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## Biology Curators Group

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Conservation - Report by a Working Party  
Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries, 1980

Comments prepared by the Biology Curators Group on references in the above report to natural history collections and particularly to paras 11.1 - 11.8

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Comments on references to natural history collections and particularly to paras 11.1 - 11.8.

The report states that evidence on the conservation of natural history collections was taken mainly from the British Museum (Natural History). We regret that evidence was not also sought from the Biology Curators Group and that our request to be given the opportunity to comment (28 July) could not be met. We also regret that comments made by the Group in August 1979 on Framework for a System for Museums and Galleries (HMSO, 1978) were not taken into account.

The present report, whilst highlighting some important issues does tend to present a generally satisfactory position when we feel that the reverse is in fact the case.

Para 11.1 indicates that the working party found two problem areas; a) the conservation of large mammals and b) the conservation of geological collections. The BCG agrees that both these areas are cause for concern, but feels that the conservation of large mammals is a relatively minor problem and that there are many areas where biological collections are equally if not more urgently in need of attention.

We feel that insufficient distinction is made in the report between material preserved for exhibition and education, and material preserved for scientific use. Natural history collections differ from other kinds of collections in that in many instances a decision must be made as to whether an object is to be preserved for scientific study or for exhibition. The preservation techniques employed will differ according to this decision and in many instances the mounting of a specimen for exhibition will destroy or severely reduce its scientific value and such specimens are seen to have a limited life and to be replaceable. It is true that, in the past, scientifically important specimens have been mounted for exhibition and in situations where this situation cannot be changed (where a mounted bird cannot be relaxed into a study skin) special precautions will need to be taken to ensure the long term preservation of the specimen.

Taxidermy is only one aspect of the conservation of biological specimens in museums. It is largely concerned with display material which forms only a minor part of the collections. Further, legal and ethical considerations of wildlife conservation make it difficult to see a significant role in the future for the presentation of large animals. However, for those large animals which do become available from zoos and other sources, it is important that the skills of taxidermy are preserved and available to the museums.

Paras 11.2 and 11.4 indicate the scientific basis for the conservation of most natural history collections. The BCG would submit that a similar situation in respect of the neglect of biological collections exists to that of geological collections for which the Geological Curators Group have provided detailed evidence. The BCG feels that the working party have underestimated the problem and whilst pointing out that scientific staff need technical support, fails to point out that such support rarely exists. The BCG would question whether adequate support staff are available in the national institutions listed.

The BCG would also wish to make the point that there is need for much more experimentation and research into preservation methods. We would particularly draw attention to the manuscript of A selective bibliography on preservation, macro and micro techniques in zoology prepared by Reg Harris, formerly of the British Museum (Natural History) and which neither the Museum nor the Museums Association have been able to find the resources to publish. Traditional preservation methods are constantly being affected by considerations of safety and there is a need to develop new and safe preservatives. This is particularly true in the field of fumigation where there are no generally accepted procedures.

The BCG would therefore wish to reiterate the remarks which it made in 1979 that conservation problems can best be solved by first tackling the underlying academic difficulties of discovering more precisely the extent and value of collections and making an objective assessment of their conservation needs. When the extent of the problem has been ascertained, it is essential that staff skilled in the conservation of scientific specimens be appointed to undertake the work.

Such staff should be quite distinct from taxidermists and might be designated biological preparators or conservators. There is clearly a need for such appointments, especially in the larger museums.

As far as Area Councils are concerned, we see the need for peripatetic natural history curators with special knowledge of particular types of collections. Such curators should be available to advise museums which do not have the requisite expertise to look after their collections. Whether specialist curators of this kind could be recruited by short term secondment from existing museum needs to be further explored.

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Biology Curators Group