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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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INFORMATION POLICIES FOR MUSEUMS

by Elizabeth Orna

Published by the Museums Documentation Association, Cambridge, 1987.
ISBN 0-851158-300-2 Price £9.95

INFORMATION POLICIES FOR MUSEUMS should be read and inwardly digested by all museum directors and decision makers. It points out the central role that information should have in the operation and management of all museums. Museum information is not solely about collections documentation and management. Information policy should be at the core of the management of all museum functions. The availability of information is not just vital to the management of a museum's collections, but also in managerial decision making (such as the allocation of resources) and in the development of publications programmes etc. The information policy should stem directly from a museum's aims and objectives and should provide one of the main frameworks for the achievement of the museum's goals.

Orna places great emphasis on the need for an information manager post in museums. This proposal is relevant both to large and small museums. In the latter case information should be part of the responsibility of a single individual. The author recognises that it is essential that the post holder is part of the management team, and is closely involved in, for example, staff selection and training. The information manager should not just be viewed as a documentation assistant.

Orna's philosophy is many years ahead of that of most museums. She recognises the opportunity that advances in information technology will represent to museums. Interestingly, most of the examples of development along the lines she is advocating come from the realms of natural history, both from this country and overseas. At present few museums have integrated collections management information systems, let alone the wider integrated information systems Orna envisages. Perhaps this reflects the lack of natural historians at directorial level in museums in this country?

The paper was first published in 1980. It has now been updated to take into account the advent of Modes, and more importantly the development of affordable mini-computers, computer networks and advances in office automation. The paper's one major failing is in its design and layout. It is of three column format. In general the first column is either blank or contains a strange graphic motif. This would be acceptable if the typeface was of a reasonable size. Unfortunately it is small enough to be difficult to read if not positively painful. In addition the headings to some of the illustrative tables in column three are placed in column one, making the layout somewhat confusing.

Despite these problems, the paper should be essential reading for all museum managers and not just documentation experts. If museums

are to exploit the advantages that developments in information technology will bring, it is essential that museum decision makers address the issues Orna raises.

Phil Collins
St Albans Museum

Future Programme, 1990

A seminar has been arranged in conjunction with the Museums Association on the subject: **NATURAL HISTORY FOR NON SPECIALISTS.**

Quote from the MA Seminar programme:

'Biological Collections UK revealed alarming gaps in the maintenance of natural history collections - nearly 200 museums with such collections have no specialist curator and even those that do often exist in an environment where the management/governing body have little idea of the philosophy, value, use and conservation of the collections. This seminar is aimed principally at those non-specialists who have some natural history responsibilities.

Bookings should be sent to: Museums Association Seminars, 852 Melton Road, Thurmaston, Leicester LE4 8EN.

Please tell non specialist curators who have charge of biological collections about this seminar and urge them to attend. Some biology curators may wish to send their boss to it!

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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