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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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The Association attempted to obtain from Derbyshire a written assurance that the items would only be sold in accordance with the Code of Practice. This they have failed to do.

Developments at Sheffield Museum

Tim Riley has accepted early retirement from his post as Principal Keeper of Natural Sciences at Sheffield City Museum and he left the museum on 1st February 1991. Derek Whiteley has taken over as Principal Keeper and his old post of Assistant Keeper (Zoology) is now frozen. Derek is, of course, Secretary of BCG, so he will need to take a sabbatical from these duties until he has settled in to his new job. The arrangements for this will be discussed at the AGM and reported on in the next Newsletter.

BCG takes Steps to Safeguard Uncurated Collections

Stickers are now available to help safeguard uncurated collections and individual specimens. Self-adhesive for glass, cardboard boxes, wood etc., these labels are available at £1 (stamps, cheque, P.O.) for 200 (including postage) from:
Biology Curators' Group
Derek Whiteley
City Museum
Sheffield S10 2TP

This is a prototype. If there is a demand we will produce other designs and other adhesives. Hopefully these labels may prevent future authorities 'burning their Dodos', 'doing a Barnsley' or assigning scientific collections to the skip. So if you visit a museum with no natural history curator, take some stickers with you to mark collections you think are of value and which could come under threat.

THIS COLLECTION/SPECIMEN
HAS SCIENTIFIC VALUE
DO NOT DESTROY/DISPOSE
WITHOUT CONSULTING AN
EXPERIENCED CURATOR
BIOLOGY CURATORS GROUP

In the Press

Conservation News (44, March 1991) has an interesting short review by Chris Nicholson of the production, properties and composition of Shellac. This is an insect product (species *Laccifer lacca*); some 75,000 individuals are involved in producing the raw material which goes into one kilogram of the finished material. It has traditional uses in taxidermy and as a bottle or jar sealant, but the main interest of the article is in the processing of the 'lac' and the farming of the insects.

The Systematics Association, in conjunction with the Linnean Society and CAB International, have produced an attractive and informative leaflet: **Systematics - the Study of Biological Diversity**. It covers the role of systematics, the contribution of systematics to science, the relevance of systematics and the need for more resources. The leaflet is probably not suitable as general museum give away, but it is useful for handing out to specific enquirers or to those who say 'what's it all for' - and this includes many councillors. Copies are available from: The Systematics Association, c/o International Mycological Institute, Ferry Lane, Kew, Surrey TW9 3AF.

Controversy on the use and value of herbarium specimens raged for a time in *Nature* last year. In *Nature* of 16 August, it was suggested by Clifford, Rogers and Dettman that taxonomists might usefully dispense with existing large herbarium collections, instead relying on type specimens and published descriptions of species. The response was massive and a read through the reply letters published in *Nature* of 20 September provides an overwhelming array of arguments, with examples, of why we should retain our herbaria in perpetuity. They cannot be repeated here, but these arguments form the bricks and mortar of the defences we are called on more and more frequently to construct in the face of uninformed criticism from 'busy administrators and politicians seeking quick remedies to immediate ills' (to quote from one reply).

Another defence of museum natural history collections came in *Nature* of 27 September with Jared Diamond reporting on current research using the polymerase chain reaction to extract, amplify and

sequence DNA from museum specimens. The example he quoted involved 43 study skins of Kangaroo Rat held at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, University of California, collected between 1911 and 1937. The genotypes of these were compared with genotypes of 63 modern rats from the same sites, and the same subspecific differences observed today were present over half a century ago. The point of this is that the DNA of the museum specimens had not altered with time, and DNA can be extracted 'not only from dried leaves and dried skin but also from hair, feathers and eggshells'. Thus 'old' specimens constitute a vast, irreplaceable source of material for directly determining historical changes in gene frequencies, which are among the most important data in evolutionary biology museums with large, well-run collections of specimen series large enough for statistical analysis will be at the forefront of research in molecular evolution'.

In *New Scientist* (no 1759) of 9 March, there is a beautiful description of the Museum für Naturkunde in what used to be East Berlin but what is now Germany. When Berlin was divided in 1960, the East got most of the museums. The big, famous ones like the Pergamon have the usual late twentieth century trappings, and are on the tourists' routes, but the natural history museum has remained in its 'natural' state, uncorrupted by post war influences and exhibition fashion. Two quotes: 'Where the Museum für Naturkunde really gleams, though, is in its collection of stuffed animals. This is the pure, original museum. The air is quieter here than the outside. Visitors move silently around beeswaxed wooden cabinets that display the best taxidermy I've seen. Occasionally a child's delighted exclamation echoes from the next room.' 'This museum does not teach; it can, at least for the right people, inspire.'

The article continues with a comparison of this museum or 'proper' museum as the author Mike Holderness calls it, with the Natural History Museum in London. The article is called 'Down among the display cabinets' and Mike Holderness is described as a freelance science writer and 'collector of museum tearooms'.

Letters

Dear Dr Mathias

Leucistic Barnacle Geese

I have recently carried out an analysis of the occurrence and performance of white Barnacle Geese in the population wintering in the Solway Firth. These white forms seem to have become more common in recent years (there are five in the current population).

I am very interested to have information on their occurrence in the past. I am told by Alan Knox that you edit the Biological Curators' Group Newsletter and I wonder whether you would be willing to put in a notice about this. What I am interested in is information about the location of skins or mounted specimens of white (or very pale) Barnacle Geese, and knowledge of the accompanying documentation.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Myrfin Owen
Director of Research
The Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust
Slimbridge
Gloucester GL2 7BT

Editor: will members please reply direct to Dr Owen at the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust.