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Preliminary report of the Seminar held at the Natural History Museum in London on Friday 14th May to consider the implications for museums of the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981).

The Seminar was arranged by the Biology Curators Group and the Museums Association. Three speakers, Dr Colin Harrison of the British Museum (Natural History) at Tring; Dr Mike Hounsome, Keeper of Zoology at Manchester Museum; and Peter Morgan, Keeper of Zoology at the National Museum of Wales had agreed to present short papers on the different aspects of the new Act.

In preparation for the Seminar, the Department of the Environment had prepared a short paper for circulation to delegates together with the leaflet A Guide to the Registration of Sellers of Dead Birds (Feb 1982).

Colin Harrison, speaking particularly about ornithological collections drew attention to the fact that under the new legislation there was an onus on museums to show that they were acquiring collections within the law. This assumed that it was possible to identify beyond question, specimens in the collections. Dr Harrison referred to the problems of marking both eggs and skins and to the fact that although several methods had been tried and others suggested, no completely satisfactory method had been found.

Mike Hounsome considered the implications of the Endangered Species (Import and Export) Act of 1976 which had been amended by the new Act. This had arisen from the British Parliament's endorsement of the Washington CITES Convention of 1973. For those museums which were involved in borrowing specimens from abroad or lending to other countries. it was necessary to obtain individual licences for each lot or for the museum to become registered for this purpose. This would involve checking to see whether any specimens in the projected loan were of the species listed in the Schedules attached to the Act. Museums were also becoming involved in advising Customs Departments on the correct identification of items seized. In some cases items which had been confiscated were subsequently offered to museums.

Peter Morgan considered some of the broader issues and pointed out that whilst it was important for natural history curators in museums to understand the implications of the Act it was also important that museums holding natural history collections but without natural history staff should be made aware of the implications. He suggested that museums should welcome the Act and referring to Peter Raven's address to the ICOM General Conference in Mexico he suggested that museums should be more active in environmental conservation and should work closely with the Nature Conservancy Council and other conservation agencies. He raised several questions on which he felt natural history curators needed guidance. Should museums inform when members of the public have been found to break the law? In what circumstances should museums accept collections knowing that the law has been broken?

The afternoon session was largely devoted to discussion with a short contribution from the Taxidermists Guild. A fuller account of the Seminar will be published at a later date but in the meantime museums with natural history collections should note that Part 1 of the Act is likely to come into force in June 1982. From that date (if it is not already standard practice) museums should be able to show that all specimens added to the collections have been acquired within the law. They should know when a licence is needed and how to obtain one. They should identify any specimens in the collections affected by the Act and should make sure that if they purchase any specimens, the vendor is licensed.

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