 'The potential long-term effects of gamma irradiation on paper' by Fiona Butterfield. The increasing use of gamma irradiation as a biocide in what might be called 'Sensitive' areas, like hospital sterilization and food preservation has alerted some conservators to its possible use as a single-treatment pesticide for infested museum objects. Damage to the treated items seems to be the primary cause for concern and the extent and nature of this damage appears to be the main line of research.

The article in question summarises the effects of treating various papers with IOKGy gamma radiation. The results indicate unacceptable levels of paper degradation - specifically a decrease in mechanical strength measured by fold endurance and tear resistance.

What biologists need is some base-line data on the effects of this treatment on biological specimens; there is an open field of research for someone - any takers?

A short article by Mike Wilson of the Commonwealth Institute of Entomology should be read by any curator dealing with small insects which need to be dry mounted after being preserved in alcohol: 'Removing Auchenorrhyncha from Alcohol using Critical Point Drying' is in TYMBAL (Auchenorrhyncha Newsletter) no 4, 1984.

The technique of removing minute and fragile specimens from alcohol with no distortion or appreciable colour loss by critical point drying is discussed in detail and seems to be much the best means of carrying out this difficult operation. The article also has a short bibliography of North American papers on the same subject.

The Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections met at Redpath Museum, McGill University, Montreal in early June. Two small publications emanating from there are A PRELIMINARY LIST OF CONSERVATION RESOURCES FOR THE PRESERVATION OF NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS produced by the Conservation Committee of SPNHC and A LISTING OF PUBLICATIONS PERTINENT TO NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS. Both are available from Catherine Hawks and Caralyn Rose, US National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560, USA.

The UNESCO publication, MUSEUM, has in issue 154, a review of natural history exhibition development in regional museums in France and a discussion of present and future trends in display. The whole question of 'permanence' being a desirable feature of any natural history exhibit is discussed as is the integration of complementary media with more traditional forms of display. The paper is called 'The vexed question of permanent exhibitions in natural science museums in the provinces'.

British Museum (Natural History) changes hands

No, it's not been privatised! Yet.

In July the Prime Minister announced her decision to transfer responsibility for the BM(NH) from the Secretary of State for Education and Science to the Arts Minister, so it is now sponsored by the Office of Arts and Libraries.

In her own words "Such a change will enable this world famous Museum to play its full part alongside the other great national museums and galleries in the government's developing policies for the national heritage".

You can read into that classic piece of political verbiage anything you want!

The transfer requires no change in the pay, conditions and grading of current or future staff. As well as the BM(NH), the Minister for the Arts and OAL now has responsibility for the BM, Imperial War Museum, National Gallery, National Maritime Museum, National Portrait Gallery, Science Museum, Tate Gallery, V&A, Wallace Collection and the Merseyside Museums.

There will be no reduction in the planned level of Government funding for the BM(NH) as a consequence of the transfer.