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NEWSLETTER

May 1994

Vol 6 No. 4

"Here it is at last" I hear you all exclaim as the entire natural sciences staff of every UK museum rushes to open the latest and slightly overdue edition of the newsletter. Well unlike the Museums Journal we do not carry job advertisements on our back pages although there is something approaching one below. The attraction of this issue lies in the complete set of papers from last years spirit meeting which will be of great practical use to members. In order to fit everything in you will be pleased to hear that the editor edited out the editorial. However please note that this is likely to be the last newsletter before the first issue of *The Biology Curator* later in the summer. Meanwhile please continue to send in notes, reviews, moves and postings. This is your publication, please support it!

PEOPLE

Outside of the large research institutes it is not particularly common for museum staff to be allocated resources for research involving more than a trip to the local SSSIs for surveying. It is particularly gratifying to report the enlightened attitude of the management of the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside who did make sure that such resources were available to BCG member **Clem Fisher** who has recently returned from Australia where she was following up her research into the activities of John Gould's collector John Gilbert. Clem was able to take up a three-month fellowship at the Macleay Museum, Sydney where she worked primarily on a transcript of the diary which Gilbert kept during the Leichhardt Expedition of 1844-45. She also examined in detail the museum's collection of 9000 birds and mammals, naturally rich in australasian species, which contains specimens from the Layards, father and son, who also sent specimens to H.B. Tristram now in Liverpool's collections. Clem was able to recognise at least 250 Layard specimens in the Macleay collections, some from type series and others which represent rare or extinct species. All in all

Clem's trip seems to have highly worthwhile for all concerned. Well done Liverpool for making it happen. Other museums please note well.

Congratulations to BCG member **Maggie Reilly**, Curator of the Glasgow Hunterian Museum's zoological collections on the safe arrival of a son earlier this year. We understand that Maggie will be returning to work after her maternity leave but too late to travel with the University expedition to Trinidad. **Geoff Hancock** of Glasgow's Kelvingrove Museum will be going to examine the entomological predators on the amphibian populations of the native forests there.

It was the pursuit of international efforts to study and conserve plant biodiversity that took **Professor David Ingram** FRSE, Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, to the Komarov Botanical Institute in St Petersburg in December last year. Here a UNESCO-funded conference focused attention on the plight of the many important botanical collections held in the countries of the former USSR. These are now desperately starved of resources and the conference addressed the action needed to ensure their future integrity. The herbarium of the Komarov Institute alone holds over seven million dried plant specimens and is of global importance. (This note originally appeared in *The Botanics* Issue 16 from which it is reproduced with thanks).

Sally Cowan, previously a technical assistant at the Australian Museum with experience of curation and field collection of insects and spiders as well as their computer documentation, is in the UK and is looking for temporary work (preferably paid). Likewise **Peter Rowland**, an ornithologist, will be here in August. Both are British passport holders. If you can assist please contact Clem Fisher on 051 207 0001.

Mark Simmons is also available for paid employment, the one year flood recovery scheme here in Perth,

Scotland having come to an end. This is not the place for testimonials but anyone wanting confirmation of the high standard of Mark's curatorial skills should contact the editor.

Tatton Park, Knutsford is looking to reinstate its collection of ethnographical/natural and social history items in the historic Tenants Hall Museum at Tatton. The project includes the preparation of an action plan for refurbishing showcases and redisplaying a wide range of exhibits, as well as carrying out research and documentation to provide a detailed inventory and catalogue to the collections. Assessment of objects for conservation treatment is included in the project brief which should result in the production of a detailed, costed collection management plan. For further details of the project, which is funded by the North West Museums Service and Cheshire County Council, contact Maggie McKean, Collections Officer, Tatton Park, Knutsford, WA 16 6QN. Tel: 0565 654822.

