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## The Biology Curator

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**FishGopher on line** - Yes, its one of those wonderful inventions now available for those of you who cruise the information superhighway. This is an integrated Internet fish collection catalogue allowing simultaneous query access to a simulated union of collection catalogues by using Gopher+ software to fan out a single query to multiple databases. Produced by The Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, Cornell University, Field Museum of Natural history, Harvard University, The University of Alabama, University of California at Berkeley and the University of Michigan, FishGopher can be accessed on the main menu of the Biodiversity and Biological Collections (BBC) Gopher, located on: muse.bio.cornell.edu.

## PEOPLE

More news from Bristol where **Mrs Anne Hollowell** retired as Keeper of Biology in December after 32 years service to Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. Anne began her career within the Schools Section before transferring to become Assistant Curator, Natural History and then Curator of Natural History. She was head of the Natural History section until it amalgamated with the Geology Section in 1994. Anne was an examiner for the M.A. Diploma and is a Fellow of the Museums Association.

**Samantha Hallett** moves from the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside to be Curator of Biology at Bristol. Samantha took up her post on January 9th.

**Anne Abernethy**, Assistant Keeper of Natural Sciences at Perth Museum, moves to the Ulster Museum as Assistant Registrar in February.

**Jean Sinclair** a volunteer known to the Hancock Museum is looking for employment, preferably paid, in a museum in the UK or overseas. Jean's background is in marine biology and she has a wealth of expedition experience plus work for the Royal British Columbia Museum and the British Antarctic Survey. Anyone who has suitable work for Jean is asked to contact her direct on 091 265 4639 or at 142 Cartington Terrace, Heaton, Newcastle upon Tyne NE6 5SJ.

## DIARY DATES

**Feb 20 1995.** BCG 'Bones' Meeting. Grosvenor Museum, Chester. An instructive and entertaining day

guaranteed. Further details from Steve Woolfall, Grosvenor Museum, tel 0244 321616, Fax 0244 347587.

**Mar 8-9 1995.** The good, the bad and the disaster. UKIC Natural Sciences Section AGM and Conference at The Natural History Museum, London. Papers and short talks are still required. Offers or further information from Clare Valentine, The NHM, tel 071 938 9252.

**Apr 19-21 1995.** International Conference on the Value and Valuation of Natural History Collections. Manchester. Programme now available. Abstracts of papers will form the greater part of the next issue of The Biology Curator. Further details from Charles Pettitt (address on back page).

**Jun 2-6 1995.** Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPHNH) Annual Meeting. Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada. The programme of SPHNH '95 *Preserving the Record of Nature through Countless Ages* will include papers and posters on natural history collections management issues. The Education and Training Committee of SPHNH is offering a training workshop on "Managing the Modern Herbarium" on June 5-6. For further information on the meeting and/or the workshop, contact Janet Waddington, Royal Ontario Museum, 100 Queen's Park, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 2C6.

**Jul 2-7 1995.** ICOM Triennial Conference. Stavanger, Norway. Conference programme now available. The theme for the Natural History Committee meeting is "Natural History Museums and Biodiversity". It is hoped that discussions will range widely over the political aspects of conservation, documentation, collection management, education and public awareness. Joint sessions with some other International Committees are also planned.

Remember: the conference is open only to ICOM members and, if you are not already one, you are urged to join now. You can then opt to be a voting member of the Natural History Committee. (Grants towards attendance are available from ICOM UK for members of more than one years standing - Ed). Further information about ICOM membership is available from Ms Nell Hoare, Textile Conservation Centre, Apt 22, Hampton Court Palace, East Molesey, Surrey, KT8 9AU. Tel 081 977 4943. For information on the

Natural History Committee contact Mr Christopher Hill, Clarence Road, Kew, Surrey, TW9 3NL. Tel 081 940 5272.

**Aug 6-10 1995.** American Institute of Biological Sciences Annual Meeting. San Diego, California. The AIBS is requesting proposals from groups or individuals seeking to organise discussions, workshops or Symposia at their 1995 meeting. The AIBS meeting provides an excellent forum for outreach/demonstration activities and for scientists and policy makers to express their views on issues relating to biology and biologists. Proposals should indicate type of session and include a provisional title, a one paragraph justification, special room requirements and any other information that might help AIBS determine the suitability of the proposed session. For further information contact The AIBS Meetings department, 730 11th St NW, Washington, DC 2001-4521, or tel (202)628 1500, Fax (202)628 1509.

**Sep 11-15 1995.** Museums Association Conference. Leicester. The two main themes are 'Beyond the Gallery' and 'Creativity in the Museum'. Delegates will be able to book their places by April and discounts will be offered for early bookings. Further details from the MA, 42 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1R 0PA.

**Aug 20-24 1996.** Second Congress and International Symposium on the Conservation and Preservation of Natural History Collections. Madrid 2!. Watch this space for future announcements.

## BCG COMMITTEE NEWS

The last BCG Committee meeting was held on November 6th in the middle of the North Sea. Ten of the twelve committee members were present, no-one was sea-sick!

