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Natural History - The Cinderella Subject in Museums

Recent correspondence in the 'Museums Bulletin' (James, T. (1984), 24(9), p169 and Hancock, E. G. (1985), 24(11), p204) points out that the natural sciences are the cinderella subject of museums. They receive far less in the way of staffing, accommodation and funding and far less publicity within the museum profession, when compared with the 'humanities' such as social and industrial history or fine and applied art.

The reasons for this neglect are complex but we, the natural sciences curators, bear some responsibility for this state of affairs and we can, if we wish, take steps to reverse this trend. In the process we may have to compromise some of our ideals.

The recent upsurge of interest in local and industrial history has had a beneficial impact on museums. The enthusiasts have associated museum collections very closely with their interests and consider them to be relevant and important to their activities. The results of work undertaken by local amateurs, both historical research and practical restoration, have come into museums, and this in turn has prompted more interest by enthusiast and general public alike, eager to view or study the exhibits. This popular interest has, therefore, translated itself into support for museum projects and many new museums have been created as well as the enlargement and improvement of many existing institutions. During the 1970's there was the beginnings of an even greater interest in natural history but, in marked contrast to the situation just outlined, this has not resulted in greater support for natural history in museums. It seems fairly clear that an interest in natural history means an interest in living animals and plants whereas museums are still regarded as being haunted by necrophiliacs interested only in dead material. This is exemplified by the car sticker "Preserve wildlife. Pickle a squirrel." We have managed to miss the boat almost completely and most naturalists do not regard museum natural history as being relevant to their interests.

Part of my responsibilities in operating a biological records centre at Rotherham Museum has been to assist groups or individuals who wish to manage their property in a way which is sympathetic to wildlife. In some cases (e.g. Naturalist Trust reserves) the wildlife interest is paramount, but in other cases (e.g. golf club and fishing club) it is peripheral to the main activity. The initial reaction to my involvement is one of surprise that museums are indeed interested in wildlife before it pegs out as well as afterwards, but once this barrier has been overcome and our interest in the living animals and plants of the locality has been explained then our relevance to local natural history has been understood.

Country Parks have been one of the few growth areas in recent years and the ones in South Yorkshire have initiated ambitious programmes of guided walks for the public, often on natural history topics. They have begun to satisfy the public demand for help in studying our wildlife and their staff are becoming regarded as expert naturalists by their public. We are in danger of being outflanked by these country parks and there is a danger that they, not museums, will be seen in the public eye as the fountain of all knowledge and wisdom. That public includes our political paymasters. I know that many museum-based naturalists are involved with the public education organised by these country parks but our involvement is usually minor, and we may be helping to reinforce the belief that the parks are the organisations which are responsible for studying the local wildlife. If we are to re-establish museums as the local research centres then we need to adopt a much higher profile and spend much more time in leading guided walks, preparing articles for the local press, appearing on local radio and television and giving lectures.

The snag is obvious. The upsurge in interest in displays and education work in the 1970's led to curators neglecting their collections, and there has been a backlash against this recently. We all hoped (and expected) that we would attract additional funding as a result of this demonstration of our value to society, but the results have been very disappointing. A concentration on our educational role in field natural history would cause a similar neglect of our curatorial functions in the short term and the long term benefits would be equally uncertain. However, it may be the only way in which we can compete against other natural history organisations to assert our position within British natural history.

A second reason why the natural sciences are under-resourced relates to monetary values, and in this respect we have lagged far behind our colleagues in other disciplines. The classic dichotomy is between natural history and fine art. If you visit an art and craft shop and wish to purchase a very ordinary picture by a local artist with no reputation you would expect to pay at least £30-£50. A particularly good example would cost ten times that amount, and a painting by a "known" artist would command even more. I maintain that the skill, knowledge and experience involved in putting together a small collection of shells, insects or even birds' eggs (!) is at least as great as that required to arrange a few grammes of pigment on a piece of canvas or paper and yet we, as natural history curators, do not consider them to be of equivalent monetary value. We expect to acquire the life's work of an expert whose skill and knowledge in his own subject far exceeds our own for the equivalent of a few days of our salary. Our fine art colleagues have no such inhibitions. They are willing to pay the equivalent of several years of their own salary to acquire one reasonably interesting object, and when it comes to the product of a master of the craft then the sky is the limit. During the 1984 the following appeals have appeared in the 'Museums Bulletin':-

Earl of Southampton Armour	Tower of London	£367,950
'Crucifixion' ascribed to Duccio	Manchester City Art Galleries	£1,789,800
C18th Silver Travelling Canteen by Ebenezer Oliphant	National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland	£145,000

Not to mention £500,000 for security, maintenance and restoration of Dulwich Picture Gallery and £3,000,000 to move the Courtauld Institute and Galleries to Somerset House.

Can you imagine a natural history curator asking his committee to spend £¼ million on a collection of insects, mounted birds, pressed plants or field notebooks? In one of the earlier BCG Newsletters (Taylor, M.A. (1977) 7,p.33) Mike Taylor drew our attention to an antique dealer in Castleton, Derbyshire, who was selling British shells from last century with full data at £1 to £3 apiece, and the general reaction was one of amazement that such prices could be asked. This attitude on our part undervalues our collections. We may consider their scientific value to be all-important and we may positively shun the monetary value they embody. This is an attitude that is unlikely to be understood by our governing committees or even by senior professionals who come from other disciplines. An object or collection that costs £50 is worth £50, whether it be a mediocre painting or a nationally important collection of insects.

The monetary value of our comparatively miniscule collection in Rotherham was brought home to me several years ago when I had to give an insurance valuation. We have a policy of collecting local material, and it is almost impossible to buy a collection of insects, mammal skins, shells, etc. from a specific locality or from a specific county/district. The only way I could expect to re-establish a local collection in a few years' time was to employ a team to collect, identify, mount and catalogue one from scratch. Immediately the collection becomes worth tens of thousands of pounds. If you have an important collection from New Zealand, Sri Lanka or Hawaii then the replacement cost would be somewhat higher.

At a time of financial restraint it is unrealistic to suggest that we should all insist on paying a commercial rate for our natural history specimens, but we can appraise our committees of their value. A note which tells them that the small collection of butterflies donated by a local naturalist is worth £25,000 will have a much greater impact than one which merely records it as a free gift. If a collection is offered for sale we should not try to beat the vendor down to a ridiculously low figure. If our long-term strategy is to persuade our masters (both political and professional) to rank natural history alongside fine art then we must begin the process of education soon. A request for a small fortune to buy an important collection will probably be turned down, so we must do it gradually by agreeing to pay a fair price. I believe that the only way to increase our purchase funds is to spend them and to prove that we have had to forgo some purchases. An increase in these funds and an increasing appreciation of the monetary value of our collections is the only way to prove that we need additional staff, storage space and equipment.

Bill Ely,
Clifton Park Museum,
Rotherham.

PEST CONTROL IN MUSEUMS : SURVEY

Martyn Linnie has contacted the Editor concerning his post-graduate research project on pest control in museums. Many of you will already have received the questionnaires and I hope that you can find time to complete and return them. If you have not received one write to: M. Linnie, Dept of Zoology, Trinity College, Dublin 2, Ireland, for a free copy(ies).

Perhaps a good response may help us to take a step further towards a pest control strategy which is both effective and acceptable on health and safety grounds.