



<http://www.natsca.org>

Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Review of the Year

Author(s): Davis, P. M.

Source: Davis, P. M. (1986). Review of the Year. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter, Vol 4 No 6*, 118 - 119.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/1199>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.



NEWSLETTER



Vol 4 No 6

Review of the Year

(BCG's contribution to the Specialist Groups Session of the Museums Association's 1986 Conference in Aberdeen. Written and presented by Peter Davis.)

As a founder member of BCG it is difficult to imagine that it was ten years ago that museum biologists took the first tentative steps towards the foundation of their own specialist group. So, instead of a 'Review of the Year' perhaps I should delve deeper into history. However, Graham Swift, in his novel WATERLAND (1), defines history as 'that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account with incomplete knowledge, of actions undertaken with incomplete knowledge; so that it teaches us no short-cuts to Salvation, no recipe for a New World, only the dogged and patient art of making-do'. So I will not bore you with a detailed account of what BCG has achieved, but leave those of you who seek that knowledge to explore for yourselves the cumbersome but precious bag of clues called history which lies within the pages of the group's NEWSLETTER. What a treasure chest - consider some of the titles 'Confessions of a punk naturalist', 'Biologist on the bottle' and 'Biodeterioration' - the latter of interest to all of us in a certain sense.

Briefly, BCG has provided a forum for discussion for museum biologists, an opportunity to bring together and share expertise, experience and concern. Three major threads of activity are evident throughout the last ten years.

First, biological recording - the collection, storage and dissemination of information about the natural environment.

Second, biological collections and their current status.

Third, a liaison and monitoring role which has been a fundamental activity as an awareness of environmental issues and environmental organisations have blossomed.

Major achievements which have resulted from

these activities include the development of a national network for biological recording, now as the 'National Federation for Biological Recording' making a plea for more adequate staffing and funding. On the collections front we have seen the rise of the Federation for Natural Science Collections Research (FENSCORE), the preparation of a national collections database at Manchester, and unprecedented regional co-operation in collections research and rescue. BCG has been responsible for initiating the 'Working Party on Natural Sciences Collections Resources', and we will hear more later from Peter Morgan about the 'WILLIAMS REPORT'.

In spite of these achievements, it seems that natural science, the main reason for the founding of many of our provincial museums, is now regarded as the Cinderella of the profession in terms of adequate funding. For example, in 1986 we see the Natural History Museum, because it is facing financial stringencies, plans to introduce an admission charge, so denying many thousands of visitors, especially children, the opportunity to exposure to arguably the most exciting, certainly the largest view of the natural world, in Britain. The Royal Institution of South Wales Museum in Swansea is threatened to a greater extent by withdrawal of University support. I find it difficult to cite a natural history museum or natural history department which has adequate staffing or funding in relation to its collections and responsibilities. Natural history in museums no longer has the prestige and kudos that for example 'art' enjoys, linked in part to the difficult problem of valuing natural history collections, but also to the lack of understanding, even within the profession, of what the museum naturalist is trying to achieve. The idea that natural history is stuffed birds in glass cases is unfortunately still alive and well. Even in the popularity stakes (if we believe that the Scots are representative of our public) natural science has been toppled by local and social history - 'the hay rakes and flat irons of the dear departed' as Reg Wagstaffe (2) branded that discipline.

In truth, 'local wildlife' was only 1% behind in that particular pole(3). There is an enigma here - isn't it odd, even incomprehensible, that financial support for natural history in museums in Britain is declining at a time when interest in the natural world and the environment is increasing? If we consider that the ultimate reason for having natural history museums and natural history displays is environmental or conservation education - and in this respect natural history is different from all other disciplines in that to be successful it must change attitudes and influence the visitor's subsequent behaviour - then there can never have been a more important and opportune time to put greater resources into natural history museums. Our natural world is disappearing fast - 20 million hectares of rain forest were destroyed in 1985; in spite of a worldwide moratorium 1500 minke whales were killed; famine engulfed much of Africa; the world population grew to 5,000 millions; Chernobyl terrified us - all of which indicates that we still fail to comprehend man's impact on the environment. I don't think that there can be any doubt that education is the key to conservation - especially so in the Third World. Recent work (4) in Tanzania and Rwanda has shown that change in attitudes towards wildlife and wilderness areas can be made by increasing people's awareness; surely this is an area where museums can make an impact. It's easy to be complacent and think ... well, it's not like that in Doncaster, Gosport, or Cardiff, even Aberdeen. But isn't it? The launch of the British Wildlife Appeal this year highlighted the problems closer to home: in the UK an area of prime natural habitat the size of the Lake District has been destroyed since 1949. In the interests of building food-mountains, we have lost 95% of our colourful hay meadows, 60% of heathland and 40% of natural woodlands for more quick profit. So we, in museums, must make people aware of such changes, we must record and monitor what biological resources we have in order to aid their protection; we must develop links with individuals and conservation organisations to promote environmental conservation. There is nothing new in this message, simply that its urgency is greater. In the words of the British Wildlife Appeal - 'tomorrow is too late'.

Naturalists in museums have a vital role to play in conservation, but finding adequate funding for this role is difficult. There is no equivalent of the situation in archaeology where 'rescues' can be funded and additional money made available for conservation of finds. Yes - many 'one-off' biological surveys have been made, or funded by, other conservation organisations - NCC, National Trust, County Trusts etc. But this is not enough - ongoing monitoring of sites is vital.

There are, of course, many success stories in conservation; success stories in which museum biologists and museum collections have played their part. Collections should not be forgotten in the conservation story - often it is necessary to make new collections to assess

a site, collections which must be maintained; it is also necessary to be able to consult well-curated collections to obtain correct identifications. Without correct names on the species, we are likely to reach the wrong conclusions about the significance of a site.

We must not ignore the role of the keepers of natural history - as identifiers, catalysts, recorders and collection managers. Those of you who are directors of museums may sometimes wonder what on earth your biologists are doing, as they give a puncture to insects, drown worms in alcohol and escape into the warm sunshine of a July day muttering 'fieldwork'. You could be forgiven for thinking that these individuals may have come to the same conclusion as the famous ichthyologist Francis Magri Macmahon 'that the study and the company of animals, plants and stones was more interesting, more pleasant and a good deal safer than that of most humans'. However, believe me, all of them recognise the wider remit and responsibilities of the museum biologist, his collections and records; BCG will continue to act as forum and catalyst for them during the next ten years.

P.S. Davis, 21.7.86
Hancock Museum, Newcastle upon Tyne

Notes

1. Swift, G. (1983). *Waterland*. London, Heinemann.
2. Liverpool Conference of the Museums Association, 1970.
3. Public Attitudes to Scottish Museums. SMC Research Series No.1 (1985). Scottish Museums Council, Edinburgh.
4. Harcourt, A.H., Pennington, H. and Weber, A.W. (1986). *Public Attitudes to Wildlife and Conservation in the Third World*. Oryx, 20.

Geoff Stansfield would like to hear from any BCG member who has access to the Cites Identification Manual.

- Vol 1 Mammalia
- Vol 2 Aves
- Vol 3 Amphibia, Reptilia, Pisces
- Vol 4 Parts and Derivatives I
- Vol 5 Parts and Derivatives II

The five volumes are priced at \$250.00 and are available from the Association of Systematics Collections, Kansas.

Geoff Stansfield, Department of Museum Studies, University of Leicester,
152 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7LG
Tel: 0533 523965.