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## Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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1987 At the time of writing (13 February 1987) we have a further egg of the Cuban Knight Anole incubating. We are hoping that utilisation of "black light" during 1987 may cure the "dead in shell syndrome" problems we have experienced with both this species and *Basiliscus vittatus*.

1 Red-eared terrapin successfully hatched.

4 "red ear" eggs in the incubator  
6 eggs of the Thai Water Dragon *Physignathus concincinus* in the incubator.

#### References

- Reid, G.M. "The Zoo Licensing Act, 1981 : Implications for Museums with Live Animal Displays". Biology Curators Group Newsletter 3 pt.10 (October 1984).  
Wright, A. "Museum Livestock Collections - Licensing or Exemption!" Biology Curators Group Newsletter 4 pt.3 (October 1985).

#### Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Alan Robinson, Design and Display Officer at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum for the design of the whole gallery and to Chris Palmer, Keeper of Natural History for helping me with the practicalities of establishing the new vivarium. Thanks also to Penny Wheatcroft, my predecessor as Senior Keeper, Natural History at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, who originated the concept of the Animal Movement display. Had she not chosen this topic for the permanent exhibition, the need for the new vivarium would not have been nearly so pressing.

Adam Wright  
Senior Keeper Natural History  
Herbert Art Gallery and Museum  
Jordan Well  
Coventry CV1 5RW.

Peter Lambley was until recently the Keeper of Biology at the Castle Museum in Norwich. He now works in the Natural Sciences Resources Centre at the University of Papua New Guinea. He sent this description of a recent family visit to the Queensland Museum.

#### The Queensland Museum

Australian museums generally set high standards in displays, research and publications. I was therefore very interested to visit the Queensland Museum which reopened last October in a new purpose-built building which forms part of the Queensland Cultural Centre Complex. My visit was in January during a family holiday and I only had time to sample the public exhibition galleries. Nevertheless my short visit convinced me that this is indeed a major event in the museum world and deserves to be widely known outside Australia.

The Queensland Museum was founded in 1862 in Brisbane and had a number of homes before moving to its new site in 1986. It is part of a Centre which also includes a magnificent art gallery, a performing arts complex and the State Library and is situated on the south bank of the Brisbane River just across from the main shopping centre. The museum building occupies 18,000 square metres and includes three floors of displays with twelve main rooms, each covering a specific topic.

The main subject areas covered in the displays are biology, geology, ethnography, science and technology and social science. The building is spacious, clean, air conditioned and carpeted and this produces a pleasant atmosphere in which to view the displays. Escalators link the three floors and provide a relief from museum fatigue. There is ample parking in an adjacent multi-story car park and the museum cafeteria is good. There is no charge for admission except to a special exhibition which was on at the time of our visit.

The style of the displays is a marriage of some long tried successful techniques, for example dioramas, with open displays coupled with the use of computers and audiovisual methods. The standard of presentation is high and I liked the uncluttered style of text which made it easy to assimilate the important points. Some of the techniques owe something to those used at the Natural History Museum in London, but there is a greater use of dioramas and specimens are more in evidence. Resin moulding has been used to great effect in a number of very realistic dioramas on such diverse subjects as termite mounds, rain forest trees and a fossil reptile in situ.

I did find the arrangement of the various rooms to be rather confusing; for instance on the ground floor you move from a display on images to one on fish followed by displays on underwater archaeology and transport. I suspect that this is perhaps inevitable when the Museum's policy is to change half the displays every five years. This rather confusing layout did not seem to bother my children who I think enjoyed the sense of discovery that this created.

The first floor reached by escalator has an engine room with working models of steam and combustion engines and a very enjoyable demonstration of various types of levers. Set in the middle of the next room are two resin casts of termite mounds, while the walls of the room are lined with a photo montage of a grassland landscape dominated by termite mounds. A feature of these mounds is that they are always aligned north-south and the visitor is provoked into thinking of possible explanations. A very successful demonstration of population dynamics is provided by the display titled "Feast and Famine". This follows the cycle of events after the ending of a drought near Birdsville in central-west Queensland, in particular the growth of a native rat plague and its

subsequent population crash. The effects are illustrated in a series of five large dioramas. It is pleasing to see dioramas used in this way, when there must have been a temptation to use computers, graphics and photographs instead. The result is that the points are well made without recourse to long paragraphs of text.