DIARY DATES

Not much to report in this the quiet season for meetings

26-29 May 1994. Paris. Meeting of the Natural History Committee of ICOM on Natural Sciences, Environment and the Educational Role of Museums. The meeting has to prepare a proposal for the triennial action plan of ICOM to be adopted at Stavanger next year. The meeting will include visits to the new Galerie de l'Evolution at the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle the Arboretum of Chevreloup near Versailles and a natural history museum outside Paris. For further information see below.

12-16 Sept 1994. Museums Association Conference Brighton. Watch out for the BCG/UKIC session on orphan collections.

BCG Study Trip To Amsterdam/Leiden

Nov 2-6 1994. Yes, BCG can truly claim a genuine interest in the European museum scene with this our second foray into the dark continent. The trip has attained a critical mass and will now certainly proceed. Travel has been arranged via Hull and the coach will pick up in London and Doncaster. The price (approx £160) includes accommodation in a twin berth cabin, dinner and breakfast on the ferry (have you seen the size of those breakfasts !?) on the outward and return journey and accommodation (half board) in a twin room in Amsterdam. Offering excellent value for money, this is an opportunity to see some very important collections and partake of good food and terrific company. Our welcome is guaranteed to be a warm one and staff of the museums involved have been very supportive. Members and non members alike are welcome (subject to availability) so please tell your colleagues. Further details from Kathie Way, Zoology Dept., The Natural History Museum, Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD.

19-21 April 1995. Manchester. International Conference on the value and valuation of Natural Science collections. A major meeting. First circular out. Further details from the Valuation Conference Secretariat, Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, M13 9PL.

1995 Stavanger. ICOM 95. Will include sessions on the theme of Museums and Biodiversity. See below.

ICOM

BCG has recently made contact with the natural history committee of ICOM through its UK representative Christopher Hill. There is no doubt that the UK has largely remained in blissful ignorance of the existence of this organisation, a situation which we will rectify with future notes of forthcoming meetings etc. I am sure Dr Hill, 12 Clarence Road, Kew, Surrey will be pleased to supply any further details of the events noted above. ICOM membership can be obtained via the UK Treasurer, Bob Bracegirdle, Scottish Fisheries Museum, St Ayles, Anstruther, Fife, KY10 3AB. The current annual subscription for individual membership is £35. Watch this space for more details.

WANTED

Request for scientific literature - do you have any scientific books or journal series that you no longer use and would like to donate for distribution to Cuba? The Association of Systematic Collections is developing a programme to exchange systematics and biodiversity information between the USA and Cuba. ASC will arrange shipment of any books etc. Please contact Elizabeth Hathway, ASC, &30 11th Street NW, Second Floor, Washington DC 20001-4521.

Microlepidoptera of Middlesex, an appeal for records - by the London Natural History Society which is now working towards the publication of a checklist covering the entire area of vice-county 21. Further details of this five year project and the form of data required are available from the London Natural History Society's lepidoptera recorder, Colin Plant at the Visitor Centre, East Ham Local Nature Reserve, Norman Road, London E6 4HN. All communications will be acknowledged and records from outside Middlesex from mixed lists will be forwarded to appropriate recorders.

Pick up a polecat! - there has been considerable interest recently in the pattern of spread and genetic status of the Polecat (*Mustela putorius*) in Britain studied by the Vincent Wildlife Trust's Polecat Project. (See British Wildlife volume 5, no 1 for an overview). Several museums in the English Midlands - currently the main area of spread - are playing a key role in recording and publicising the polecat story (three museums now have specific displays on the polecat). Recent evidence suggests that in addition to naturally spreading from its Welsh stronghold as far as Warwickshire, Derbyshire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire, it has reappeared in parts of its former range in

Cumbria and Argyll as a result of *ad hoc* reintroductions by private individuals.

It is difficult to keep track of such covert efforts and odd occurrences of the species can no longer be instantly dismissed as polecat-ferrets or hybrids. Dr Andrew Kitchener at the Royal Museum of Scotland is assessing the extent of cross-breeding between polecats and feral ferrets based on skull morphometrics, pelage examination and DNA fingerprinting (the latter in collaboration with Dr Huw Griffiths at Leeds University).

