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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Author(s): Mathias, J.

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Collections Research - is there a market?

THE REGISTER OF NATURAL SCIENCE COLLECTIONS IN YORKSHIRE AND HUMBERSIDE was published in August 1987. It represents the culmination of eight years work by the members of the Yorkshire and Humberside Collections Research Unit, and contains 343 pages of catalogue arranged by collector's name with indices to subject and associated collectors.

Surprisingly, of the 300 printed only a modest number have been sold after fourteen months. Very few have gone outside the Yorkshire and Humberside region, in spite of circulars sent out with BCG and GCG literature. Most of the museums in Britain with natural science curators do not have a copy. Overseas sales are nil.

What is the problem? Are we too parochial in outlook or too poor? Are we too busy or just disinterested? I would like to think that none are true, and that each museum with a practising naturalist would require this and the complimentary registers of the other collection research units.

Please support the collection research initiatives if you are able. The Yorkshire and Humberside Register is available for £18.00 plus postage and packing (£10.00 plus postage and packing to members of the Yorkshire and Humberside Council).

Orders and enquiries to: Mrs J Platt, Yorkshire and Humberside Museums Council, Farnley Hall, Hall Lane, Leeds LS12 5HA. Tel 0532 638909.

Tim Riley
Sheffield City Museum



ASC to hold workshops on Collection Management and Preservation; Education of Systematists

The 1989 Annual Meeting of the Association of Systematics Collections will be held at the University of Nebraska State Museum, Lincoln, Nebraska, on May 18-20, 1989. The meeting will feature a workshop on collection management and preservation on May 19-20. The purpose of the workshop is to bring together elements of the natural history community who are responsible for the collections to explore common problems from different perspectives. Collections managers, curators/researchers, and museum directors will be given an opportunity to share views. Some innovative collection assessment and preservation programs at natural history museums will be reviewed. Representatives of funding agencies such as NSF and the Institute for Museum Services and representatives of organizations such as the National Institute for Conservation (NIC)

will discuss strategies for funding and successfully completing collection assessment and preservation projects. The workshop is co-sponsored by the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections.

A second workshop at the ASC meeting will discuss education of curators/systematists. Many people feel that universities are educating fewer systematists, and manpower needs will become acute in the next ten years. The state of the academic discipline of systematics, university programs in systematics, university-museum consortia, and curriculum needs will be discussed.

For a list of speakers and registration information, contact ASC, 730, 11th St NW, Second Floor, Washington, DC, 20001, (202) 347-2850. Hotel reservations can be made directly with the Lincoln Hilton at (402) 475-4011 or 800-HILTONS. Discount air fares are available from Goodlife Tour and Travel, Lincoln, NE 800-635-0204.

[NB The Editor has the provisional programme and application form for this meeting. If any BCG member would like further details please contact John Mathias at Leicestershire Museums, tel: (0533) 554100.]

The latest ASC NEWSLETTER (Vol 16 no 6, Dec 1988) is mainly concerned with reports from the survey and seminar in 1988 on 'Collections Resources for the 1990s'. The aims of the seminar were to evaluate progress made by ASC in the past 10 years and to map out directions for development over the next decade. As a starting point, all major holders of systematic collections were circularised with questionnaires to update information on size, funding levels and staffing over the past 10 years as well as a current perceived needs; a second questionnaire was sent to managers of collections in each major taxonomic discipline; a third was sent to workers with an identified interest in, or knowledge of, computer programmes associated with systematic collections and institutions.

Returns from the surveys were entered into a computer and form an updatable data base. They also formed the basis for discussion on the three days of the seminar: 'Institutional Needs'; 'Collections Resources as seen by the Taxonomic Disciplines'; 'Computers and Networking'. The major result of the workshop was a manifesto for action that went a long way to unify the systematics community and the administrators of collections.

The manifesto for action cannot be reproduced here, but it makes essential reading for anyone working with biological collections.

On reflection, this seems to be a preferable way to approach the dissemination of information resulting from a large scale survey to the one adopted in the UK. Here the whole survey was published in a report which is expensive, indigestible and

difficult to use, with a set of rather bland recommendations tacked on at the end. The US approach is to computerise the data and produce a series of reports and recommendations on various aspects of the survey results: brief, up to date, backed with relevant statistics, and aimed at a particular problem or funding agency. Rapier compared with bludgeon!

The other important difference of course is that the survey results in the US were discussed at a three-day seminar, whereas in the UK the report 'BIOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS UK' seems to have entered a kind of limbo. We now desperately need the conference which brings together the users, curators, administrators and funding authorities to discuss the problems which 'BIOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS UK' has, in its ponderous way, highlighted.

John Mathias
Editor, BCG

In the Press

The MUSEUMS JOURNAL (vol 88 no 4, March 1989) covering the Leicester University conference of December 1988 'A Future for Museums' has a summary of the paper given by Neil Chalmers, new director of the BM(NH). Called 'Defining our Mission', it discusses what Dr Chalmers sees as the future course for the museum in fairly general terms, including safeguarding and developing the collections, new areas of research and preservation (with an emphasis on genetic material), display and education.

An interesting item is Dr Chalmer's commitment to producing travelling exhibitions and distance learning materials based on the collections - a significant new development. One criticism might be that the curatorial activities and responsibilities of the BM(NH) have not been given a higher profile, and research into the preservation and conservation of specimens is not mentioned at all - which is one field in which the museum was once a traditional and undoubted leader.

In the same issue is a paper by R E Child: 'Fumigation in Museums - a Possible Alternative' which summarises the fumigation methods presently available and describes Rentokil's 'fumigation bubble' development. This has been noted in previous BCG Newsletters.

The British Dragonfly Society has now got its act together very nicely. It has been in existence for six years and in that time its publications have evolved from the 'interesting but scruffy' newsletter approach to what is now a very professional looking

JOURNAL and a series of associated booklets and leaflets. Two which caught my eye in the December 1988 mailing were:

- 1 CODE OF PRACTICE for collecting dragonflies in the UK, which contains a series of guidelines for collecting common species, rare, vulnerable species and isolated populations of common species;
- 2 POND CONSTRUCTION FOR DRAGONFLIES which is a very useful practical guide.

Enquiries for these should be addressed to the Editor, S J Brooks, 25 Salisbury Avenue, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL1 4UB.

Book Reviews

A PROVISIONAL ATLAS OF THE SEPSIDAE (DIPTERA) OF THE BRITISH ISLES
by A C Pont

Published by the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology, 1986. Price £3.00
ISBN 1-870393-00-7

This atlas provides distribution maps for the 27 known British species of Sepsidae. Accompanying each map is a paragraph of text giving information on frequency of occurrence, flight period, habitat preference and world distribution. There is also an introductory section to the atlas, giving interesting information on Sepsids, their distribution, and the sources of records used for plotting the maps. A table provides information on the number of records received per species, and on the number of 10km squares in which each species has been recorded.

Mr Pont has taken considerable care to avoid misidentifications being accepted, and the bulk of the records are from museum collections, or from material identified after the publication of the Royal Entomological Society's Handbook on Sepsidae, published in 1979. Thus historical published records have not been included.

One thing which I did find frustrating was that the maps only show the presence or absence of records - there is no means of telling how old a record is unless it is specifically mentioned in the text.

That criticism aside, I found it a most interesting publication containing much information. I am also far keener on the A5 format than the old, spiral bound A4 atlases.

Adam Wright
Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry