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The Biology Curator

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Orphan collections are still on our agenda, and I have recently met with both Barbara Woroncow and Val Bott regarding options for progress in this area.

Steve Garland continues to promote museums as biological recording centres, and to raise their profile within the drive to establish a national biodiversity network.

Our links with GCG and NSCG continue to be close and, despite a little confusion over the possibility of another joint AGM, we continue to enjoy each others support. BCG also seeks to liaise with other bodies, including UK Systematics Forum over their strategy for systematics research, SMA at the 1997 MA conference, MAGDA (disability forum) at the 1998 MA conference and DoE over licensing for the use of taxidermy specimens, where we gained a major concession for any registered museum that makes use of such material. Our thanks to Jane for getting on to that very promptly, not to say successfully.

Our conference sessions have attracted between forty and sixty people, and Robert Anderson, (BM director), who chaired our last one, was full of praise for it, so we are clearly hitting the right notes there. The 1998 session is to be about the use of museum objects in the future.

Our other meetings continue to be succesful, with attendances of between forty and seventy people. The AGM in Cardiff, jointly with NSCG, went very well and the Vienna trip was fully booked. I believe a jolly good time was had by all. Silly me for not going, but there we are. Future overseas trips are planned for Belfast, Leiden and St. Petersburg, and I don't intend to miss those. The next meeting is to be in Edinburgh, so we expect to see a full complement of curators from the frozen north. See insert in this issue. These meetings all take a great deal of work, and we try to provide the best and most relevant possible events for the membership, so please make every effort to support them.

The August issue of the Museums Journal contained a substantial (cover) article on natural history, and a number of our concerns were aired. We are pleased that we do appear to be raising our profile within the profession. You may rest assured that we will continue to promote this trend. Our web page, currently being created, will no doubt help towards this.

The last edition of The Biology Curator (TBC) came with Paul Brown's special paper on the care of microscope slides, which contained a great deal of useful information. We will be happy to publish similar works should the opportunity arise, so, any offers?

Maggie Reilly has had to stand down from committee, for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the recent arrival of another pair of tiny feet. (Congrats to Maggie). John Harrison has come onto committee and we feel very strongly that Scotland should continue to be represented, particularly at the present time. To this end, Shona Allen has agreed to see if the role fits, but, ever flexible, we are hoping to be looking at the practicality of joint representation from Scotland, to ease the burden on any one individual or institution.

As you can see, we are pretty busy, but never too busy to respond to feedback from the membership. Let us have your

comments, ideas, criticisms, letters for TBC, whatever. We hope to see you in Carlisle and Edinburgh.

Steve, the Sec.

BCG Foreign Trips

As you are well aware, the Committee has organised very successful study trips to Europe for the last few years. Future trips are likely to include a return to Leiden in 1999, to look at new developments there, and one to St. Petersburg in 2000.

At present, one for 1998 has not been organised. Suggestions have been Belfast, Spain or Portugal, though the practicability of these has to be investigated. If anyone has any suggestions to make for possible destinations, we would like to hear them, especially if they have connections in the appropriate places.

Steve Thompson

Collections Monitoring Cell News

Collections at Risk Packs

The two *Collections at Risk* packs namely, the *Action Pack for Curators* and the *Information Pack for Museum Governing Bodies*, are now out and available following their launch at the Natural History Museum on 27th October by Professor Steve Blackmore. Contrary to the short note in December's Museums Journal, the packs are available from me on a request basis (address at the end of the section).

The *Curator's Action Pack* contains both direct information aiming to improve the way in which the Group deals with specific cases of collections at risk and also support information designed to assist curators with their ongoing role of collections advocacy. Contents are as follows:

1. Introduction
2. BCG Policy Statement for Safeguarding Collections at Risk
3. Checklist for Curators with Collections at Risk
4. Outlines of BCG Approaches
5. Arguments in Support of Biological Collections
6. Prevention is better than Cure
7. Useful Contacts
8. Useful References

The *BCG Policy Statement for Safeguarding Collections at Risk* is published further on in this edition of the Newsletter. The *Checklist for Curators with Collections at Risk* provides a listing of the type of information the Cell from curators who feels their collection is either currently at risk or may become at risk in the near future. It also emphasises the importance of early notification and the need for curators to ensure that the Cell is kept informed as the

situation develops. One point I would like to add to this section is the usefulness of receiving copies of any local newspaper reports or AMC newsletter covering collections at risk, so please send in any cuttings you come across.

Outlines of BCG Approaches serves to provide curators with some idea of the ways in which the Cell may proceed once a collection has been reported. The underlying message of this section is for curators not to wait until some form of action is required before contacting the Cell. The *Arguments in Support of Biological Collections* provides a pool of information to assist curators in putting forward the best possible defence of their collections as and when required. This section, however, is by no means complete. I would like to receive suggestions for further *arguments* and also more examples with which to *illustrate* them. *Prevention is better than Cure* highlights the potential causes of collections becoming at risk while emphasising the need for ongoing curatorial advocacy on behalf of collections. The pack also provides a comprehensive listing of useful references and useful contacts including the recently established network of *Regional Collections Monitors*.

It is probably a truism to say that the usefulness of the pack will vary from curator to curator, however, it is the ambition of the pack to become as useful as possible to as many curators as possible. Achieving this ambition requires your help. Its publishing now provides scope for consultation on a wider front. The pack comprises of loose sheets held within a folder making it easy to revamp individual sections or to add completely new ones. Your comments, suggestions and ideas are, therefore essential in strengthening this pack.

The *Information Pack for Museum Governing Bodies* is largely based on the *Action Pack for Curators* and promotes the value, significance and relevance of biology collections to the museums that house them and the organisations that fund them while encouraging museum governing bodies to make better use of the Group's knowledge and experience of the management, care and use of biology collection through greater consultation (long sentence I know). Contents are as follows:

1. *Introduction*
2. *Working with the BCG*
3. *BCG Policy Statement for Safeguarding Collections at Risk*
4. *Arguments in support of biological collections*
5. *Useful Contacts*
6. *Useful References*

As with the *Action Pack for Curators* I would like to hear any comments and suggestions you have for future improvement and inclusion in this Pack.

If you would like copies of either pack or have any comments and suggestions to make on their current and future contents please contact me at *The Natural History Centre, Liverpool Museum, William Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EN. Tel: 0151 478 4281, Fax: 0151 478 4390, e-mail: mikep@nmgmnhc.demon.co.uk*

New EC Regulation Affecting Taxidermy

By now everyone should have received a letter from Roy Pitt of the Wildlife Licensing and Registration Unit about EC Regulation 338/97. This regulation concerns the use of specimens of certain wildlife species for commercial purposes as detailed in the last *Biology Curator*. Zoos, museums, botanical Gardens and other scientific institutions may apply to the DoE for a one off exemption certificate from this regulation. Thanks to a combined effort of your BCG committee, MGC and the DoE, museums registered with the Museums and Galleries Commission are automatically eligible for a certificate. If you have not received a letter, or have any queries, please contact:

Roy Pitt, Wildlife Licensing and Registration Unit, DoE, Room 821, Tollgate House, Houlton Street, Bristol, BS2 9DJ
Jane Pickering

Policy Statement on Safeguarding Collections at Risk

As part of the *Collections at Risk Initiative* the Committee have formulated a policy statement of the above title. This is included in both Packs, but in order to ensure all members are aware of its existence and content it is also published here now.

Biological collections represent a unique and irreplaceable scientific resource of enormous proven value and unknown future potential. They contain material and information of immense environmental, historical and cultural importance and so provide the basis for a wide and popular range of educational and public services. In recognition of this the Biology Curator's Group is committed to safeguarding these collections for present and future use by both the local and wider communities they serve.

Accordingly, the Group seeks to gain assurances from bodies responsible for the care of biological collections that they:—

- ***acknowledge the unique and irreplaceable nature of biological collection;***
- ***understand their full scientific, environmental, historical and cultural value for providing a wide range of services both for the local community and wider audiences; and***
- ***accept that specialist knowledge, skills and experience are required for their ongoing care, accessibility and effective use by the public.***

The Biology Curators Group, in turn, recognises the financial constraints facing many museum governing bodies and seeks to help provide the best possible solution for these irreplaceable collections within these constraints. In order to achieve this the Group requests that any governing bodies proposing changes that are likely to have impact on biological collections should:—

National Biodiversity Network Seminar

Working Through Local Record Centres

Arranged by the NBN Local Advisory Group and targeted at those running, contributing to, or using Local Record Centres (LRC's). The plans to develop a national network, work already underway and the role of LRC's in Biodiversity Planning and how recorders can get involved will be looked at. There will also be an open discussion session with plenty of opportunity to comment on these proposals and input into future developments.

Contact: Sandra Skipworth, Seminar Organiser, NBN, c/o The Wildlife Trusts, The Green, Witham Park, Waterside South, Lincoln, LN5 7JR

Tel: 01522 544400, Fax: 01522 511616, E.Mail: nbn@wildlife-trusts.compulink.co.uk

- provide the Group with details of the proposals and of plans for their future care and usage;
- allow the Group to submit comments to any relevant body, committee or working party regarding such plans and proposals; and
- keep the Group fully informed as to the ongoing situation.

The Biology Curators Group are always pleased to offer advice on all aspects of the care, use and access of biological collections.

For further information please contact:— (Chair & Secretary contacts given)

The new, improved Collections Monitoring Cell

Since taking on the role of Collections Monitoring Officer in 1993 I have witnessed a marked increase in the Cell's workload. While this is undoubtedly due, in part, to an increase in the number of collections becoming at risk, it is also a reflection of the Cell's ambition to monitor collections more comprehensively and at an earlier stage.

Consequently one of the first needs to be identified as part of the *Collections at Risk Initiative* was to expand the Cell. To this end we have increased the population of the Cell as follows.

Collections Monitoring Officer — The main point for all matters relating to collections at risk. If, for some reason, the Collections Monitoring Officer the Groups Secretary or Chair may serve as back-up contacts.

Two Assistant Collection Monitoring Officers — Responsibility for monitoring delegated collections at risk and providing comment on others.

Fourteen Regional Collection Monitors — Responsible for feeding any local concerns on the well-being of biological collections within their area to the Collections Monitoring Officer, both from within and without the curatorial profession e.g. county nature conservation trusts, local natural history societies and the plethora of other collection user groups. This should not dissuade any curators from contacting the Cell direct.

Volunteers still wanted!

No communication from the Collections Monitoring Cell would be complete without a request for more help. Although the Cell has expanded, the current trio responsible for active monitoring of collections at risk still have their hands more than full. Consequently, I would be grateful to hear from any members who feel they could help out. It is important to remember that by stepping forward you are not letting yourself in for a humungous amount of work. The amount you undertake is entirely up to you — even if you take responsibility for just one collection that is one less for the rest of the Cell to work on and thus allowing more time for dealing with other collections. If you would like to offer your services or find out more, please give me a ring (0151 478 4281).

SEMS University Collections Survey

SEMS Western Region have secured funding to undertake a survey of the collections held by universities and specified colleges in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Hampshire. The aim is to identify existing collections, to assess their importance or significance and to raise awareness of them within the higher education sector. The survey will result in the publication of a 'gazetteer' of collections as well as individual survey reports and key collection management recommendations where appropriate. Kate Arnold-Foster has been contracted to undertake the project which will run from October 1997 to December 1998.

SEMS are keen for specialist assistance from BCG members in the following area:—

- Notification of any collections held at universities or colleges within the Western Region.
- Help with specialist assessments of key collections. Although all collections brought to the project's attention will be surveyed by Kate, there may be cases where she feels that specialist input would be particularly beneficial.
- Providing advice on organising and documenting biology collections for individual organisations.

While there may be some money available for specialist help and documentation work the project's budget is fairly constrained. Accordingly, SEMS are hoping to rely on the goodwill of museum professionals to make the funding stretch as far as possible.

As yet I do not know how far this survey will go towards providing new information beyond that published in *Natural Science Collections in South East Britain*, Bateman, McKenna, and Timberlake (1993), however, any project aiming to increase awareness of collections is worthy of our support.

For further information from *Sophia Mirchandani (Museums Officer)*, SEMS Western Regional Office, Chilcomb House, Chilcomb Lane, Winchester, Hampshire, SO23 8RD. Tel: 10962 844909, Fax: 01962 878439.

Mike Palmer

Collections Monitoring Officer, January 1998