Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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after which the agreement lapses. This creates a category of "time-expired" data which are no longer in the public domain. It is intriguing to think that data might be accessed rather like loans of specimens, to be handed back after a specified period, but I can't see how one polices such a system. Most curators agreed that the biggest task was to educate the market to expect charges; in this respect, non-profit organisations are less inclined to accept charges than are commercial concerns, most of whom pass them on to their clients. Computerisation of collections data has led to a notable increase in the levels of requests, as users begin to appreciate the value of information held in databases.

The second major topic of discussion was on conservation concerns, with particular reference to the pro's and con's of deep-freezing. The feeling at the meeting was that the risks of causing cracking of specimens glued directly to paper had been over-stated in a recent article in *Taxon*, and that control of humidity fluctuations during freezing was sufficient to avoid such problems. Double-dip freezing, however, was becoming more common, except where large volumes are handled in walk-in freezers.

There was a short discussion of the latest developments in on-line access to databases. Many American herbaria are linked through INTERNET, a network analogous to JANET, and a number of new services are now freely available for the price of a call. Jane Lowry (New Mexico) maintains a directory of plant taxonomists on-line through BITNET. Missouri Botanical Garden is linked to several members of the Flora of North America editorial committee, giving them access to the TROPICOS database as well as e-mail facilities. The Grey Herbarium Card Index, a new world equivalent to Index Kewensis, has now been entered on computer and will be available from Jim Beach (Harvard) as a completely free downloadable service. This contrasts sharply with Kew's plans for a CD-ROM version of Index Kewensis; alarming rumours were circulating about the prices of the original data and updates.

One of the most valuable aspects of the whole meeting was the chance to discover that one's problems are indeed shared by fellow curators. It was uncanny, indeed, to hear people's experiences of seeking advice from government offices on the application of the CITES regulations; sounds familiar? It is a pity that BCG meetings do not yet attract a high percentage of herbarium curators in Britain, and I hope that this issue might perhaps be tackled soon by way of a special meeting. To make this a practical proposition, I would suggest that herbarium curators should have an informal get-together in Liverpool during the forthcoming conference on "Conservation in the herbarium" on the 14th May, 1993. Contact me for further details.

John Edmondson, National Museum & Galleries on Merseyside, Liverpool Museum, William Brown Street, Liverpool L3 8EN.

World in our Hands

Five years ago the Natural History Department debated ideas for new permanent exhibitions and top of the list was the environment. The next step was to plan it out. I discovered that although previous exhibitions had focused on individual environmental issues no-one had attempted to deal with the problems worldwide. Environmental problems effect us all, where ever we live, and this was the line I wanted to take. But how?

Agonizing over this problem one morning a solution suddenly came to mind. There would be five sections in the exhibition:

(1) *a dramatic introduction* to orientate visitors;

(2) *single species extinctions* showing extinctions through human activities;

(3) *habitat destruction* showing why habitats are more important than single species;

(4) *why wildlife matters* explaining why we need plants and animals for our survival;

(5) *what can be done* describing how environmental problems can be solved.

After a long process of discussion and refinement the plan gradually took shape. We linked up with various outside environmental projects such as the Programme for Belize, which is creating tropical forest reserves and is featured in the exhibition.

Eventually our feasibility study was given the green light and we started to look for sponsorship.

IBM UK Ltd offered to help with computers and the Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund offered to provide up to half the costs. With this help and our own money we moved to the next stage – production.

The team putting the exhibition together grew and with the script finalised we worked out production schedules leading up to the opening day, 27 July.

Months of work are at last producing results – the AV show in the Biodome that introduces the exhibition, the Planet in Peril interactive devices, specimens from giant pandas to butterflies, the Coral Reef display, the reconstruction of dolphins trapped in a net and the touch-screen computer games.

The exhibition offers visitors an opportunity to become better informed about important environmental problems and what can be done to solve them. At the heart of the exhibition is an explanation of how living creatures all over this unique planet contribute to its vital life-support processes. We're confident that 'World In Our Hands' will be a success – come and see it!

Graham Rotheray, Curator Insects, Royal Museum of Scotland. Copied with thanks from 'Museum Reporter' No. 26

Training at Leicester

If the Newsletter is undergoing punctuated equilibrium, perhaps the provision of natural sciences training is the living embodiment of Plate Tectonics? We have seen the subduction of the crusty old MA Diploma, the MTI orogeny and now a northward shift in the British Isles has sent Geoff Stansfield spinning down to the Big Smoke and me to Leicester. Ironically, through all this our BCG/GCG Curatorial Course hotspot, the least institutionalised element in natural sciences training, has remained steadfast. Okay, thats enough of the pretty naff geological analogies but if you will appoint a geologist as Editor!

So how does this affect training at Leicester? That's a good question! As I write this I've hardly got my foot in the door – perhaps it's a bit too early to say. However, changes are already in place which affect the two special subject modules covering the natural sciences. These have now been merged with last year's Science option, a course essentially for those interested in science and technology museums and science centres, taught by Graham Durant of Hunterian Museum and Glasgow Dome of Discovery fame. Strangely, the merger mirrors that taking place in Glasgow Museums hinted at in recent issues of BCG Newsletter.

The new Sciences option will obviously place some constraints on teaching but I'd don't believe natural scientists should be overly concerned. Museum scientists do share a lot in common, particularly in trying to communicate their science to others, and there is much that can be learnt from developments in each discipline – after all the Natural History Museum was one of the first in Britain to adopt science centre technology (but that's another story!). One thing is certain, the Department is not going to produce a new cross-breed of curator – a sort of green techno-scientist; it will continue to supply curators in the traditional museum disciplines. The merger reflects the shortage of scientists wanting to be trained for a career in museums compared to the overwhelming numbers of historians and archaeologists. This is one area that perhaps BCG and GCG should be concerned about; how many of us saw museums as a possible career when we were undergraduates? I know I didn't.

Leicester's strength has always been in allowing curators and others to escape from the frontline of museum work, to examine broader issues, new techniques and developments. I don't see that role changing. Obviously with my background and interests, collections are going to remain the central thrust of training; the next generation of curators must not only be informed about standard techniques but also equipped to deal with neglect and sell the natural sciences to masters who may not be informed of their potential; the ethos of BCG and GCG. That's the aim anyway! The first courses will give equal weight to biology, geology and science but the next few years will