Items dealt with since the last committee meeting included: letters to Portsmouth City Council and to Newham Borough Council about our concerns regarding collections at risk; contact with Nottingham Museum over a proposed taxidermy training course; articles on the Orphan Collections Working Party and the Brighton seminar; institutional memberships; 20th anniversary meeting; consultation over the Leicester Natural History Curators course; the bones meeting and index compilation.

Items covered at this committee meeting included: moving the bones

meeting from Birmingham to Chester (see diary dates above); holding the 20th anniversary meeting at Bolton; letter of protest sent to SEMS over the closure of the Natural Sciences Conservation Unit; offers of assistance to Leicester in the form of extra speakers for evening talks to complement the course; and next years M.A. Conference. The Linnaean Society received the support of BCG in the face of their potential eviction from Burlington House. BCG members are also to be involved in the planning of Madrid 2 - which will be held in Cambridge in 1996.

The nature of the venue prompted discussions on the BCG constitution, Registration Phase 2 and the M.A. annual report to be held over until the next meeting. This will be held in Chester on Sunday (that's dedication for you) 19th February.

As this meeting covered the agenda items in record time, it was suggested that we hold all future committee meetings on board ferries - with an option on trains and airliners. The idea of holding one in a mini going along the M1 is perhaps less than practical.

### ORPHAN COLLECTIONS MEETING: AN OVERVIEW

On 12 September this year BCG and GCG held a meeting before the MA conference in Brighton, which looked at the problems faced by orphan collections, ie collections with no qualified curator to care for them. This was the first important result of a working party set up to look at this problem.

The meeting was split into four sections. The first section looked at the current state of such collections in this country, as represented at this meeting by surveys and by work done in the North East, North West and South East regions, as well as the state of Archaeological collections in the West Midlands. Between them they gave what is probably a typical, and generally depressing, picture of the country as a whole.

The second section looked at the enabling side, with accounts of the setting of standards, so far in Biology, Geology and Archaeology, of registration, collections research and the potential of collections. This gave some idea of the background against which a strategy for the care of these collections might be developed.

The third section looked at ways in which the problems identified are

being or might, in the future, be tackled. This section concluded with a summary of the findings of the working party. As this also served to run quickly through the topics covered by the meeting itself, I shall give an even briefer version, consisting of the headings of this summary, here:

#### A) Aims of the working party:

- 1) To review activities to date.
- 2) To organise the Brighton meeting.
- 3) To try and develop strategy for the future.
- 4) To promote useful action on these collections.

#### B) Findings:

- 1) Efforts to date have tended to be short term projects.
- 2) They are often based on voluntary efforts, or
- 3) Based on the goodwill of institutions and/or individuals.
- 4) The efforts of the AMC's are stretched very thin by chronic underfunding.

#### Results of the above:

- 5) There is a lack of the necessary continuity and, often, consistency.
- 6) Goodwill is welcome and necessary, but is also irregular, variable, provides no guarantee of good workmanship and no recompense against poor workmanship.
- 7) After many short term projects, collections may be abandoned again, providing no long term benefit and wasting the resources that were put in.
- 8) Finally, no more than a small part of the whole problem can be dealt with on this basis.

As an adjunct to 6) above, I should say that poor workmanship is now very rare, but any activity based mainly on goodwill will always have this potential problem, which should not exist in a professional environment.

#### C) Factors for consideration:

- 1) Registration II. Will it have teeth, and what will the responses be.
- 2) DNH policy review. A possible opportunity for improvement.
- 3) Local Government reorganisation. Will certainly have effects, some good and some bad.

- 4) Cultural attitudes. The spending of (relatively) large sums on art collections but not on NH collections is still seen as justified.
- 5) Cessation of Natural Sciences Incentive Funding, just as its value was beginning to be appreciated.
- 6) Value and Valuation of Collections conference, 1995. This will give an airing to many of the relevant issues.

#### D) Possible options:

- 1) Employment of a professionally trained curator.
- 2) Shared curatorial services.
- 3) Use of freelance curators/conservators.
- 4) Use, (paid), of curators from neighbouring institutions.
- 5) Programs of voluntary work.
- 6) Transfer of collections.
- 7) Disposal of collections.

The issues and factors above were all discussed at some length during the meeting itself, either by way of the papers or during the discussion period, and much of this will be published in the near future. The working party did not feel able to discuss strategy at any length until after the Brighton meeting, although a couple of very general ideas were proposed at the meeting, to wit, the establishment of regional collections centres and schemes following the NWCRU/NWMS model, which has already achieved some modest successes.

The last section was a forum for discussion in which many points were covered and general support for the aims of the working party was established. With a few exceptions people were unable to commit themselves to direct support, though this was expected. No conclusions were drawn as to strategy, and it would have been misplaced to hope for any such conclusions. However two further main steps were decided upon. The first was to gather together the papers presented at the meeting with the aim of publishing them as the main theme of an issue of the *Museums Journal*. This should have the result of presenting the situation as it stands at present to the wider museum community, which we feel to be essential if anything meaningful is to be achieved in the long term. The second step is to develop the working party, by bringing in a wider range of participants, (eg MGC, MA, AMC's