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## The Biology Curator

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Title: A Proposed Accreditation Standard for Environmental Records Centres (ERCs)

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Source: Garland, S. (1996). A Proposed Accreditation Standard for Environmental Records Centres (ERCs). *The Biology Curator, Issue 6*, 16 - 17.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/519>

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### BRITISH INSECT STUDIES AT THE NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM, LONDON

The staff of the NHM Entomology Department have shown a long-standing interest in British insects, even though official work on the British fauna has endured varying degrees of encouragement over the past few decades. In view of recent widely expressed views that there is a global need for taxonomic databases, species inventories, identification guides and information on major collections, we now feel that this is the right time to coordinate systematic studies on British insects. Our fauna, of over 20,000 species, is one of the best known in the world, and this is an excellent opportunity to lead the way towards a taxonomic database of world species and associated literature.

The new programme of work in the Entomology Department will cover four main projects:

- to develop and maintain a national taxonomic database of British insects, which will contribute to the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. We will seek external funding for this project which will be developed after extensive consultation with many appropriate bodies, and will hopefully cover all the British Isles, not just the UK.
- to stimulate the production of new handbooks and other identification guides, in collaboration with other specialists, both amateur and professional, and to ensure a rapid and efficient method of publication for this literature.
- to further develop our own British collections to full taxonomic representation, including significant voucher material.
- to facilitate the activities of special interest groups (recording schemes, special topic groups etc) to improve the national collections and associated information, by extensive consultations and by setting up workshops.

Clearly much of this work will be in collaboration and consultation with many individuals and groups outside the museum, such as the Royal Entomological Society, JNCC, BRC etc. Even in the 1960s and 70s, when the department had its largest complement of permanent staff, we could not cover all insect groups to the same high level. It is clear that there is a great deal of information about British insects held by various people, and much can be achieved simply by rationalising and coordinating these data. However, the NHM Entomology Department is still the largest group of professional entomologists in Britain, and many of our staff will be involved in this new initiative to some extent, so we are well placed to undertake this central role in British insect studies, which will begin to produce tangible results within 2-3 years.

The Department's efforts are being led and coordinated by Dr Peter Barnard (tel. 0171-938 9457, fax 0171-938 8937, e-mail p.barnard@nhm.ac.uk).

*Peter Barnard, The Natural History Museum, London*

### A Proposed Accreditation Standard for Environmental Records Centres (ERCs)

After discussions with several other curators, I thought that it would be useful to throw into the arena for discussion some proposals relating to Environmental Recording. These are based on practical experience, with a large dose of ideas from the MGC collections care guidelines.

It is very important to include standards on the service side as well as for the data management. Many of these service standards are already being set in publicly funded bodies as a result of customer care policies.

Some of the elements should be considered as mandatory, whereas others may only be aims for which plans and targets must be set to work towards. For example, it will be very easy to forward data to national schemes annually when a RECORDER to BRC linking method has been agreed!

Please respond to this article. It is essential that some form of accreditation is agreed in the near future. The museums who run active records centres have over 20 years of experience and their views are vital.

A final thought. Do we require a set of standards for smaller records centres or for individuals running schemes?

Respond to Steve Garland, Bolton Museum.

#### FULLY ACCREDITED CENTRES REQUIRE:—

- (1) The ERC's governing body must draw up, adopt and publish a policy containing the following elements. It should be reviewed at least every five years:
  - (i) A collecting policy (containing details of taxonomic and geographical coverage)
  - (ii) The level of service provided (the services provided to enquirers, researchers etc)
  - (iii) Access arrangements, charging policies, copyright and data use policies
  - (iv) Resources (staff, training, premises and finances)
  - (v) A policy for data transfer, security and accessibility if the ERC ceases to function
  - (vi) Adoption of the Code of Conduct
  - (vii) A fieldwork policy
  - (viii) A quality control policy
- (2) Enquiries and requests for information should normally be answered within 15 working days.
- (3) Any bona fide enquirer must, under normal circumstances, be allowed access to the records (see also 8).
- (4) Every effort must be made to harmonise the data collecting policy of an ERC with those of other ERCs collecting locally (and nationally?).
- (5) A suitable study area should be available with access to equipment and facilities to read any data held on disk, fiche, paper etc.
- (6) Data should be forwarded to national species recording schemes on an annual basis.
- (7) Data should be forwarded to local species recording schemes on annual basis.



