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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Letter to the Editor

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Source: Locke, S. (1979). Letter to the Editor. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 2 No 2*, 53 - 54.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1668>

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Mr. Davis,

Those responsible for the Human Biology Exhibition at the British Museum (Natural History) must be disappointed with the quality of the criticism which this display has received from their museum colleagues. Dr. Seddon's letter in the last issue of BCG, is a particularly unfortunate example of misplaced criticism and unsubstantiated assertions made about this Exhibition.

Some question the location of the Exhibition, like Tony Duggan (Museums Journal 7882) who believes its relationship with the Natural History Museum "seems almost accidental". A view of natural history which excludes human beings is a strange one indeed. Homo sapiens is of such overwhelming importance on this planet that surely one of the world's great natural history museums is more than justified, it is obliged, to explain its biology. How often must it be repeated that this is only the first step along the road to modernization which the Natural History Museum has chosen? The Ecology Gallery is different enough to demonstrate what the Museum has explained, that they are not committed to a uniform approach to the successive phases of their overall plan. Dr. Seddon's assertion therefore that this Exhibition will set the seal on a widespread deleterious museum policy is far-fetched.

One of the baleful influences Dr. Seddon anticipates "is a tendency to use specimens... as adjuncts to a dominant theme". I find it impossible to visualize the creation of a meaningful exhibition which has not got a dominant theme or themes to which the specimens should properly be subservient. A museum exhibition is a medium of communication which like all communication is better understood for being the more clearly expressed. Others have complained that there are no specimens anyway, or at least no "real specimens" (a point made for example in the discussion about the Exhibition at the Museums Association Conference.) This point is equally groundless. In the field of natural history especially, it is not possible or desirable to exclude representations of living creatures from a satisfactory definition of "display specimen". A stuffed and mounted cheetah and a film of the cheetah hunting are both representations, each illustrating different attributes of the living animal as it exists in nature. To demonstrate human biology many types of representation are needed and in very many cases are the only practical method of communication. After all, the Hall of Human Biology has the unique advantage of having its spectators as specimens.

Dr. Seddon also objects to the requirement to follow a didactic exhibition in a prescribed sequence, a complaint I would expect from someone

who dislikes the concept of thematic displays and is concerned that the creation of such exhibitions "precludes the visitors option to view selectively and his freedom to interpret facts for himself..." But few specimens have the magical property of radiating information unaided. Curators have a fundamental obligations to interpret their collections, and the selection of themes, the choice of specimens and the organization of information, are the techniques we use to fulfill this duty.

The fundamental question to be asked of the Hall of Human Biology is how effectively has it enhanced knowledge of human biology amongst its visitors? Many museum curators ask instead whether it should be there at all, whether displays should be didactic, whether the absence of bits of human body ('real specimens') lessens its value and so on. Even worse, one critic, P. S. Doughty, stooped to gratuitous rudeness when, in his review on "Britain Before Man" a display in a neighbouring national museum (Museums Journal 78.2) he made passing reference to the Hall of Human Biology as "a kind of lewd offal-shop nightmare".

The quality of much criticism ranged against this Exhibition has therefore been unhelpful at best. My own impressions have up to now been based on a rather brief visit, but they were gained in the company of my wife and two young children. It is their reaction, rather than Dr. Seddon's or Mr. Doughty's, that make me believe that the Hall of Human Biology deserves far more intelligent criticism from museum curators than it has received so far.

Yours sincerely,

Stephen Locke
Director
Royal Albert Memorial Museum,
Exeter.

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SLENDER-BILLED CURLEW (*Numenius tenuirostris*)

An attempt is being made to gather together all records of Slender-billed Curlew with the aims of assessing the apparently very small present population size, changes in status and the migration pattern. The information will be reported to the International Waterfowl Research Bureau and ICBP. In order to provide background information on past status and migration patterns we would like to include data