



**NatSCA**

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

## The Biology Curator

---

Title: Slaying the Sacred Cow

Author(s): Baird, W. J.

Source: Baird, W. J. (1995). Slaying the Sacred Cow. *The Biology Curator*, Issue 3, 6.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/522>

---

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.

The *Geological Curators' Group* supports the work of those responsible for the hands-on care of collections, and seeks to advance their training and proficiency. We aim to set standards for curation and encourage their proper implementation. We alert the authorities at all levels to their responsibilities to collections and curators as well as to the science of geology itself. We actively seek to publicise and popularise the science and encourage only responsible and useful collection.

The *Geological Curator* is the the Group's journal. It contains articles concerning all areas of interest for Group Members; historical articles, techniques of conservation, preparation and display, reports of meetings, as well as reviews and news. The *Lost and Found* column is an invaluable aid for the exchange of information on collections.

*Coprolite* is the newsletter of the Group and complements the *Geological Curator*. Published three times a year, it contains up-to-date news of meetings, people, exhibitions and events.

Membership of the *Geological Curators' Group* is open to anyone interested in geology, and will be of particular interest to individuals or organisations responsible for the care of geological collections, the interpretation of geological specimens or sites, as well as historians of geology.

For further details please contact the GCG Secretary  
c/o Geological Society of London  
Burlington House  
Piccadilly, London W2V 0JU

### The Group for Directors in Museums

### The Systematics Association

The Systematics Association was founded in 1937 as the "Committee on Systematics in Relation to General Biology and Evolution" to provide a forum for discussion of the general, theoretical and practical problems of taxonomy. Its first publication, *The New Systematics (1940)*, edited by Sir Julian Huxley, has since become a classic.

Since then, the Association has pioneered discussions on many new developments in biosystematics. The Special Volume series, developed from symposia organised by the Association, have been among the first in their respective fields to assess the implications of advances in the subject. Several symposia are organized each year by members of the Association. Topics covered have included chemotaxonomy, scanning electron microscopy, data processing, biological identification with computers, molecular biology, and the biosystematics and evolution of particular groups. *For further information contact: Z. Lawrence, International Mycological Institute, Bakeham Lane, Egham, Surrey TW20 9TY, UK.*

### ABSTRACTS OF PROPOSED ORAL PRESENTATIONS.

#### SLAYING THE SACRED COW.

*W.J. Baird, Geology Department, Royal Museum of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh EH1 1JF*

The proposal for this Conference posed a question:- "*It is often said that natural science collections are under valued (in all senses of the word) when compared with humanities based collections, particularly those of fine art objects*". Is this true? Unfortunately I consider that it is at least partially true when applied to science based collections and that we have only ourselves to blame. I believe that if we wish to be treated on the same footing as the humanities based collections we must become more rigorous in our collection policies and disciplines.

Collecting and storing objects is taken to extremes by humans and has been described as "the passionate pastime". With very few exceptions no collector wishes to be known as a collector of anything and everything. I know of few who through choice collect just anything and everything - broken, complete, incomplete, labelled, unlabelled. Such collections, stored in indifferent conditions, outdoors and indoors, uncatalogued and uncared for, do exist; they are known as junk shops. It is my opinion, and mainly for historical reasons, that in some areas of their collections certain National Museums are on their way to becoming little more than junk shops.

Most curators are by their very nature acquisitive collectors and by the limitations set upon us by lack of staff and storage space we are fast becoming simply hoarders of unclassified accumulations of objects. We continually add to our collections but we are not in the main upgrading these collections, leading to inadequate storage, inaccessible and badly curated material and conservation facilities become severely overstretched. I have so far not even raised the matter of what it costs to store and conserve specimens, but specimen housing is costly and has to be considered.

We have to be prepared to deaccession, within the framework of individual institutions' collections policies, material that has little or no scientific value. I believe there is no major collection which would not benefit from careful, considered pruning as part of a national policy of upgrading and rationalisation. The benefits of such a process would be considerable; savings in valuable storage space, improved curator moral, lower market prices for the standard level of museum objects [the price of the very top of the range acquisitions I would expect to remain high], better classified, conserved and more accessible collections. By using modern information storage facilities it is still possible to keep a lot of information about items even if they are not physically retained in an institution.

It is time the museum world came to its senses and put its house in order, decided sensible collecting policies and kept to them, put forward some accession ideals for the future and meant them. Perhaps under those circumstances governments could be encouraged to give us the increased funding and staff we will require in the short term to sort out the mess we have got ourselves into.