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LIAISON BETWEEN NERC AND THE BIOLOGY AND GEOLOGICAL CURATORS GROUPS

REPORT OF MEETING HELD AT BRITISH MUSEUM (NATURAL HISTORY) ON 11 JUNE 1981

Present: NERC	Mr J D D Smith (HQ)
	Mr M G Morris (ITE)
	Mr F W Dunning (Curator, Geological Museum, IGS)
	Dr W H C Ramsbottom (Chief Palaeontologist, IGS)
	Mr H J Killick (HQ)
Biology Curators Group	Mr E F Greenwood
	Dr M V Hounsome
Geology Curators Group	Dr C H C Brunton
	Dr R Clements
	Dr H S Torrens

1. OBJECTIVE OF MEETING - The meeting had been requested by the two Curators Groups who wished to follow up some of the recommendations in the report of the ABRC Working Party on Taxonomy. They wished to know more about NERC policy for the preservation of collections of specimens as a first stage in developing a more effective policy in this area.
2. CURATION OF COLLECTIONS - Public money is awarded in the form of NERC research grants and research studentships and many of the projects thus supported result in the collection of valuable material, but this is not always adequately curated. The Curators Groups considered that it was important to ensure that potentially valuable material was adequately curated and documented by research staff or students. Those university departments which make it a condition of the award of a PhD that the research student curates his collection satisfactorily were to be commended.

It would be desirable to draw to the attention of universities the need for adequate training for students in curatorial methods. This should be introduced at the undergraduate level and form a significant part of postgraduate training where collections are made. In addition, it could be introduced into those MSc courses where the collection of specimens is relevant.

These points should be drawn to the attention of university departments, perhaps through committees of heads of departments such as the Committee of Heads of University Geology Departments.

It would be helpful if museum curators drew up a code of practice for the curation of specimens and for this to be widely circulated.

3. PRESERVATION OF SPECIMENS - Even where specimens are adequately curated there are often no facilities for permanent preservation in circumstances where the collections can be made available for study by others. Some universities have museum facilities but the staffing of these may be at risk following cuts in university funding.

It was suggested that NERC should take action to ensure that university research workers supported on research grants or research studentships ensure the permanent preservation of collections where their importance justifies this. Except in those cases where the university has adequate museum facilities such collections should be offered to local or national museums. This would result in increased offers of collections to museums and any such action would need to be undertaken in liaison with the Curators Groups. Museums would need to be selective in their acquisitions and in the length of retention. They would also need to ensure that indexes and catalogues of collections were published. It would be helpful if museum curators could identify and nominate museums with special strengths in particular groups.

Even if NERC was unwilling to make it a condition of an award that such steps should be taken, it should strongly encourage university research workers to take this line of action.

4. NERC INSTITUTES - The Geological Museum, within the Institute of Geological Sciences, is the only public museum within NERC. Although its policy for accession of specimens is firmly based, it would be worth considering whether there was scope for a more positive policy in relation to collections acquired by university workers supported on NERC research grants or research studentships.

In the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology (ITE) the distinction could be drawn between ecological collections and collections built up for taxonomic or identification purposes. ITE could not afford extensive unified curation and many of the large ecological collections would probably not be retained in the long-term. ITE could be invited to formulate a policy for curation and preservation of specimens and this policy might be of value to other NERC institutes.

5. PUBLICITY - Greater awareness of the importance of curation and preservation of collections is crucial. An article in the NERC Newsjournal would assist in achieving this awareness.

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 has now been published. It can be obtained from Leicester University Bookshop, price £6.35, who have it in stock.