(8) Security Records identified as sensitive or confidential by donors must be treated as such. Access will not be given until approval has been obtained from the donor.

(9) Research and survey projects undertaken involving collecting should include in their design, deposition arrangements for voucher material with a museum or a recognised research institute, unless it is part of the ERC's policy to hold collections of their own.

(10) Back-ups of data holdings must be made regularly and kept in a separate building.

(11) The main database should be computerised with a planned policy to process backlogs of data within a reasonable time.

(12) Provision must be made for storage of archives (such as maps, record cards and other manuscript records). It should be the aim of an ERC to maintain all archives to the standard set out in BS5454 (British Standard recommendations for storage and exhibition of archival documents).

(13) An ERC must employ at least one appropriately qualified full-time biologist (or geologist) who has clear responsibility for environmental recording. Adequate premises, training and funding support must be provided (this could be someone with only partial responsibilities for environmental recording).

(14) Data must not be acquired by illegal means. It must have been acquired in compliance with all current species and habitat legislation. This includes the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and subsequent reviews and updates, CITES and local, national and international species and habitat protection laws.

(15) The ERC must be registered to comply with the Data Protection Act, 1984.

(16) An ERC must provide data recording facilities for all taxonomic groups of plants, animals and fungi.

*Steve Garland*

*Bolton Museum & Art Gallery*

## **“THERE IS AN INEXORABLE CHRONOLOGY TO THESE DISASTERS” : MUSEUMS IN MYSTERY, SCIENCE FICTION AND HORROR MOVIES**

Sally Y. Shelton, Director, Collections Care and Conservation, San Diego Natural History Museum

After the penetrating, intellectual discussion of murder in the museum (Shelton, 1996), which did for museums and mysteries what the Huns and Goths did for literacy, democracy and progressive urban planning, my colleagues and I turned our attention to catching glimpses of the museum community in films. This is harder work than you might think. In looking at mystery, science fiction and horror movies (or, to use the highly educated technical term, creepy

movies), which I did by mutual agreement (something to do with matching personality types to genres), you have to watch the whole movie and suppress the gag reflex. It's not all that different from what we normally do, anyway. In fact, suspense, speculation and horror are familiar to all of us who deal with annual budgets these days.

I concentrated in particular on mystery, sf and horror movies of the past fifty years, which means that my black-and-white vision is now highly overdeveloped (if that is really the term that I want to use). I consider colourisation a horror in itself. This gave me an opportunity to compare literary and film treatments of museums in suspense settings, watch the kind of movies that the video warehouses will pay you to take for a week (or, better yet, forever), and to begin work on another study suggested by a colleague: matching movie snacks to appropriate genres. For example, my colleague suggests, the atmosphere of vampire movies and their ilk is much enhanced by eating chocolate-covered cherries. I haven't taken this line much further, especially since I kept running into a number of giant-spider plots for which I have no snack suggestions at all. Nor am I interested in hearing any, though it has been mentioned that Raisinets are fly-like...

The title of this paper is “There Is An Inexorable Chronology To These Disasters”, a line uttered by the curator type in *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* that describes everything about this presentation nicely. This movie, by the way, takes the award for the most pompous dialogue ever contrived and sets the standard for several of the themes discussed below.

One way in which movie portrayals of museums differ from literary portrayals is in the staffing of a museum. In analysing this, we found that there were recurring and predictable stereotypes of people in particular job types, and that in turn made the part they played in the plot predictable. Curators were far and away the most likely to be murdered, while directors and trustees were the most likely to be murderers and frequently needed to be under house arrest. This year's assignment was much easier because there are very few job types in Hollywood museums. By going to the movies, we seem to have rid ourselves of everyone else altogether (except a few directors and trustees up to no good) and are left with the curator, the security guard and the occasional student. (Students in the movies never actually study very much of anything. They are there to advance the plot by superior logic - superior because they do not actually have their degrees yet and so have more common sense - or by starting new careers as existentially challenged individuals.) This all puts quite a strain on the curator, who now has to take on many responsibilities not in the original job description. The security guard is just there to get strangled, crushed, shot or gassed, which must tick off the union something fierce. The student is there to expose the curator, who usually has some vice that needs exposure. The student's chances of being killed or becoming a hero are roughly equal. That leaves the curator to manage the museum, the collection, the exhibits, the evil results of his nefarious research, and the reporters and police. No wonder these places never get cleaned up.