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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Isles. Surely a move to be applauded if it helps to focus the attention of active field botanists to their often neglected (scientifically and sometimes curatorially) local herbaria.

## Information Wanted

Barry Constantine, 4 The Green, Skipsea, East Yorks YO25 8SZ, is wanting to compile reference material of coleoptera, synantropic insects and ectoparasites to assist his researches into the remains of faunas in archeological sites. Barry is particularly interested in acquiring specimens of saproxylic beetles, aquatic beetles and bugs, pests of stored products and bird, animal or human ectoparasites especially any European species no longer found in Britain.

Any information on the whereabouts of any spirit preserved material or manuscript material from the family of the late Basil Bunting (1900-1985) would be welcomed by Colin Simms, Low Woodhead North, Bellingham, Northumberland.

Numbers and distribution of muntjac in Britain is the subject of research by Professor Stephen Harris at Bristol University Zoology Dept., School of Biological Sciences, Woodland Road, Bristol BS8 1UG. Please contact Prof. Harris if you can help with distribution data or survey work.

## Publications

'Standards in the Museum Care of Biological Collections 1992' – now available from the Museums and Galleries Commission, 16 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9AA price £6 including p&p ( £10 outside the UK ). This important document *will* affect you in one way or another. Short critiques would be welcome for the next newsletter.

'Horse Power: a history of the horse and donkey in human societies' by Juliet Clutton-Brock. £19.95 from the Natural History Museum.

Also from the NHM are two publications to mark last year's centenary of Sir Richard Owen. A 'Richard Owen Commemoration' by Jacob Gruber and John Thackray (£29.95) and 'The Hunterian Lectures in Comparative Anatomy May and June 1837' (£15.95 pbk).

'Scottish Bats'. This new serial is available from South-east Scotland Bat Groups, 9 Brunswick Street, Edinburgh, EH7 5JB. Volume one contains distribution maps of all Scottish species and other articles. Price £3 including p&p.

The 'Checklist of the Plants of Perthshire' by RAH Smith et al is the first account of this superb area since the 1898 'Flora'. A complete flora is planned but meanwhile this annotated checklist will fill you in with the summary distribution of all local species. Price £5.00 pbk.

## At last! – a letter to the Editor.

Dear Editor,

These are difficult days. We read and hear about problems at what we previously considered stalwart natural history museums e.g. Bristol, Glasgow, Sheffield and even the Hancock Museum, Newcastle.

Yet interest in natural history, biological recording, collections, natural history exhibitions and the demand for our services have never been greater and continue to increase.

It is all a question of £££ and image. BCG can continue to play a key role by campaigning and lobbying for both. Every letter and every targetted leaflet helps. BCG's watchdog activities and ongoing campaigns continue to notch up notable successes. It is more important than ever to keep the heat on.

It is the long term security of collections, records and biological archives which worries me most. I sometimes get the feeling that only BCG is out there able to help with an independent voice. I wish the BCG Committee the very best of luck. I shall be with you in spirit if not in body. I think it was Bill Pettitt on the Isle of Man who suggested that we adopt the old Hill Street Blues slogan "Lets do it to them before they do it to us".

*Derek Whiteley, Sheffield, (ex Secretary BCG)*

## Mothballs, Curators and the Law

Collections managers use a wide range of substances to control pests and mould. A preventative control strategy including monitoring, inspection and risk reduction is best but occasionally an active infestation may be found. We can use a 'green' control method, such as freezing, but we may need to use chemical control methods. Are these methods as used by museums legal?

### 1. Legislation

Statutory powers to control pesticides are contained in the Food and Environmental Protection Act 1985 (FEPA). The aim of these controls is to:

1. Protect the health of humans, plants and animals.
2. Safeguard the environment
3. Secure safe, efficient and humane methods of controlling pests.
4. Make public information about pesticides.

The mechanism for achieving these aims is set out in regulations made under the act. This is the important bit and is called the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 (COPR). This details how a pesticide can be "approved". An "approved" pesticide can be sold, supplied, used, stored or advertised. All approved non-agricultural pesticides are registered with the Health and Safety Executive.

The Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1988 (COSHH) also apply to a wide range of pesticides used at work. Under COSHH employers must make a suitable COSHH assessment before starting to use the pesticide. Pesticides should only be used where the benefit from using them significantly outweighs the risk to human health and the environment. If the decision is reached to use a pesticide, then the substance used should be one that poses least risk to people and the environment, whilst being effective at controlling the pest or weeds.

