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## The Biology Curator

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which had been blown up to twice their size, freeze dried bananas and the radioactive geological material.

**Thursday** – The aim of the day was to learn about systematics, taxonomy and identification. We spent the morning trying to do examples of cladograms and phenograms. Simon had provided some useful examples for us to work through to get the hang of the principles. We got bogged down in the maths and didn't have time to cover the nomenclature and taxonomy aspects very thoroughly.

The identification workshop in the afternoon was a replica of the museum diploma practical exam. John Martin provided specimens for teams to key out, identify and then discuss in hypothetical curatorial situations. The strangest item was a horse hair ball.

**Friday** – This morning we reported back on our historical research. By this time we had spent a week getting lost around the library and now had a clearer idea on which books were most useful. Simon then told us how we should have done it! This was followed by a video on the Natural History Museum. The next topic tackled was neglected collection assessment and restoration. Once again this was group work solving hypothetical scenarios. The course ended with a fun identification quiz.

On comparison with the Sheffield course I would say they appear extremely similar. From the point of view of a person attending the one week course only:-

\* I would have liked a more comprehensive coverage of issues and situations encountered by curators. For example, environmental education was not mentioned within the one week course. The subject is covered in a separate course.

\* The time could have been more packed, I would have enjoyed evening sessions. Contact in the evenings was limited because we were all staying in separate accommodation.

\* The course was designed to be 1/2 biology and 1/2 geology. Personally I would have liked to course to be a 1/3 botany, zoology and geology. Not enough plants and too many rocks!

I thoroughly enjoyed this course and have learnt a lot. I would advise anyone new to natural history curation to try to get on it. The course notes were easy to follow and well organised. My thanks to all those who ran and tutored the course especially Simon Knell also

to NMGM for allowing me to attend.

*Sam Hallett, Assistant Curator  
Botany Department, Liverpool  
Museum*

### COLLECTIONS AT RISK

The Committee of the BCG place a high priority on counteracting any downgrading of the care and curatorship of natural history collections which may lead to them being placed at risk. It is the role of the Monitoring Cell, namely myself, to collect and bring to the attention of the Committee information on any such collections. The Cell, however, relies on the vigilance of all members to monitor situations at local level and to send information to me, in confidence, as early as possible. Subsequent action may vary from discrete monitoring to strong letters of protest from the Chairperson, depending on the wishes of the member concerned.

On the reverse side of the coin, however, I would also like to hear of any good news relating to collections, "New post created", "Collections saved!" etc..

*Mike Palmer (in confidence), Natural  
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### LETTERS

Dear Editor – I admire and envy the initiative and energy shown by Hampshire Museum Service in obtaining £95,000 for their discovery centre for natural science and active learning centre for history ('SEARCH for Science in Hampshire – the background' B.C.G. Newsletter 6:3), but why did Chris Palmer have to introduce their new strategy for 'natural science provision' with such a string of false and outmoded arguments? I quote from his article.

Firstly, '*the trap approaching natural science displays as solely the interpretation of the local natural environment*'. Why 'trap' and why 'solely'? All local environments are unique and this uniqueness is what a local museum is pre-eminently qualified to interpret. Most people's interest in the natural world is aroused by and builds on their experience of their local environment; start there and you can take them anywhere.

Secondly, '*local history, which by definition is very parochial*'. If

'parochial' means lacking in breadth, depth or relevance to the general human condition, then I suggest that this view is seriously mistaken and out-of-date. The work of W.G. Hoskins shows, *par excellence*, to what a profound extent local lives and landscapes are affected by events at national and international level, whether changes in the pattern of land ownership, the spread of the plague or the industrial revolution.

Thirdly, '*the natural environment ... consists of far broader brush strokes*'. Even ignoring the dubious construction of the metaphor, this assertion is no more true than is the contrary for local history. It is, surely, the recording of the minutiae of the natural world which enables us to detect and interpret the affects of natural events up to global level and even beyond, whether the evolution of new organisms, plate tectonics or sunspot cycles? And, in the context of the recording of minutiae, and Hampshire, spare a thought for the founder of local natural history, Gilbert White, who was born, lived and died in that county. He must be turning in his grave!

Fourthly, '*it is conceivable that one display could be created which would be equally relevant at each location in a region*'. This not only ignores the manifest uniqueness of every part of our environment, but would also require a singular lack of imagination and foresight on the part of those responsible.

A different aspect of the case, but when Chris says '*what we needed was a more strategic approach*'; who was 'we'? Did the Museum Service in fact consult its public, the ultimate source of its funding, on, for instance, the demand for '*straightforward taxonomic displays*'?

Lastly, a more general point; why are we still pigeon-holing our knowledge and interpretation of the environment into 'history' and 'natural sciences'? We know that, in the context of most of Britain, this distinction is virtually meaningless, such has been the influence of man on the landscape. Just look, for example, at any one of Oliver Rackham's magnificent series of publications. More important, this approach perpetuates the still prevalent myth that man is in some way independent of the rest of the biosphere, rather than an integral, dependent and very destructive part of it.

