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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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opportunity to exchange ideas and learn about new approaches to the problems of conserving botanical material. The theme highlighted by the first speaker, Dr Angus Gunn, that a dialogue between conservators and curators was an essential part of solving these problems, was taken up by subsequent speakers, and everyone enjoyed an excellent lunch provided by Sue Flackett's team of caterers.

*John Edmondson*

### **Diary Dates**

The care of spirit-preserved material is the subject of a one day BCG meeting planned for the 25th October at the Natural History Museum, London. The provisional programme covers topics such as containers, labels, rehydration techniques, storage etc. BCG members will have had a mailing about this meeting but further details can be got from Kathie Way at the NHM.

27 October is the start of National Dormouse Week and the launch of a national dormouse survey of England and Wales. Survey packs and further information from English Nature (NDW), Northminster House, Peterborough, PE1 1UA.

11-12 April 1994 are the dates of a joint BCG/GEM conference in Oxford. The BCG AGM will be on Tuesday 12th. More details to follow.

### **Exhibitions**

Primates - a new permanent exhibition at the NHM opened in July and explains the lifestyle and behaviour of the group while drawing parallels between humans and other primates.

Megabugs - also at the NHM, this temporary exhibition of giant robotic insects including a 5 metre-long locust and a 6 metre-long stick insect is already pulling in the crowds. Until October.

On Wenlock Edge - is a new exhibition at Much Wenlock Museum on the wildlife of Wenlock Edge from prehistory to the present day. Open Mon-Sat 10.30-1.00 and 2.30-5.00. Further details from Much Wenlock, Museum, High Street, Much Wenlock, Shropshire TF13 6AE. Tel 0952 727773.

### **People**

Professor Robert May FRS will succeed Sir Walter Bodmer FRS as Chairman of the Trustees of The Natural History Museum in January 1994. Prof. May is Royal Society Research Professor, Dept. of Zoology, Oxford University and Imperial College and President of the British Ecological Society.

Dr Neil Chalmers has been confirmed as Director of The Natural History Museum for a further five years.

Steve Thomson has not only taken over the BCG Secretaryship but has obtained the post of Keeper of Natural Sciences at Scunthorpe Museum. He moved from Clitheroe in April.

## **Registration Proposals from FENSCORE to the Museums and Galleries Commission.**

### **PREAMBLE.**

In past decades UK natural science collections demonstrably have suffered disproportionate damage and loss when compared to all other types of museum objects. It is a sad fact that because they are erroneously perceived to have a higher 'value' the most mundane social history or decorative art object almost invariably receives far more cossetting than any natural history specimen housed in the same institution, despite the growing importance of the latter material to society. Although through the efforts of Biology Curators Group, Geological Curators Group, and the Collection Research Units, this situation is steadily improving, a large part of the nation's heritage represented by natural science collections is still at risk. Natural history collections require curatorial and conservation care that is different in kind from that needed by collections of human artefacts. Because of this FENSCORE makes the following recommendations to the Museums and Galleries Commission, with a request they be incorporated into the Registration Guidelines as appropriate.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS for the REGISTRATION GUIDELINES.**

1. Because of the special curatorial needs of natural science collections there should be a

strong presumption that institutions without a permanent qualified natural science curator post should in future not acquire natural science collections, unless the collection has strong local associations.

2. Again, because of the special curatorial needs of natural science collections, MGC are asked to extend the scope of Registration Guidelines 26 (a) and (b) so that all registered institutions with existing or newly-acquired natural science collections, but without a permanent qualified natural science curator post, are expected to make formal arrangements for these collections to receive appropriate on-going curatorial care from a natural science professional in the appropriate discipline(s).

3. If the above recommendations are accepted, then because of the increased needs of other museums, those institutions with permanent natural science professional curatorial posts should be encouraged, within the resources available, to:-

- i) give speedy and sympathetic consideration to requests from other institutions for the provision (by loan, gift or purchase) of natural science specimens suitable for non-scientific purposes such as display and teaching.
- ii) give speedy and sympathetic consideration to requests from other institutions, preferably *via* the regional Collections Research Unit or the natural science panel, for assistance in the professional curation of their natural science collections, and, where charged, to provide such assistance at reasonable cost.
- iii) assist other institutions in dealing with natural science enquiries, including giving advice on suitable 'first line' identification guides, and possibly by helping the institution to assemble small reference collections to assist the non-naturalist staff to identify local and/or common natural science material brought in by the general public.

