



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

Biology Curators Group Newsletter

Title: Uses of Biological Specimens: a Survey

Author(s): Pettitt, C.

Source: Pettitt, C. (1989). Uses of Biological Specimens: a Survey. *Biology Curators Group Newsletter*, Vol 5 No 1, 1 - 2.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/860>

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 5 No 1

Uses of Biological Specimens: a Survey

In these days of financial stringency 'accountancy thinking' is beginning to pervade all aspects of public life and museums are not exempt from its influence. The Cardiff conference in July 1982 contained several references to the need for us to state clearly the importance of the natural history collections in our charge (Morgan 1986). The use of natural history collections for the basic museum purposes of taxonomic reference, biogeographic voucher and as a source for display are all well established, but perhaps because of their very familiarity tend not to have much force in discussions with county finance officers, bursars, local councillors and other members of management committees, when trying to convince these worthy people that it is worth continuing to expend expensive resources of space and staff, with their attendant overheads, on maintaining the museum's 'reserve' collections of natural history material.

There is a danger that it can be only two short semantic steps from "reserve" to "duplicate" to "surplus" - and therefore either jettisonable, or translatable into CASH. One suggestion, consciously adopted some years ago at Manchester Museum, is for staff never to refer to "reserve" collections, but always to call them "research" or "resource" collections, and always to correct anyone using the former term.

One has only to contemplate the recent sales of material by Chester Museum and Newcastle University and of books by Manchester University, or the involved 'lease-back' agreements arranged by some local councils searching for new ways to raise cash to realise that the scenario adumbrated above is by no means fanciful. Therefore to counter the challenge "Why are we keeping all this stuff?" I believe it would be wise for BCG members to pool our experience and form a source file from which each of us can extract examples of the uses to which natural history collections are known to have been put, examples with which to engage the interest (and hopefully sympathy) of the arbiters of

our fate. Some examples that spring to mind include the story of the Quagga DNA or the eggshell thickness/pesticide saga, and Penny Wheatcroft (1987) recently mentioned others; I feel, however, there must be many more examples known to our members.

At the last AGM in Bolton I volunteered to compile this source file and to see to the dissemination of the information. I expect the information to be of different kinds:

1. Anecdotal information, unusual uses that you have heard about, even if only vaguely; any odd snippet could be of

Uses of biological specimens (1)



Scene at the BCG dinner, 1988:
Derek catches the eye sporting a magnificent Trogonoptera brookiana.
(Thanks to Punch, c.1860)

[Redacted]

value as I may be able to track down firmer information from your clues.

2. Personal knowledge, unusual uses to which material in your collection has been put; if possible give dates, nature of usage and out-turn.
3. Documented instances, an unusual usage that has been documented, albeit perhaps only in correspondence.
4. Published references or reviews. Please send me the citation of any reference to unusual usages that you come across in the literature. Especially valuable would be a note about any review articles, similar to Genoways, H H (1979).

I think information on usage of overseas collections would be equally valuable, so do not restrict yourself to uses of collections in U K institutions. Also usages apparently only of local value should be reported, as they may well turn out to have wider implications.

I intend the project to be continuous so there is no final date for sending information; periodic progress reports will be made in the BCG Newsletter, and once we see the scale and scope of the information submitted the best method(s) of disseminating the information will be discussed with the Committee.

References

Genoways, H H, et al 1979. Systematists, other users and uses of North American collections of recent mammals. MUSEOLOGY No 3. Texas Tech. Univ., Lubbock, Texas.

Morgan, P J, 1986. A NATIONAL PLAN FOR SYSTEMATIC COLLECTIONS? National Museum of Wales/Biology Curators Group, Cardiff.

Wheatcroft, P, 1987. Merely Rubbish. MUSEUMS JOURNAL 87 (3): 133-134.

Charles Pettitt
Manchester Museum
The University
Manchester M13 9PL

[Redacted]



NEW DIRECTOR FOR THE BRITISH MUSEUM (NATURAL HISTORY)

The Board of Trustees, with the approval of the Prime Minister has appointed Dr Neil Robert Chalmers as Director of the Museum, from 2 November 1988.

[Redacted]

Dr Chalmers, aged 46, has been Dean of Science at the Open University for the last three years, and was employed previously as a Senior Lecturer in Biology since joining the University in 1970. His first employment was as a Lecturer in Zoology at Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda from 1966 to 1969 and he was Scientific Director at the National Primate Centre, Nairobi, Kenya from 1969 to 1970. He has a First Class Honours Degree in Zoology from Magdalen College, Oxford, and a PhD in Zoology (Animal Behaviour) from St John's College, Cambridge.

Dr Chalmers emphasizes the astonishing size and richness of the Museum's collections, together with the popularity and educational importance of the Museum's exhibitions to visitors of all ages. "We are a world leader among Natural History Museums. Our work directly benefits science, medicine, agriculture and the natural environment. Our exhibitions will be lively and topical - we aim to educate our visitors while we entertain them."

The Director's appointment is for a fixed term of five years, renewable by agreement between all parties. He is responsible to the Board of Trustees for all aspects of the operation of the Museum, for advising the Board on policy and planning matters, and for ensuring the policies and plans are implemented. The Director is the Accounting Officer for the Museum and is responsible to Parliament for the proper expenditure of public funds voted by Parliament through the Office of Arts and Libraries.

[Redacted]

REFERENDUM RESULTS

The referendum resulting from a motion passed by a majority vote at the 1987 AGM has now been completed and the votes counted as follows:

- I support the policy of the British Museum (Natural History) to charge visitors for entrance to the museum2
- I do not support the above policy53
- Abstentions2

The Committee has, in accordance with the wishes of the 1987 AGM, sought a mandate from the membership which clearly indicates that we should take action. Additional comments on the returned ballot forms are as follows.

What the Membership Says!

"Taxonomic research bears no relationship to the displays built by the display team. Why should school parties fund taxonomic research"

"The introduction of charges for entry to any national museum is deplorable. The statistics of attendance, post-introduction of charges usually indicate a sharp fall in numbers of