A large sample of undamaged polecat, feral polecat-ferret and hybrid corpses from across Britain are needed if the project is to succeed. Andrew would be grateful for access to any specimen handed in to local museums and can be contacted on 031 225 7534.

Any curators interested in promoting local publicity on the polecat's recovery may apply to the Vincent Wildlife Trust's Polecat Project at 3 Knell Cottages, Harcourt Road, Mathon, Nr Malvern, Worcs WR13 5PG, for a free sample of polecat leaflets and associated artwork.

PUBLICATIONS

Wilthew, P. 1994. *Bugs, or beating unwanted guests*. SSCR Journal Vol 5 (1). - is an account of the 12th meeting of museum conservation scientists at the V&A last november with outlines of speakers accounts of pest control strategies, monitoring and treatments.

In the USA the ASC has published the report *Guidelines for Institutional Database Policies* the result of its two year study and workshop on data sharing and database ethics. Although the sections on the law relating to data are not likely to be of practical use to BCG members, sections on data sharing agreements, data sharing, transfer policies and the responsibilities of owners and users could be of use in developing models in what is as yet a very poorly developed area here.

Goulet, H. and Huber J. (eds) 1993. *Hymenoptera of the world: an identification guide to families*. Published by Agriculture Canada and available via Books Express, PO Box 10, Saffron Walden, Essex CB11 4EW. (Price approx = \$63.35). A fully illustrated, minimal jargon key to all 99 families of Hymenoptera and to the subfamilies for the ichneumonoid wasps and the aculeates.

Back Issues

All parts of BCG Newsletter are available from the editor price £2.50 incl. GB p&p **except** the following:

- Vol 1 parts 7 and 8
- Vol 2 parts 1 and 3-7 inclusive
- Vol 3 part 1
- Vol 6 part 1

Masochist Needed

All volumes of the BCG Newsletter up to and including

volume four were indexed. There has been no index for volume five thus far because no-one has volunteered (or been volunteered) for what can only be described as the equivalent of hard labour. Would anyone with a particular desire to indulge in this secretive and highly specialist activity which I suspect has been carried out in secret for generations by a band of dedicated disciples please contact the editor?

PAPERS FROM THE SPIRIT MEETING OF 25 OCTOBER 1993

The following papers have been submitted by speakers at the highly successful BCG meeting at the NHM last year, including those which for various reasons could not actually make it on the day. They provide a particularly useful compendium of practical knowledge and the editor would like to thank not only the authors for their valuable contributions but also Jane Mee (Ludlow Museum) for her tenacity in eliciting such a complete account of the day for the benefit of BCG members. The presentation of such a mass of useful information bodes well for the proposed metamorphosis of *BCG Newsletter* into the *Biology Curator*.

ON THE STATE OF PRESERVATION OF DNA FROM MUSEUM SPIRIT COLLECTIONS.

Museum collections around the world contain many millions of biological specimens which are preserved in formalin or alcohol. A large number of these specimens were collected at great expense from remote parts of the globe, and would be difficult or impossible to recollect. Some represent extinct species, and others represent species which are threatened to become extinct in a few years from now. The fact that molecular techniques have progressed tremendously in the last few years has widened very much the scope of museum collections, so that they can now be analyzed in different ways and their study can provide invaluable new information.

The molecular data obtained from DNA work is a precious complement to morphological and physiological studies, and sometimes provides a clear answer to problems that cannot be solved with the more traditional morphological approach.

This is the case, for example, with organisms that display a limited variability or a limited number of distinctive characters in their morphology, and are for these reasons difficult to discriminate or classify. Molecular data can also be used, as in the case of the quagga, to establish the phylogenetic position of an extinct animal, or as in the case of rare and endangered species, to make an informed choice on which conservation policies should be adopted to preserve authentic genetic diversity in critical areas of the world. In other cases the use of museum specimens can facilitate the study of organisms that are temporarily uncollectible for reasons of cost, availability, security, politics or geography.