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Your views are sought on the above proposals. Please contact Charles Pettitt, Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, M13 9PL [061-275 2666; FAX 2676] with any comments. While criticism and suggestions for improvement

will be welcome, if you just approve the document as it is please let Charles know as well, for a record of such support will strengthen our case.

### **Improving the Care of Natural Science Collections - A Discussion Document from FENSCORE**

In past decades UK natural science collections demonstrably have suffered disproportionate damage and loss when compared to all other types of museum objects. It is a sad fact that because they are erroneously perceived to have a higher 'value' the most mundane social history or decorative art object almost invariably receives far more cossetting than any natural history specimen housed in the same institution, despite the growing importance of the latter material to society.

Natural history collections require curatorial and conservation care that is different in kind from that needed by collections of human artefacts. Sadly a large part of the nation's heritage represented by natural science collections is still at risk.

In most Area Museum Service/Council [AMS/C] areas the natural science collections research units [CRUs] are already active, and comprise a group of active curators who represent the whole range of natural science expertise. FENSCORE requests that the Museum and Galleries Commission encourage the AMS/C to investigate ways in which these largely informal units could provide more formal assistance to the functioning of the museum service.

Such assistance could include:

- i) a referral service for advice and assistance in the provision of professional natural science curatorial expertise to institutions in the area who require it. This could be supported by maintaining a register of natural science expertise in the area; such a register could include details of specialists in colleges and universities who are prepared to assist museums when required.
- ii) advice on, and concordance of, a regional approach to natural science collection policies.
- iii) liaison with FENSCORE to maintain a collection-level record of the location and the

general condition of all natural science material in their area.

iv) help in drawing up, implementing, and monitoring a regional collection maintenance plan, particularly for those natural science collections identified as 'at risk'. As a minimum such a plan would ensure that all collections not in the care of a natural science professional would be visited and checked at least every two years. The experience of the North West CRU is that non-natural science curators welcome such visits, and usually act on the advice given.

v) provide peer group review of all grant applications affecting natural science material, to help the AMS/C distribute the available resources in the way most appropriate to the curatorial needs and priorities of the natural science collections involved. The final decision on grant distribution should, of course, always remain with the AMS/C, who can take account of the wider perspective.

All these functions are already being discharged by one or more CRUs, and this request is aimed at creating a more uniform approach to the needs of natural science collections in the UK.

#### **Directing resources to collections at risk**

In most areas there are a few unregistered institutions which hold scientifically important natural science collections; these are usually government funded research institutes or museums run by private societies. Examples are Bacup Nat. Hist. Society, Whitby Museum, the Freshwater Biological Association, and the Institute of Oceanographic Sciences.

In the case of government funded institutions holding important collections, such as the Freshwater Biological Association, the Museums and Galleries Commission is asked to arrange high-level talks with the Government Departments responsible, to make sure they are fully aware of their responsibilities towards these collections which form such an important part of the national heritage. The FENSCORE committee would be willing to provide a list of such institutions that have been identified by the collection survey work around the UK.

In the case of unregistered institutions where the local CRU consider the collections in urgent need of conservation and curation, AMS/C should be

encouraged to allow grants up to 100% for such urgent work to be done by suitably qualified professionals. Such grants could be administered by a local registered museum, and should be made subject to the proviso that the collections would then be made available for inspection by *bona fide* research workers.

The CRU work has made many institutions, both registered and unregistered, become more aware of the importance of the natural science material they hold, and also of the cost of adequately housing and maintaining such collections. As often these collection now found to be peripheral to the present aims of the institution (eg. the important collection of mounted birds at Manchester Grammar School, and the natural science collections at Salford Mining Museum) the institutions involved are looking to transfer the material to more appropriate homes. However there are costs associated with such transfers: sometimes preliminary curation and packing is necessary, transport costs when vans etc. need to be hired, provision of storage at the receiving museum, and accessioning costs. In some cases the holding institution will also expect to receive some payment for the material transferred, especially when this has clear market value (eg. mineral collections). The Museum and Galleries Commission is asked to indicate to the AMS/C that such costs should be grant aidable, and where possible given a high priority, for often if the material is not 'rescued' when offered it may be destroyed or given to an inappropriate recipient.

The above document was presented to representatives of the Area Museum Services/ Councils at a meeting at the Museum and Galleries Commission on 28 July 1993. Your views are still sought on the points raised in the documents. Please send any comments to Charles Pettitt, Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, M13 9PL [061-275 2666; FAX 2676]. Again, while criticism and suggestions for improvement are welcome, if you approve this document as it is then please let Charles know; the strength of support out there will be an important factor in the reception the Directors of the AMS/ Cs give it.