



**NatSCA**

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

---

Title: Strife at the Natural History Museum

Author(s): Not Listed.

Source: Not Listed. (1990). Strife at the Natural History Museum. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter*, Vol 5 No 5, 49 - 52.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/936>

---

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.



# NEWSLETTER



May 1990

Vol 5 No 5

## Strife at the Natural History Museum

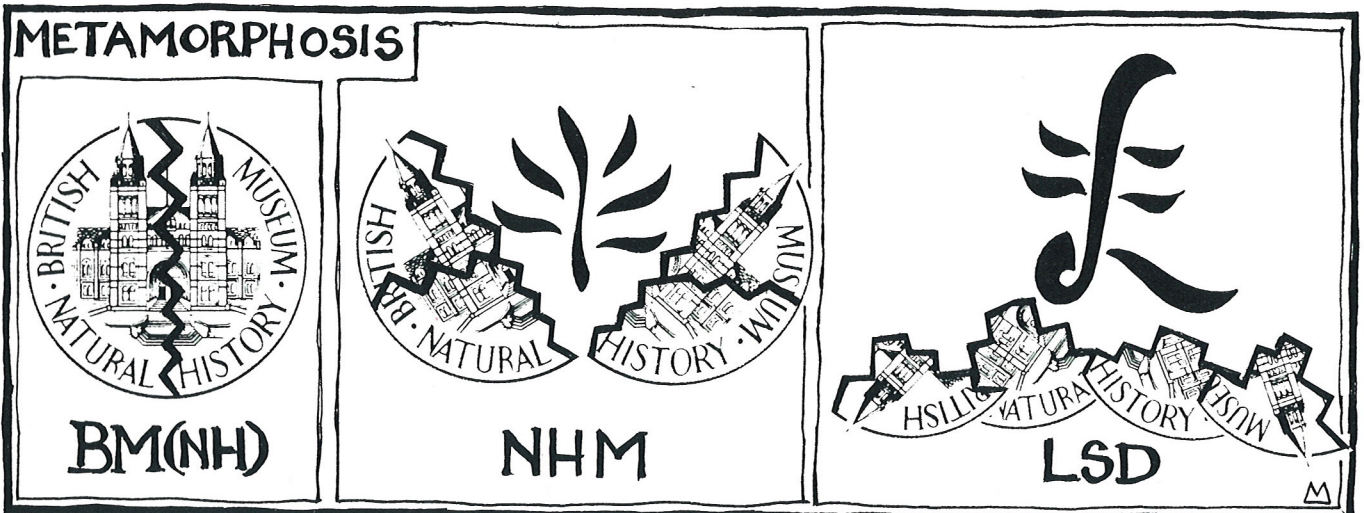
Radical change is the somewhat unusual flavour of the month at the Natural History Museum and that August, if slightly dusty institution has hit the headlines as never before. Dr Chalmers' Corporate Plan for 1990-95 was approved by the Trustees on 18th April, with no meaningful staff consultation as far as one can gather, and the long-rumoured prospect of scientific job losses suddenly became reality. About 100 jobs will disappear by 1992; 40 have already gone through natural wastage (the Plan actually says 'saved' but appears to mean the opposite) and 50-60 more will be lost over the next two years by a combination of natural wastage, redeployment, and voluntary and compulsory early retirement.

Assessments seem to vary as to what proportion of the losses is from the scientific establishment - about 43-46 seems to be the most likely estimate (about 15%).

Further information on what this actually means has come from the decent daily papers. Some sections and collections, like palaeobotany, appear to be losing their scientific staff completely. In

Botany, ten out of 49 jobs will go; in palaeontology, eleven out of 53; most of the Public Services Department seems to have been lopped. The latter despite the fact that there is to be a massive new exhibition programme at the museum: eight new permanent galleries during the next five years, presumably all developed through short term appointments and contracting out. If the furore caused by the architectural extravagances of the new BP-sponsored ecology gallery are anything to go by, this will not be an easy course to navigate. It is disturbing that the museum is so dependent on sponsorship for this ambitious display programme. It is deeply worrying that the staff who would have been competent at defending the scientific content of the galleries in the face of the expediencies of fashion seem to be on the way out.

The research thrust of the museum is now to be narrowed down to six areas: biodiversity, environmental quality, living resources, mineral resources, human health and human origins; what Dr Chalmers summarises as environmental, human wealth and human health issues.



According to NATURE, research themes characterised by their 'eyecatching banality'.

The riposte from the staff side says that, despite the stated aim in the Corporate Plan to concentrate on biodiversity as one of six research areas, the museum is closing down research on: recent and fossil mammals (except primates), testate amoebae, sponges, diatoms and bryophytes, taxonomic computing, fossil plants, fossil birds, modern bees and wasps, hemiptera (heteroptera) and weevils, building stones and gemstones amongst others. This in addition to research already closed down on modern birds and spiders, coelenterates, bryozoans, echinoderms and annelids. This, they say, makes the cuts inconsistent with the stated policy.

