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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

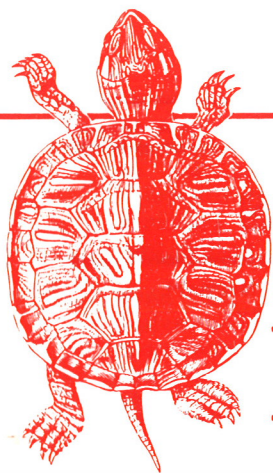
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NEWSLETTER



Vol 4 No 7

BCG Aims and Objectives

Our aims and objectives - expanded and reaffirmed.

When the Group was formed in 1975 the following terms of reference were agreed:-

'To facilitate the exchange of information between individuals concerned with collections of specimens and records, their conservation and interpretation.'

'To present the views of biological curators to the Museums Association and to other bodies.'

After ten years, the time has come for the Group to reaffirm its primary objectives but it is now appropriate to be more specific. The above could be elaborated on the following lines:-

- 1 To encourage research and the dissemination of information on the care, maintenance, ordering, documentation and interpretation of biological collections.
- 2 To take action to make biological collections in museums more widely known and available to those who need to carry out research.
- 3 To work towards a Code of Practice for the curators of biological collections to include: standards of documentation, policies on type and voucher specimens, research, access to and disposal of collections, and the legal and ethical aspects of all forms of acquisition (including field collection).
- 4 To take appropriate action to safeguard biological collections in Britain by encouraging surveys of collections, and by seeking the support of the Museums Association, the Museums and Galleries Commission and the Area Museum Services. Also to explore ways of obtaining additional resources for natural history conservation.
- 5 To liaise with the biological collections user community to ensure the most effective use and care of collections.

6 to encourage the setting up of Biological Record Centres in co-operation with the Federation for Biological Recording and to move towards the acceptance of defined standards. Also to seek additional resources in terms of finance and manpower for survey and recording.

7 To seek to improve natural history exhibitions by encouraging the exchange of information, critical reviews and evaluation.

8 To review and to seek to improve the ways in which natural history museums provide a service to the community including their role in disseminating information about the natural environment in conservation education.

9 To promote advances in the display and maintenance of living museum collections (zoological and botanical). In the case of live animals, to conform with the Secretary of State's standards for zoo licensing which require a high level of husbandry and which emphasise the role of licensed establishments in recreation, education, scientific study and conservation (captive breeding).

10 To improve the status of natural history museums and natural history departments in museums.

11 To ensure that biological collections in museums with no specialist staff and biological collections held by other institutions are recorded and their condition monitored periodically by professional biological curators.

12 To press for more facilities for the training of natural history curators and this to have a strong practical element. To seek the support of the Museums Association in this.

13 To liaise with other Groups and Bodies with similar aims, both within the UK and abroad, in order to establish a framework for information exchange and establish joint promotional strategies on issues of common concern.

To achieve the above we need to set some targets:

- 1 To aim to persuade all practising natural history departments to become members of the Group, (i.e. to launch a membership campaign).
- 2 To use the Collections Survey Report as the basis for BCG statements on the care of systematics collections including recommendations for appropriate action and to lobby those organisations who are in a position to implement the recommendations.
- 3 To formulate plans for a 'Guide to Curatorial Practice for Zoological and Botanical Collections' on the lines of the GCG Manual.
- 4 To prepare a programme of seminars (at least one per year) and associated publications to achieve the above.
- 5 To press for specialist natural history curatorial training courses to become part of the Museums Association Diploma training, to be run by the Group with full Association support.
- 6 To continue to improve the Group's publications and to seek their acceptance by the scientific and museological communities as essential sources of informed opinion and information relating to all matters involving biological sciences in museums.
- 7 To campaign for more biology curators and conservators to be employed in permanent posts, particularly in museums without specialist staff.

G. Stansfield, John Mathias, Gordon Reid
June 1987

BCG Curatorial Training Course

Only one person expressed an interest in the proposed course for 1987, so the committee have decided to POSTPONE THE COURSE TO 17 - 21 OCTOBER 1988. Once again we have booked Losehill Hall in the beautiful setting of the Peak District National Park, within easy reach of Manchester, Liverpool, Bolton, Buxton, Derby and Sheffield museums and with suitable localities for fieldwork. The course will be aimed at Museums Association Diploma students (for example, there will be a mock practical) but will also be suitable for the mid-term curator as a refresher course, and the non-specialist curator. Once again the price will be 'bargain basement', hopefully less than £100, covering full-board accommodation at a delightful field centre, with excellent food and facilities. Please make a note in your diary now, and look out for further details in forthcoming Newsletters.

Derek Whiteley
Sheffield Museum

Exhibitions

The Live Animal Displays at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Coventry

Historical background

Like most live animal displays in museums in Britain, that at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum started life as a series of aquaria housing native freshwater fish. It consisted of thirteen glass and angle-iron aquaria, six measuring 120 x 45 x 45 cm and seven measuring 75 x 38 x 38 cm. These were installed in the late 1960's.

When the author started work at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in April 1979, the emphasis of the display had shifted slightly to include native species of reptile and amphibian, and small mammals and stick insects in addition to the fish. The display cages (which at the time of my appointment were apparently the original angle-iron aquaria!) were replaced during the summer of 1979 by "all-glass" aquaria (six 120 x 45 x 50 cm and seven 75 x 40 x 40 cm).

Between 1979 and July 1981 the live animal display was further diversified to include exotic reptiles and amphibians, tropical fish and foreign invertebrates. Animals were selected which exhibited special adaptations for movement within their chosen environment, in readiness for the opening of the new permanent exhibition "Animal Movement" which opened on July 1st 1981, and of which the live animal display was designed to be an integral part.

The problems of maintaining a successful live display in small vivaria were familiar to the author, and plans to redesign completely the vivarium section were commenced in 1981, and implemented in January 1984. For those contemplating changing their aquaria into vivaria, the following possible pitfalls should be borne in mind:

- 1 It is virtually impossible to create a realistic looking and interesting habitat within a small vivarium.
- 2 All glass vivaria can cause condensation problems; for many reptiles dry conditions are vital for healthy survival.
- 3 Small vivaria impose considerable limitations on the size of animal which can be kept. With lizards, this has far-reaching implications. Small lizards are extremely vulnerable to predation in the wild. To combat this problem they are normally (a) nocturnal or crepuscular or (b) extremely secretive and retiring or (c) cryptically (usually drably!) coloured. Although there are exceptions, the majority of small lizards make poor display specimens in terms of arousing public interest.