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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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PAISLEY MUSEUM AND ART GALLERIES, NATURAL HISTORY  
DEPARTMENT AND BIOLOGICAL RECORDS CENTRE, RENFREW  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

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Museums are a combination of collections, displays and activities, and the presumed purpose of articles such as this is to broadcast to the profession information about these facets so that facts, opinions and ideas may be exchanged.

On advice from the Editor I have decided to concentrate on "activities", and in particular on biological recording, which I think is of great importance to museums and to the society they work in. The contents of this article are a personal view as will be apparent, and much of what is said will be old hat to many others in more advanced centres.

To set the scene: our collections have not been well documented historically. There is probably no nationally important material present but we have useful reference collections in many groups. The displays, now about ten years old, are good, up-to-date based on local habitats but with some general interest features. Activities are treated as an important aspect of museum work. Contact with the public is made whenever possible, the constant aim being to extend people's interest in natural history, their respect for 'flora and fauna' and to encourage greater appreciation of the interdependence of humanity and the natural world.

This museum began the recording habit in 1975 when I arrived fresh from the Leicester course, full of ideas and raw enthusiasm. During the course I had visited Monk's Wood and had been exposed to Frank Perring's persuasiveness. I have also seen the records centres at Leicester and Dundee and had become convinced this was an essential role for museums to adopt. Many museums seem not to have a great involvement with local naturalists and there is much natural history that goes on without contact with the local museum.

Of course museums have an important job to do in providing an initial exposure to natural history by means of displays and by providing information on request but this is all done against increasing competition from television, books and magazines, nature centres with ranger guided tours, all capable of providing the initial stimulation in very attractive ways.

Recording gives a new sense of purpose to museums and makes it much more rewarding to be able to tell the audience "this is nature, and this is what we are doing to further its study and to safeguard it". It also provides a new bond between the museum and local naturalists which was once much stronger than is general today. When I look through the

collections and see how many people collected and gave to the museum I find it difficult to see a comparable support group in the local area these days.

The first move in setting up a records centre is of course sounding out the local feeling and measuring the likely support. In our case a forum was held in Spring 1976. The idea was welcomed but of course the amount of practical help to be expected was of a smaller measure. Being a newcomer to the area with new ideas naturally invites a 'lets wait and see' response. Also of course many active people are already doing their own work; so it became apparent that the initial work would fall to the museum. This does have several advantages in that:

- a) The centre remains independent and does not get immediately annexed by one particular group to the exclusion of others!
- b) the system can be fairly quickly established and become a physical reality to demonstrate the principles
- c) It means the organiser has to get involved in each of the groups and in the study of the area and so goes through a good and essential grounding.

On one hand it is a symptom of the gulf between museums and the naturalists' movement. Many established naturalists were paying their first serious visit to the museum. On the other hand as the system is slowly developing and gaining some respectability, support is slowly being offered. Moreover the interest is coming from serious conservation minded naturalists and not the record-hoggers, the do-littles or the empire builders.

Development is unavoidably piecemeal but a rough chronological sequence is as follows. The initial work was to find or prepare county species lists for the more popular groups. In the Clyde Area a good, if dated, main source was the British Association handbook of 1901, listing flora and fauna. Since the system is designed for the future a fairly large range of biological groups was adopted, though information on some of them will be minimal for some time to come. The index cards I have used have, in addition to the map and recording lines, a space for general notes about the species status, national distribution, ecology and so on, so that each card has, or will have, a potted history of the species on it. There is also a box for a single word description on status: common, rare etc.

Choice of geographical area of coverage has caused some minor problems, not only here, but in Scotland generally. We are centrally placed in vice-county 76 - Renfrewshire, which has been the traditional recording area for a long time. Prior to re-organisation (1974 in Scotland) this

was a Borough museum with a county-wide interest. Reorganisation divided the county into three districts and politically our area of responsibility is now only Renfrew District. Our current interest in the larger area can rightly be defended in terms of our traditional interest and the fact that natural history interests of people within the district extend beyond the district boundaries. Up to the present no conflicts have arisen, the great bulk of the work has been of direct relevance to the Renfrew District. Eventually, however, I hope that the centre will make a 'quantum jump' in energy and then formal agreements will be required between Districts so that our service may be extended.

The second stage was the gathering of site information and it soon became apparent that no systematic site analysis had been conducted previously and many places seemed to be little studied, perhaps because they were off the 'beaten track'. It has to be said that this area, whilst of considerable inherent value, is flanked on the north by the beginnings of the Highlands, with a multitude of places of great beauty close at hand, and this is a great temptation to many naturalists. Initial searches showed that several bodies were all guarding the same items of information and that a comprehensive site data system such as a records centre could provide would be a great advance.

