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NEWSLETTER

September 1991

Vol 5 No 8

Peering at Systematic Biology Research

Largely in response to the recent changes at the London Natural History Museum, the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology set up a sub-committee during 1990 to enquire into 'systematic biology research'. The sub-committee membership is:

Lord Adrian (Baron) [Cell physiologist]
 Lord Butterworth (Baron, Life peer) [Lawyer]
 Earl of Cranbrook [Zoologist]
 Lord Dainton (Baron, Life peer) [Chemist]
 Lord Flowers (Baron, Life peer) [Nuclear physicist]
 Baroness Nicol (Life peeress)
 Lord Porter of Luddenham
 Earl of Selborne [involved in agriculture and food research]
 Lord Taylor of Blackburn
 Lord Walton of Detchant
 Lord Whaddon (Baron, Life peer) [?Chemist/
 Sociologist]

The Clerk to the sub-committee is Dr R H Walters, Committee Office, House of Lords, London SW1A OPW.

Initially the sub-committee requested information from the other national museums, some government bodies and a few societies etc. However, the request for information rapidly spread wider, as can be seen from the publication entitled 'Systematic Biology Research: Written evidence received up to 21st May 1991' (HL Paper 41, ii+202p., London, MHSO, £21.60 net), which contains 87 submissions in addition to eight submissions previously published. This total of 95 submissions was made up of 40

individuals (such as Professors A J Cain, R W J Keay and Ernst Mayr), 27 biological societies and organisations (such as the British Ecological Society, Conchological Society, FENSCORE, Institute of Biology, Polychaete Society, the Royal Society, and the National Federation for Biological Recording), four universities, seven research institutes or councils, two companies (Unilever and SmithKline Beecham), five museums (including the NHM), nine government bodies, and one 'trade union' (the Institute of Professionals, Managers and Specialists).

Although a number of respondents tended to concentrate on the NHM, and others emphasised the aspects that directly concerned them, still the most striking thing about all the evidence presented is the total unanimity underlying the views expressed by the very broad constituency of biological systematics users and providers represented. These views may be summarised as: biological systematics research is vitally important to society but over the past few decades in the UK it has been increasingly undervalued, underfunded and poorly taught, both in absolute terms, and in comparison with practically all our major competitor countries.

However, the sub-committee has now circulated a further letter which states, *inter alia* '... we have received a considerable volume of evidence attesting to the decline of systematic biology research in the United Kingdom; the decline of the teaching of systematic biology in the universities; and the increasing average age of the practitioners. Unfortunately much of the evidence is anecdotal. We have very little in the way of hard facts ...' The letter

is accompanied by a questionnaire of 11 questions, each asking for the relevant figures for 1980, 1985 and 1990. The first four questions ask about funding and expenditure, and the next four are devoted to manpower levels involved in systematics. Question 9 asks about the time students spend studying systematic biology, and question 10 the age distribution of staff teaching systematic biology. This questionnaire has gone to five national museums, 16 local authority/regional museums, nine university museums, two national botanic gardens, two regional botanic gardens, six university botanic gardens, and 35 universities. Questions 2 and 6 ask, *inter alia*, for figures of expenditure and manpower related to 'curation'. The return date for the questionnaire was 14th October 1991.

I believe it is important that members of BCG note the emphasis on the need for 'hard facts', and that the

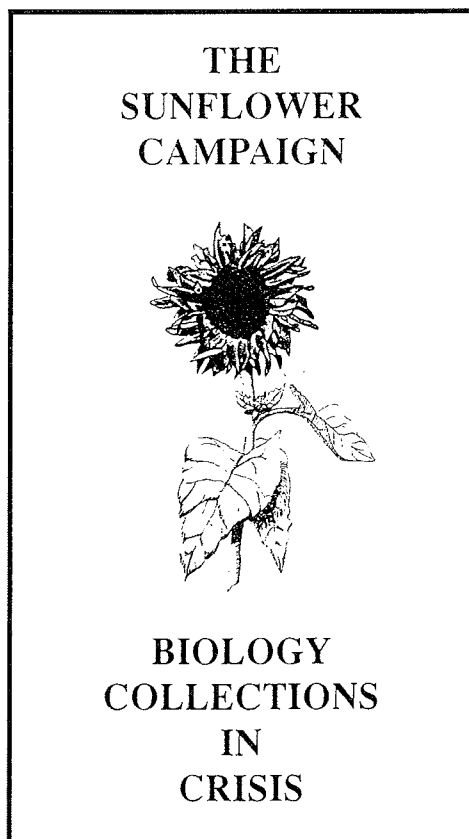
BCG should be gathering the relevant information on systematic biological research in those museums not covered by the sub-committee survey. Research in this context should be interpreted in its broadest sense and would include biological recording, which is very relevant to systematic biology. We should also be gathering numeric data to support the importance of biological collections, such as number of researcher visits and research loans made.

The part of the questionnaire dealing with expenditure on systematic biology research is enclosed with this newsletter. Would all members ensure that a return is completed for their museum and send it to the address below.

Charles Pettitt

The Manchester Museum, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL

BCG Campaigns 1991-2



Sunflower 2

The revamped Sunflower leaflet is now available to all those in need of sticks with which to beat governing bodies. The sentiments of the leaflet are similar to the original, but there is more reference to our relevance in the 'Green Decade', and suggestions as to what governing bodies and local businesses should do if they want to help. In addition the leaflet has improved illustrations and is printed in two colours (topical green and sunflower yellow - our adjectives so do not ask your printers for them!).

Bundles of about 250 leaflets can be obtained from:
Alec Coles
Sunderland Museum and Art Gallery
Borough Road
Sunderland
Tyne and Wear SR1 1PP

Please enclose a cheque for £2.50 to cover postage. Any overseas orders will be invoiced separately, but please note that the content of the leaflet is UK-biased.

Alec Coles
Tyne and Wear Museum Service
Sunderland Museum