The interdependence of an aboriginal people, the Jirrbal, who live in rain forest in northern Queensland and their environment is the subject of a set of dioramas which again use resin moulding techniques to good effect. They are designed so that you feel you are walking through rain forest, though there are no live leeches or mosquitos to give that final touch of authenticity! In contrast the arid side of Australia is shown in the next display which sets three species of kangaroo in a semi-desert habitat. Instead of giving a general account on the three species the display demonstrates the problems of separating the three species in the field. Having seen two of the species in the wild I can testify that it is not easy. Also on this floor is a reference area where many examples of the fauna of the Brisbane area are displayed in taxonomic order. Minerals, aboriginal artefacts and applied art are also set out in the room so that visitors can identify many things for themselves. There is also a reference desk which is staffed and there is a library for further information. To judge by the number of people in this room it is a very popular facility.

On the third floor there are displays of Queensland in the Cretaceous, with examples of some of the spectacular dinosaur and other reptilian finds from the State. There is also a display of minerals. Birds are notoriously difficult to display and I think that the exhibit here succeeds better than most. Various aspects of avian biology are discussed including territorial behaviour, feeding, colour, and learning using a mixture of specimens, graphics, and computers. I liked the Victorian dome full of brilliantly coloured birds which was used to illustrate the difference between pigments and structural colours. There are touches of humour in the labels such as the comment in a display on the emu "I might not be able to fly but I can sure beat the pants off a kangaroo". A memorable way of making the point about an emu's running ability. Other rooms on this floor cover social history and the Melanesian cultures of New Guinea, the Solomons and Vanuatu, Australia's nearest neighbours.

The Museum thronged with people while we were there, no doubt some to escape the sub-tropical heat of a Brisbane January and it was also the school holidays. However, considering the many other attractions of an Australian summer it showed that a good museum can more than hold its own with Dreamworld, Seaworld and the rest. With a policy of frequently renewing their displays it should continue to attract new and returning visitors for a long time to come.

# Diary

During the week 24th to 28th August 1987  
GCG meeting in Belfast to coincide with the British Association meeting there.  
Subject: The Geological Heritage.  
Contact: John Wilson, Ulster Museum, Botanic Gardens, Belfast BT9 5AB.

Monday 21st to Friday 25th September 1987  
Symposium on the storage of recorded images, New College, Oxford.  
Of interest to curators who have collections of slides or earlier photographic images in their care.  
Full programme now available from:  
Miss H.M. Graves, Research Division, Kodak Ltd, Headstone Drive, Harrow, Middlesex HA1 4TY.

Friday 25th September 1987  
BCG Seminar at Coventry Museum, 'Live Animal Displays in Museums: the Lower Vertebrates'. Coordinated by Adam Wright, Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry (the programme is given elsewhere in this Newsletter).

Thursday 1st October 1987  
The Care and Management of Geological Collections by the Scottish Museums Council in Edinburgh  
Contact: Admin Officer, SMC, County House, 20-22 Torpichen Street, Edinburgh EH3 8JB.

Thursday 1st and Friday 2nd October 1987  
Joint GCG, Geol Soc and Pal As meeting at Burlington House, London, on 'Use and Conservation of Palaeontological Sites'.  
Contact: Peter Crowther, Museum and Art Gallery, Queens Road, Bristol BS8 1RL.

Wednesday 7th October 1987  
Association of Independent Museums seminar 'Video and Museums' at the London Transport Museum, Covent Garden, London. Details from AIM Seminars, c/o Torfaen Museum Trust, Park Buildings, Pontypool, Gwent NP4 6JH.

5th to 8th November 1987  
'Speciation', an international symposium to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences. Contact: Dr George Davis, Symposium Committee, Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103, USA.

Friday 13th November 1987  
Association of Independent Museums seminar 'Making Cheap Publications Better' at the Birchcliffe Centre, Hebden Bridge, West Yorks.  
Details from AIM Seminars, address given above.