The division between 'curatorship' and 'scholarship and research', formerly reasonably well integrated at the museum, is to be widened to chasm-like proportions. There is an obvious similarity here with the restructuring at the V & A (which was so derided that it has been modified since its launch a year and a half ago) although the axe has not been wielded at such a lofty level (the keepers don't seem to be losing their jobs at the Natural History Museum). It would be wrong to think that all departments have been cut - the Department of Administrative Service apparently loses four posts but gains six. Well done Admin Services!

Following an initial period of shock, the staff side is organising a campaign of industrial action and wider ranging pressures. An early one day strike by some staff members was followed by demands for consultations with the director before the Plan is presented to the Minister for the Arts. Threats of further industrial action hang in the air following the outcome of this meeting (unknown at the time of writing). A petition urging the Trustees to reconsider the Plan and use their influence to get proper funding is circulating around museums and research workers (if you want to sign the petition, contact: Lynne Patchett, IPMS Secretary, Department of Public Services, The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD).

The campaign of pressure and comment from the wider scientific community has born fruit in the national press. So much has appeared that it is difficult to keep track of it all, but these are three relevant comments:

Dr Niles Eldridge, Dean of the Scientific Council of the American Museum of Natural

History, NY, says 'We just don't know whats out there (meaning species). To cut back now is a disaster. The Natural History Museum library is a treasure trove and its backbone the research scientists. We desperately need them. There is no point in maintaining a collection if research is not being done on it'.

From thirty staff of the Biology and Earth Sciences departments at the Open University (where Dr Chalmers worked previously) an open letter to Dr Chalmers printed in the Guardian from which this paragraph on the staff cuts is taken:

'We consider that the planned staffing cuts are both extremely unwise and injuriously introduced. We understand that one of the intentions of the cuts is to reduce the staff salary component of the Museum's budget, yet the scientific, technical and exhibition staff of the Museum are the essential mainstay of its work, providing a vital spread and continuity of expertise in curatorial management of the collections, in taxonomic methodology and the mounting of exhibitions. Once lost, such expertise would take a considerable time (and no mean expense) to re-establish. The cuts would therefore undermine the Museum's ability to pursue its essential purposes. We would be more than happy to support you in pressing for adequate funding for the Museum but condemn massive staff cuts, as a most inappropriate option.

From the Independent, 14th May 1990, Viewpoint by Beverly Halstead of Imperial College:

'The public galleries are due for an overhaul, but I fear we have people in charge who do not understand what the scientists actually achieve down in the depths of the museum. Now the criterion is what will draw the crowds and generate income. Roaring, growling, half-sized models of dinosaurs brings them in by the hordes. But a giant dinosaur toy is still a toy for all that. A genuine fossil bone, a jaw full of teeth, a nest of eggs, trackways where dinosaurs once trod, these are the objects to capture the imagination. Let us hope that they can find their place again in the hallowed halls of that Kensington cathedral of 67 million specimens.

As a matter of policy the director has placed the high-profile, commercial activities first in the queue for substantial backing. So dinosaurs and prehistoric humans are safe-guarded; for fossil mammals and birds - zilch. The fear is that there may be no place for the museum's scholarship in the public galleries. The dedicated, low-profile scientists are at the sticky end of things - they simply cannot compete in this particular game.

It is invidious that they should have to. The museum fulfils two distinct roles: entertainment-cum-educational on the one hand, scientific research on the other. It is wrong to set one side up against the other - it is wrong for the museum management to have to weigh the relative worth of the museum's separate functions.

The scientific research of the museum is concerned with collecting, identifying, describing, and classifying the natural world - taxonomy and systematics. It is the sort of activity that requires lifetimes of dedication. It is the compilation of the inventory of our planet. Like a dictionary, it will only be of use if it has all the words in it, not just the currently fashionable ones.

#### BCG RESPONSE

At the BCG AGM in Douglas the effects of the Corporate Plan on the existing staffing levels at the NHM, and the revised research strategy were discussed as far as possible. Those members present felt that BCG should take a strong stance on this issue and unanimously passed the following resolution, which gives the committee a lead in any further dialogue with the NHM management on the implications of the Corporate Plan.

'The BCG strongly condemns the Trustees and management of the Natural History Museum for the reduction in staffing resources resulting from the implementation of the recent Corporate Plan.

This will lead to the loss of irreplaceable expertise, in specific areas of the collections, unavailable elsewhere.

In addition, the inevitable damage that will be caused to collections, which are a vital part of the national and international heritage, represents an indefensible loss to science.'

#### THE CORPORATE PLAN, 1990-95: SOME DETAILS

The Corporate Plan itself is an eleven page document which cannot be reproduced here in its entirety. However, Section 2 titled 'The Mission' gives a set of objectives which the Plan then addresses in greater detail; this section is reproduced below. Section 3.3 is the strategy as it relates to science and, as this is the area which is probably of most relevance to BCG members outside the NHM, it is also reproduced below. Other key areas of the strategy are: Library,

Exhibitions, Education, Front of House, Estate, Financial Resources and Human Resources, all of which are dealt with in some depth. The final part of the Plan quoted below, section 4.2(c), deals with the impact of the strategy on staffing levels and is at the core of the present unrest.

