Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Museum Biology Specimens and their Educational Potential

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Source: Scotter, C. N. G. (1979). Museum Biology Specimens and their Educational Potential. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter*, *Vol 2 No 2*, 84 - 85.

URL: http://www.natsca.org/article/1683

MUSEUM BIOLOGY SPECIMENS AND THEIR EDUCATION POTENTIAL

Biology curators are primarily concerned with the careful maintenance of their collections. Furthermore, the potential for increasing their collections is often limited by their sensibilities with regard to the conservation of living things. In spite of these constraints, I contend that biological collections have a unique contribution to make towards engendering peoples' interest in wildlife.

Specimens do not fly or run away and thus present the observer with the unique opportunity to note colours, comparative sizes and textures in his or her own time. A very good mount can even convey a typical posture or frozen movement. With such clear impressions, reinforced by a discussion with the museum Education Officer, Curator or knowledgeable teachers, the chances of recognising creatures in the wild will become much greater, and the interest in them more likely to be maintained.

The temptation to stroke fur and feather is nigh overwhelming and one way to divert attention from mounted specimens is to provide skins which can be handled gently. Fragile insects can be viewed quite satisfactorily without danger of damage, by being pinned to the bases of a clear topped box.

Herbarium specimens, especially those pressed to sheets of paper, present fewer observational advantages over well illustrated texts unless, of course, microscopic examination is required. Nevertheless, fresh collections of flowering plants particularly, sealed to an herbarium sheet with clear film and made accessible to the public in the form of a ring bound volume, would provide a valuable reference source. Mosses, liverworts, lichens and microscopic algae could be treated in a similar manner, although recourse to a microscope or chemicals is necessary at a more advanced level of identification. Air dried fungi are probably more prepossessing than the anonymous grey or brown rubber that pickled specimens change into. Freeze drying, however, greatly increases the value of such specimens for educational demonstrations, although with the fungi, at least, colours become severely faded after some months even when the specimens are kept in the dark.

As an example of the interest shown in biology museum specimens by schools I cite a questionnaire sent to them by the Education Section at Leicestershire Museums. The questionnaire took the form of a list of topics which could be ticked according to the teacher's view of their usefulness or interest when bringing a group of children to the museum.

Over 200 responses were received, mainly from Junior and Infant schools. Seventy-three percent of the respondents, for example

regarded Leicestershire and British birds and mammals as usefully dealt with by the museum, but only 5.5% noted Leicestershire Naturalists as of interest. This last result is somewhat surprising since Leicestershire has spawned such eminent naturalists as Henry Walter Bates and David Attenborough, to name only two of a number that readily spring to mind.

Museum biological collections thus offer a unique potential recognised by many teachers. Having their interests encouraged by, and gaining their knowledge of key features from museum collections and personnel, people can then be encouraged to collect information about wildlife localities and behaviour rather than be encouraged to collect the wildlife itself.

Christopher N. G. Scotter
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STAFFORDSHIRE BIOLOGICAL RECORDS CENTRE

The Staffordshire Biological Records Centre was set up in 1973, following the stimulus provided by a Conference on "Centres for Environmental Records" held under the auspices of the Department of Museum Studies of the University of Leicester and the National Biological Records Centre.

Once the project had been launched data began to come in and past records were ectracted from the literature. The scheme is primarily based on species recording but site data is now being compiled in co-operation with the Staffordshire Nature Conservation Trust. It was our intention from the outset to publish "Atlases" as soon as sufficient data became available. We are quite fortunate in having some extremely knowledgeable naturalists in the county and we have been able to make good use of their talents.

1975 saw the production of our first publication, an "Atlas of the Lepidoptera of Staffordshire, Part 1 Butterflies" with Mr. R. G. Warren the county recorder for this group as its author.

By undertaking the artwork and copy preparation for production by the "offset-Litho" process we were able to keep costs to a minimum. Unfortunately, the machinery in use by the City's Printing and Stationery department was unable to undertake the work and so following the receipt of tenders 300 copies were printed by George St. Press of Stafford for £110.