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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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## A NATIONAL PLAN FOR MUSEUMS

The Standing Commission, in consultation with the Museums' Association, set up a Working Party in 1975 to study means of implementing the recommendations of the Department of Education and Science's Report on Provincial Museums, HMSO 1973 (the Wright Report) in regard to the establishment of Centres of Excellence. The Working Party envisages this as the preparation of a national plan for museums based on the designation of such provincial centres.

The Wright Report recognised that there were already a number of actual or potential Centres of Excellence in the country on which to build and, as a first step, panels of advisers were consulted about the location of the most important collections in the main museum disciplines. (The lists of selected centres, together with appropriate comments from special Area Council Panels, should be available from the Museums Director or the Area Museums Service.)

The preparation of this plan is being undertaken by the Working Party on two assumptions. The first is that the functions and responsibilities of the Centres to be designated will be those set out in the Wright Report, and second, that the kind of government assistance there envisaged will be available particularly for museums undertaking services on behalf of their neighbours.

The designation of a centre will depend on the institution in question being able effectively to meet the basic aims of museums\* or having the potential so to do and, in so far as services to other museums are concerned, on the willingness of the governing authorities of a museum to seek recognition as a provincial centre and to undertake to meet their share of the costs and endorse the relationship with the provincial services (Wright Report Ch.12.7).

In view of the fact that the Working Party were both willing and able to receive further information the B.C.G. Secretary wrote to the Secretary of the Standing Commission:

4th March, 1977

Dear Mr Wakefield,

The Biology Curators Group was pleased to hear that some time, albeit short, is still available for the submission of evidence on the National Plan. We intend to prepare a special publication of the B.C.G. Newsletter inviting comments from members on some aspects of the study, which will include a questionnaire. This evidence will then be collated and submitted to you in early June.

We will do our utmost to achieve everything by the latter date, although all the evidence may not be completely collated by then,

(\*See Wright Report Ch4.7)

the basic data will still give you enough information. In our recent telephone conversation you mentioned one major difficulty, that of defining regions and areas in relation to the location of collections. This we will look into carefully and if presented in map form should not prove difficult. A plot of the collections, subdivided into Zoology and Botany, will give an immediate idea of location, distance between the various centres and the area of the regions being covered. If necessary an overlay of population density can be superimposed. This will allow some assessment in terms of Ch.4.9 of the Wright Report. I assume that the N.C.C. and I.T.E. evidence is mainly concerned with record centres linked possibly to the N.E.R.C. Taxonomy Research Group findings; if this is the case we will concentrate upon three dimensional collections where evidence is more scattered and scanty. Record Centres are being considered by several groups at the moment and although we will include them our major deliberations would probably follow those outlined elsewhere.

A few comments and an expansion of our intentions may help you to understand our line of thinking at this stage; more detailed comments will follow after our committee meeting.

1. The B.C.G. concurs with the evidence submitted to you on 25th May, 1976 by M. Jones of the Geological Curators Group. There are minor differences but the need for the separation of Geology from the Biological sciences is paramount.
2. For many of the reasons outlined in the paper by the G.C.G. it is further necessary to divide the biological sciences into Zoology and Botany.

These two disciplines are covered by different Codes of Nomenclature, institutional responsibilities and laws regarding import, export etc., The location of collections here is fundamental and in Botany Universities often hold important collections, as they do in Geology. This is not so prevalent in Zoology however, the main university collections being attached to museums as at Oxford, Manchester, Cambridge and Newcastle. This division has obviously been accepted in principle with the Botanic Institutions of Kew and Edinburgh being included as proposed Centres of Excellence.

Once the basic data on these collections is obtained an overall picture can be knitted together. One of the major difficulties previously has been the very broad coverage of 'Natural History' which leads to generalities possibly missing many important aspects. Any appraisal of coverage of material, involving the matching of collections from different disciplines within Natural History in an area or region, must involve data collections at the most basic level. The three major components for this are Geology, Zoology and Botany with further subdivisions for data collections.

In order to analyse fully the present situation the B.C.G. will further subdivide the questionnaire. Zoology will be split into

Invertebrate and Vertebrate Zoology. Hopefully one will obtain an idea of the distribution of all groups of material, data from which can be combined where required for your analysis. This type of approach will also allow an assessment of the academic and research importance of each centre's collection which could be combined to give areas or regions coverage. It should then be possible to show the major shortcomings, in those areas with major gaps in their collections. Alternatively when compared with staff and their specialist knowledge shortcomings regarding Ch.4.7. of the Wright Report can be identified with a view to correction in any final scheme.

This type of approach and analysis we feel sure would also allow a more meaningful comparison between the four major fields as outlined in the Wright Report.

3. The disparities between regions are already apparent in the published list of recommended centres. By taking such a broad spectrum as Natural History this, we feel, was inevitable. The question of coverage of material by museums in different areas raises several points especially with regard to any comparison that might be made from the current document. One example serves to emphasise the problem. In the North West the major collections of Merseyside and Manchester tend to overshadow other museums such as Bolton, but if this were placed geographically anywhere else in Britain it would, on current criteria, automatically become a centre of excellence. How to solve or deal with this imbalance is an extremely difficult one which, as you stated, is giving you tremendous problems. When all the data is collected it may be possible to obtain a true comparison of holdings and how each satisfies the requirements laid down. This, taken first nationally and then broken down, may give a more accurate picture than the artificial one imposed by the taking of Area Museum Service boundaries.
4. One final point must be made with regard to the Area Services. The majority of biologists employed there are conservationsits/ technicians/taxidermists whose main duty is the preparation and production of displays. On the whole they do not have the specialist personnel to assess collections in terms of their scientific importance or research value, especially with regard to the historical aspects. It is hoped that the B.C.G. which is national in operation with members from provincial and national museums (including London) can aid in this analysis.

We would be grateful if you could let us know of any specific points you wish covered and at a later date we would be grateful if it were possible to see the returns from the Area Services on the recommendations for the Natural History Centres of Excellence.

Yours sincerely,

Peter J. Morgan,  
Hon. Secretary,  
Biology Curators Group.