### 2. What is a pesticide?

Under the FEPA the definition of a pesticide includes any substance used:—

1. to protect plant products (eg wood) from harmful organisms.
2. to regulate the control of plant growth.
3. to give protection against harmful creatures.
4. and to render such creatures harmless.

This means that pesticides include herbicides, fungicides, insecticides, rodenticides, and wood preservatives. Clearly a museum which uses naphthalene to protect its entomological collection from insect attack is using a pesticide.

### 3. Use of pesticide products

It is easy to tell if a product is "approved". The packaging will be clearly marked with an approval notice. It can be used quite legally as long as the directions on the packet are followed precisely. An example of an approved product you might be familiar with is Superdrug Slow Release Fly Killer. This product has been approved following detailed applications typically made by the manufacturer or distributor.

The approval will have been granted for that individual product and for specified uses. The exception to this rule is the use of commodity substances.

### 4. Commodity Substances

Commodity substances have a variety of pesticide and non-pesticide uses and are generally sold or supplied as substances rather than as pesticide products. Most of the laboratory chemicals museums buy for pest control use (eg Naphthalene or Ethyl acetate) are examples of commodity substances. From the 1st March 1991 controls came into force over the use of commodity substances. There are at present only six approved commodity substances. For example, Methyl Bromide is approved, as a commodity substance, as a fumigant in public hygiene for the control of insects.

### 5. BCG's involvement

In 1990 the Advisory Committee on Pesticides agreed that there should be a public consultation to obtain data on pesticidal use of commodity chemicals. BCG were one of the museum organisations contacted by the Health & Safety Executive who recognised that a number of commodity substances are used by museums to control insects and pests which had not so far been subject to the controls on pesticides. We are asked to nominate commodity substances for consideration as pesticides.

The nominations were submitted by the October 1991 deadline. Detailed information was required with each nomination including details of strength and purity, purpose and situations in which used, rates, methods, frequency and timing of applications and much more. A list of substances for nomination was drawn up by the BCG committee following a request to the membership for information which was sent to each member. This asked what substances they used for pest and mould control.

The substances and uses nominated by BCG were:—

1. Naphthalene – use as an insect repellent.
2. 4-Chloro-m-cresol – use to keep insect specimens relaxed and free from mould and bacterial decay.
3. di-Sodium tetraborate (Borax) – use by taxidermists to preserve animal skins.
4. Camphor – use as an insect repellent.
5. Ethyl acetate – used as a precautionary control of pests typically for small specimens on receipt at the museum.
6. Formaldehyde – use as a precautionary control of pests (as above) and as a fixative for fluid preserved specimens.
7. Industrial Methylated Spirit – use as a liquid preservative.
8. Propan-1,2-diol (propylene glycol) – used as an humectant and mould inhibitor in Steedmans B post fixation preservative.
9. Ethanol – use as a liquid preservative.
10. Propan-2-ol – use as a liquid preservative.
11. Propylene phenoxetol – use as a liquid preservative.

Nominations 6 to 11 are for preservative liquids used with spirit specimens. These were judged by the HSE as requiring commodity substance nomination because whilst their main action is to arrest autolysis there is a secondary action of inhibiting bacterial and mould growth.

### 6. Nomination update

In July we received the first response from the HSE to these nominations. Applications for 4-Chloro-m-cresol, Camphor, Ethyl acetate, Formaldehyde, Industrial methylated spirit, Ethanol and Propan-2-ol are currently being processed. The nominations for Naphthalene, di-Sodium tetraborate, Propan-1,2-diol and Propylenphenoxetol can not be proceeded with. They have fallen foul of two criteria used to select commodity substances. If the commodity substance is the active ingredient in an approved product then the commodity substance cannot be approved. Naphthalene is the active ingredient in "Scent Off Buds" for vertebrate control and di-Sodium Tetraborate is the active ingredient in "Nippon Ant Destroyer liquid".

Propylene phenoxetol and Propan-1,2-diol cannot be approved as they are mixed in Steedman's B preservative and commodity substances can only be used on their own or with a dilutant. Non-approval of these substances will obviously cause some problems and these are matters which BCG will now pursue with HSE and the Museums and Galleries Commission.

As we receive any further updates from HSE we will make the information known through the newsletter.

*Mark Simmons  
North of England Museums Service*