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Committee report

BCG committee met on 20.1.97. The meeting was attended by Stephen Blackmore, Chair of the Systematics Forum, and Val Bott, Deputy Director, MGC, and nine committee members. There should have been ten but someone preferred London to Oxford.

Stephen Blackmore gave a brief summary of the Systematics Forum, outlining its background and purpose. It had been set up to develop a strategy with regards to systematics research in the UK, though beyond this the brief is very open ended. It will be for the Forum itself to decide what form of strategy to put forward and what it should cover. It is not expected that it will be a strategy for collections, but the role of collections in systematics research, and their needs will be addressed. Since this activity has been set off by central government and not the museums profession, it is clear that there is potentially a range of useful opportunities being presented. Ideas to your local committee member.

Val Bott gave an outline of the role of MGC in the care of collections, MGCs current activities and her own particular role. MGC will be continuing in its three principle roles of advice, guidelines and advocacy, and are dealing with issues raised in the governments review of the museums world, such as the designation scheme for museums, the AMC review, collaboration between nationals and non-nationals, transfer of museums to trust status, training issues and international relations. MGC has no scientists on its staff and Val will be grateful for good feedback on the issues facing the natural sciences community. She will be seeking to collaborate more closely with groups such as ourselves.

Collections at risk revealed an increasingly gloomy situation. Bristol, Leicester and Passmore Edwards still give considerable cause for concern and we are continuing in our efforts to make the relevant authorities aware of the needs and value of their collections. The situation at Manchester is unknown and it is not clear how Bill Pettitt's vacancy is to be dealt with. At Glasgow, the situation has been made very public but is currently at a standstill, and so it is not clear what result will ensue.

The collections at risk action pack was discussed and the revised form of the policy statement was approved. The various activities decided upon at the last working party meeting were in progress and members would have the opportunity to comment on the results as soon as they were available. However, Mike Palmer has done a great deal of work on this project and we are hopeful that this will result in a significant contribution towards the care of natural history collections in this country.

A brief report on orphan collections was given outlining the present situation. The report and a short accompanying article is printed elsewhere in this issue.

Organisation of the 1997 AGM is proceeding well. There will be a good range of papers, the meeting is being well supported by the NMW and we hope will be well attended by the membership.

The MA Conference session, on the decline of the specialist curator, seems to be very timely, and should be

related to the kinds of events that we are expecting over the next couple of years. A meeting of BCG, GCG and SMA representatives will be organised when all three groups have had their committee meetings, ie. after the end of January.

The next European meeting is hoped to be to Vienna, and some external support will be sought as it is likely to be more than twice the cost of recent trips. Attendance on this trip, as on past trips, is not likely to be confined to BCG members.

The next committee meeting is to be on 5.5.97

Steve Thompson

The BCG/GCG orphan collections working party report

Following this short article is the above mentioned report. It has purposely been kept short, the main part being only three pages long, in order to enable it to be quickly read and understood. This has meant, however, that a great deal covered in the preliminary discussions has had to be left out. I would therefore, like to give some idea of the background to the report.

The report outlines the present situation with regards to those natural science collections that do not, at present, have specialist curators to look after them. There are a range of issues that are directly related to any action that may be carried out on these collections. These include details of the possible courses of action open to institutions, details of an overall strategy, the implications for institutions with such collections, timescales over which work may be carried out, which organisations or types of organisation may need to be involved and, of course, the costs of carrying out the work. As our aim at this stage was simply to state the problem, we felt that these issues should not be included in this report.

As part of the work carried out, two seminars were organised. The first of these was held at the 1994 Museums Association (MA) conference, one result of which was the production of the report itself. The second was held at the 1996 MA conference, and presented the final draft of this report. This was, at least in part, to gauge the reaction to the subject and the report. The result was most encouraging, particularly because of the range of people who attended the seminar and because of the lively discussion that took place in the second half. Although organised by two natural sciences groups (the Biology and Geology Curators Groups), both the attendance and the discussion were marked by a strong, even dominant, presence of non-natural scientists, who furthermore included senior museum and area council personnel. It seems clear that there was a great deal of interest, both in the value of this work to all museum disciplines, as was intended, and in the possibility of a practical strategy to deal with what generally seems to be a ubiquitous and intractable problem in museums.

The next step following publication of the report should be to put together a working party who are able to examine all of the above issues and create a strategy that will address the problems of orphan collections. This will need to include