#### Section 2 THE MISSION

- '2.1 This focus has recently been redefined in the following Mission Statement:-  
"To promote the understanding and enjoyment of the variety of our natural world through high quality exhibitions, education and science"
- 2.2 It gives rise to the following key objectives for the next five years:-
- a) Science - for curation, to increase the efficiency of collection management and advisory services  
- for research, to develop basic and applied programmes relevant to contemporary needs and issues
  - b) Library - to conserve the collections and provide a service to meet the needs of the Museum
  - c) Exhibitions - to improve the level of maintenance in the galleries  
- to provide a comprehensive series of permanent exhibitions which are up-to-date and relevant to audience needs
  - d) Education - to complete the development of an educational programme tailored to the needs of the new National Curriculum
  - e) Front of House - to improve customer care  
- to enhance further the environment and facilities provided for visitors
  - f) Estate - to maintain the estate to a high standard, particularly by reroofing the Waterhouse Building  
- to ensure the proper housing of collections mainly through the replacement of the Ruislip store
  - g) Management - to bring about improvements in Museum organisation and management in order to build upon and develop the commitment and skills of its staff
  - h) Resources - to increase income in real terms, both from Grant-in-Aid, from other sources across all the Museum's activities, and by effective marketing  
- to continue improving the effectiveness with which resources are used.'

#### Section 3.3 THE STRATEGY (relating to Science)

- '3.3 The following strategy has been formulated:-

Science - for Curation and advice, the management and organisational structures are being redefined to ensure that resources can be focussed on:-

- a) continuing a basic level of care and maintenance of the collections
- b) making these materials available to research workers worldwide
- c) developing those parts of the collections that are relevant to the Museum's changing research programmes.

- for Research, the work is being reorganised into a series of programmes, appropriate to the Museum's remit, as follows:

- Biodiversity
- Environmental Quality
- Living Resources
- Mineral Resources
- Human Health
- Human Origins

These will be responsive to changes in audience needs and, by their interdisciplinary nature, will enhance collaboration between the Museum and other national and international organisations. The Museum will need to achieve a balance between a continuing requirement for experienced and expert staff with the need for 'new blood' appointments.'

Section 4.2 HUMAN RESOURCES, parts (c) and (d), impact of the strategy on staffing levels

'(c) Several parts of the Museum's strategy will have a direct impact on the existing staffing levels:

- in Science, a reducing grant in real terms requires the Museum to "cut its coat according to its cloth". At the same time it will have to inject new blood into priority areas and actively seek external funding to self-finance new appointments

This necessitates a reappraisal of the priority areas for science and a closer definition of posts and the management structure within the areas of curation and research. Associated with these changes will be the extension of fixed grading for some posts

- in Exhibitions, there is a need to reduce the level of in-house staff and contract out services in order to respond to fluctuating work loads and funding and import the best creative talent, cost effectively

- in Front of House, a shift from traditional warding, to information givers and security, will result in a redeployment of existing staff. In addition, day to day management of cleaning will transfer to the new

gallery team managers and the establishment of a single team for the shops admissions and enquiries.

(d) To summarise, two issues need to be addressed:-

flexibility - to respond to changes in audience needs whilst maintaining credibility and vigour

affordability - to reduce the overall level of staff to one commensurate with its needs and the funding available.

The net effect of meeting these two requirements is to reduce the existing staffing level by 50-60 posts, in addition to the 40 posts which will be achieved in 1991-92 by natural wastage. The reduction will be achieved in 1991-92 by natural wastage and redeployment where possible but some voluntary and compulsory early retirement will be necessary.

Underpinning this strategy is a need to increase investment in training and retraining. Staff will then have the appropriate skills to respond to audience demands thereby providing them with better job satisfaction and security for the future.'

Please bear in mind these are only short passages from the Corporate Plan. They are quoted here because they throw some light on the present controversies. In fairness, these quotes do not represent the full scope of the document. Members should note that further information is available from the Natural History Press Office on 071 938 8779.

December 19th and 20th 1990  
SITEM

The International Show of Museographic Techniques will take place in Dijon, France, on 19th and 20th December in the Exhibition Park and Convention Hall. It is a show sponsored by the Ministère de l'Education Nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports and organised by OCIM, University of Burgundy. There will be a Nature and Environment section and associated conference organised by Science Musées Médias, an association of curators, technicians, scientists and journalists. It is a 'show' not a closed conference, and there will be events for the general public, exhibits by suppliers of museum equipment and, especially, innovative techniques in all spheres of 'science' curation and display. Full details from:  
Office de Cooperation et d'information  
Muséographiques, 64 rue Vannerie, 21000  
Dijon, France.