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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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## Animal Welfare and Museums

Several museums have, in recent years, come under scrutiny from animal rights groups over their use of animals and the display of live animals in particular. BCG has been concerned over this development and, as well as organising the Blackburn seminar on the Educational Role of Live Exhibits, it has produced a leaflet 'Animal Welfare and Museums' to try to alleviate, or at least explain, this highly emotive issue.

Sample copies are enclosed with this Newsletter; more are available from Charles Pettitt at the Manchester Museum, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL.



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## Museums Association

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### Support from unlikely places

It has often been suggested that the Museums Association has been less supportive of the natural sciences in museums than it might have been. In particular, the *Museums Journal* has been criticised for the relative lack of natural science content. This summer has seen the balance redressed to some extent.

The August issue of the *Museums Journal* was a 'green issue', and although this had been planned for some time, it was fortified by a number of subjects that grew out of the BCG AGM, in Liverpool, earlier this year. The *Journal* was part of a process that began with Beetle Down, and has been high on the BCG agenda ever since - self publicity; not on the behalf of individuals, nor even on behalf of BCG, but on behalf of all natural history museums and curators.

To most of us, the argument that 'we have the right policies, but are not presenting them effectively' is tediously familiar, slipping from the mouths of

government spokespersons as election-time approaches. The fact of the matter is that in our case it is true. We are doing quite a lot right, but we do not shout about it enough.

We know that our displays and exhibitions are the most popular in museums, yet we still compete for resources with the arts on grossly inferior terms. We know that, nationwide, our Environmental Records Centres affect the lives of millions through their input into the planning process, yet well-resourced centres are still notable exceptions to a depressing rule. We know that the 1990s are the green decade, yet we are still labelled by some as storehouses of corpses.

Improving the public perception of 'the natural history museum' (including the Natural History Museum) is, of course vital - presumably most of us spend many of our waking hours trying to do just that. The real challenge however, is to convince our administrators of our worth; the councillors heading up Arts strategies *sic*, the university chancellors seeking yet further cuts, the trustees looking for

visitor appeal, and, one has to say it, those museum directors who fail to appreciate the potential of natural science collections and exhibitions.

If we had really won the battle for hearts and minds, why is it, that within two years of the publication of Biological Collections UK, so many biology curation posts are threatened, and even lost? Why have we seen the Natural History Museum emasculated? Why is the Hancock Museum under threat of closure? It is for this reason that our increased profile in the Museums Journal is so important, because although the public will not read it, the people who sit in judgement on our futures, might just. If they read the August Museums Journal, they will find out from Bill Pettit the incredible range of potential uses of their collections. Chris Yeates and Ian Evans describe the importance of environmental recording work, whilst I urge museums to exploit the 'green decade' for their own benefit, as well as that of the environment. In addition there are a number of case histories of display and exhibition initiatives; most importantly in this context, Paul Howard tells how to get 200,000 paying visitors into your museum!

## **The Museums Association Conference, 1991**

There is no harm in reinforcing a good point! To this end, and knowing the contents of the August Journal, I was able to present a motion to the Public Affairs session of the MA Annual Conference, on behalf of BCG and GCG. The eventual wording of the motion was agreed by a small group of members attending conference, and read as follows:

'Given the current and continuing significance of environmental issues, the role of natural science collections in museums as the material evidence of the diversity of the natural world, and as support tools for environmental research and education, conference insists that the current and potential use of natural sciences collections be properly recognised by government, local authorities, museum governing bodies and museum staff, and that their proper care and development must be assured by the provision of adequate resources.'

I am pleased to say that the motion was passed unanimously, and whilst such a motion carries no formal guarantee of action, its importance should not be underestimated. It does at least affirm the support of the whole museums profession for the natural sciences.

The need to educate the wider public about our functions is understood; the need to educate councillors and trustees is recognised through initiatives such as the Sunflower Campaign; we should be mindful of the need to convince other museum professionals lest through their ignorance, and our ineffectiveness, they become the enemy within .....

Alec Coles  
Principal Keeper of Natural Sciences  
Tyne and Wear Museums

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# **FENSCORE**

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## **Collections research - the latest**

The activities of BCG and of the Federation for Natural Sciences Collections Research (FENSCORE) over the last few years have borne fruit in an increasing awareness among policy-makers of the importance of the national resource represented by natural science collections in the UK. Such awareness has been reflected in the recent Museums and Galleries Commission 'natural science incentive funding' made available via Area Museum Councils, and also in grants to FENSCORE for database development.

The national database of collections, compiled from information supplied by the various regional Collection Research Units (CRUS), had been maintained at Manchester Museum since 1980. However, latterly lack of staff time at Manchester severely restricted both the updating and the publicity needed to make potential users aware of this valuable information resource. Therefore, in November 1988, the FENSCORE committee set up a working party 'to examine the feasibility of the Museum Documentation Association (MDA) maintaining, and providing a service from, the FENSCORE national database'. That working party met in February 1989 and agreed that the proposal was feasible, and the FENSCORE committee, at its meeting in June 1989, accepted a detailed set of proposals from the working party. A successful application to the MGC resulted in a grant of £8000 in April 1990, to fund the checking and concordance of the data from three CRUs: the North West,