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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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## NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS - A CASE FOR 'ROVING' CURATORS

Peter Morgan, Keeper of Vertebrate Zoology, Merseyside County Museums

The deteriorating state of many biological collections, frequently associated with inadequate storage has come to be fully recognised in recent years. In most cases too little money, staff-time or space have been allocated to deal with the problem. The extension of the traditional role of the curator to include that of data recorder and coordinator, although vitally necessary, leads to difficulties over the allocation of staff time and resources. General curatorial duties and especially research into the history of collections, nearly always receives a low priority.

Mounted bird collections illustrate well the problems to be faced and suggest a possible way in which they might be overcome. In an attempt to stimulate the use of collections, Stansfield (1956) published details of a bird study skin survey. A wealth of material and data also exists, however, in mounted bird collections, a very underworked field. Most museums have, at some time, been presented with such material as a collection or in individual cases. The older collections are most important and it must be remembered that at that time, little distinction was made between scientific study or display. Indeed, the more important the specimen, the more likely it was to be mounted for display. Important scientific specimens would now be made into study skins but older material may be in the form of fading and 'tatty' specimens which on the face of it have little or no useful purpose.

Many museums have 'rationalised' their collections, an increasing trend resulting from the strong commitment to local areas and faunas. Foreign material especially, has, and is being sold, given away or destroyed, isolating it from any relevant data (often stored in forgotten archives or old stock books). Too often old mounted material is appraised for its educational and display potential, the scientific value which is just as important now if not more so than formerly, being overlooked. How many Cook specimens are extant, and how many have been destroyed? Old, faded or 'tatty' specimens must be checked very carefully, but where is the expertise to cope with the volume of work involved? Where does the responsibility for these collections lie, beyond the immediate scope of the institution housing them? Nobody appears willing to accept responsibility for checking and coordinating the data from these collections. The national museums, especially the B.M. (Nat. Hist.) appears fully committed elsewhere. Other museums, including the larger provincial museums do not all have the relevant specialists or travel facilities to undertake this function and the Area Services are concentrated on the preparation of new material. Perhaps one should question whether the latter would be necessary if a comprehensive list of extant material were available and if museums had a more open transfer policy.

What is needed is a formal system to ensure that all collections and collectors are well documented, enabling the curator to fulfil his/her obligation to their institution and to the scientific world. IRGMA may assist with this but where is the high input time and the relevant expertise? How will the small museum curator, already overworked cope with demands from all sides? It becomes obvious that IRGMA will function more efficiently if the cards are completed by specialists. Surely it is preferable that the person compiling the data be familiar with the material than have someone attempt to decipher the 'polyglot' output when it reaches the computer. The classified identifications pose the main problems with many names having been used for the same species over the past century, most of them appearing somewhere on museum labels.

As an interdisciplinary locality index, the IRGMA system may work well, but for a small branch of natural history, such as birds, the inter museum indexes will need a separate programme to fully analyse the data. If the input is prepared by specialists the data should be compatible, and the researcher's task will be easier. At the present time collections are neglected and both museums and IRGMA need specialists. Central government is the only possible source of money on a formal basis and the niche for this specialist surely lies with the Area Services. Why cannot they and the Biological Curators Group work out an integrated plan for the appointment of specialist 'academic' curators who would work on the collections of a region? Their appointments could be full-time or on contract. It is no use arguing that nobody would want such posts, names of people in each discipline can be supplied if necessary. Collections can not be conserved until they are known to exist. When their importance has been established, priority for conservation work will be higher.

This system has been used once to my knowledge to catalogue a mollusc collection and similar proposals are being considered in Scotland. It is essential however that such developments be coordinated on a national as well as a regional basis. The British Museum (Natural History) and other national museums may not have the expertise to spare for the actual task of checking and cataloguing but their help in drafting a plan could be invaluable. It could also form a concrete link between national and provincial museums thus strengthening the informal personal contacts which exist at present. National museums might then take more interest in the hidden collections and the problems of the provinces. The 'roving' curators would form a link between the two systematically sorting through the collections of each museum whilst producing indexes for IRGMA if required. Complaints that the task is too large only serve to show the scale of past neglect and the urgency of the situation. Mounted birds are only one example and it must be realised that as Mayr states :- 'Dissent and controversy will inevitably result if specialists in one group of organisms are oblivious to the needs of specialists in other groups'.

The problem of neglected collections and loss of data is common throughout the biological world and the BCG is ideally placed to ascertain the scale of the problem and to suggest methods of dealing with it. It must be stated that all opinions expressed here are my own and not necessarily those of the institution in which I work.

#### References.

Stansfield, G. 'Bird Skin Collections and Local Museums' Bird Study 12 ii (1965) 129-132

#### FUND FOR THE PRESERVATION OF TECHNOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC MATERIAL

J. C. Robinson, Assistant Keeper at the Science Museum, South Kensington, London SW7 2DD (Tel 01-589 6371 Ext 414) would like to draw the attention of members of the Group to the availability of grants from the above fund for the acquisition of specimens in the natural sciences including both biological and geological material. A leaflet giving details about the Fund and the procedure for applications is available from Mr. Robinson.