Using aerial photographs, six inch O.S. maps and the habitat maps which had been completed up to that time a search was made to identify all known or suspected sites of biological interest and catalogue them by 10km squares. This was initiated in response to a request from the Strathclyde Regional Planning department who were preparing a structure plan which would show areas of ecological value. (The outcome of this is another story). Previously notified sites were thirteen S.S.S.I.s and seventeen Listed Wildlife Sites (five of which were also S.S.S.I.s). The survey produced sixty-eight sites with some ecological value at least at the local level. Of course some of these sites were of lower quality than required for inclusion under the two schemes above, but this is one of the strong points of a properly organised centre.

Habitat mapping is, I think, an important and early activity to engage in. The handbook gives it a low priority, but there are several points to consider. The maps are a good basic recording tool for visual storage of information. The mapping demands on close look at the recording area which in many cases would not have happened before. Also it is a very good scheme for encouraging participation and interest in the record centre for non-expert naturalists and encourages the adoption of local areas by local people. They can be used to show the fragmented nature of the landscape, how few semi-natural places exist and so on.

We were fortunate in securing a four-person job creation team for a year, who participated in data collection and habitat mapping. With drawbacks like transport problems and bad weather the coverage was limited but we mapped half the county : 247 out of 550 k. m. squares. Portions of the remainder have been allocated to volunteers (local park rangers mostly) and next season should see the bulk of the work done.

I suppose there are many choices of storing site and area information depending on the size of the county, number of known sites and the sophistication of the centre. Here we use a suspension filing system with one space for each 5km. square (6" map). Within each division there is a folder for general area information plus a folder on each known site within the square. Each folder has an attached sheet for recording major items added to that file. A wall chart gives file locations for the sites as well as summarising the information held. A second filing system holds information on a biological-group basis; useful for storing multi-species notes or summaries etc. A third set of files is being developed on a habitat basis which is intended to store information on habitat distribution etc; verge survey work was carried out last year as part of a regional exercise. A semi-natural woodland survey is on the agenda for next year.

The use and usage of the records centre varies with the personality in charge, the local demands in terms of science, education or planning and the degree of development the centre has reached. At the basic level, as mentioned, it is an activity which can be used to encourage greater awareness by the public of their natural surroundings whether anything practical develops or not. Nearly every visitor here gets a demonstration. We have had a few visits from final year school pupils doing sixth year area studies and it presents a useful opportunity to explain by means of the maps and information store how the flora and fauna of that area is structured, and of course the conservation issues pertinent to that area. We have submitted reports to planning department where there has been a nature conservation issue but no major battles have been engaged in so far. Present development confines us at the moment only to the presentation of information: the respect paid to this is no doubt small as yet but it is still early days. At this level there should of course be an active county body which can provide the pressure to have the case heard fully and fairly. I think it is fair to say that this area is less well endowed in that respect than many others, but the record centre is useful in encouraging development in this field by producing the information and highlighting the issues.

The centre has played a useful part in providing biological information to, amongst others, a local firm with landscaping problems (we were able to indicate the value of their marshy factory grounds); to the R. S. P. B. on providing some information about the fauna in one of their reserves and to a local society about the records for a local site.

I do not imagine that this performance is anything special, indeed I am very envious of those other centres which I know do much greater deeds. I am trying to chronicle some of the events which this centre is engaged in at present and to demonstrate how closely they tie in with what museums have or should have been doing for a long time. It enhances the service to the public directly and indirectly. It gives the collections a purpose they have not had since the pins were shiny and new. It gives the museum a chance to participate more fully in the functions of the local authority, thus using its expertise and environmental knowledge.

Our collections, like most other museums, have a considerable cultural and scientific value, and I know that they should be preserved for as long as possible. But if usage is confined to an occasional curious public and even less frequent academic examination then all the curation, space and effort is rather under-rewarded and the collections moulder away slowly (or not so slowly) and become unusable without really having been used. They will need replacement eventually and for most museums the only really justifiable reason for collecting is that of localised specimens for distribution records. This is only worthwhile if the record centre exists to use the data. The best way to have them properly used "for comparative identifications and education" - is to encourage people to have an interest in learning to identify and study, small groups (say woodlice or carabids) - one good motive for these studies in distribution work. So the records centre may finally create a proper role for the collections and we will feel less like caretakers and more like scientists.

I suppose all this means a shift in emphasis for the natural history department, away from the purely display orientated work back to a more scientific role but with a new set of principles to guide our displays. It will mean a narrowing of the gulf between the dual aspects of our work - display and science, which has caused some serious problems in the past, not least being the dual purpose collections - half being only suitable for display, the rest being too small, too boring or not pretty enough! Now we have a new reason to display insects and pressed flowers and even systematic displays because we have got a new interest in their conservation and study.

I hope these notes will have shown that recording is flourishing in Scotland in some way or another. (I found recent letters in BCG newsletter from Glasgow based biologists interesting in this context). I also hope that I have given some re-assurance to other small centres who are struggling to find their way - you are not alone! Perhaps also there may be a note of caution about allowing display-orientated policies to sweep away all the scientific value of our inherited collections widening the gap between museums and the natural history movement - a gap which is too wide already. Recording is a valuable service that museums can do best and will help to bring support and meaning back to the collections and take the collections to the people.

David Mellor,  
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