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Biology Curators Group Newsletter

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Author(s): Fletcher, A.

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It was stressed that efforts would be made to redeploy staff where possible, and that some posts might become available under the Tyne and Wear regime. However, there are no guarantees.

As yet the full details of the new staffing arrangements are not known, leading to concerns about the levels of curatorial care, the lack of continuity of care, a reduction in technical expertise and a loss of the computerised documentation systems.

The rationale behind the proposed change results from a projected deficit in the University's accounts of £1m. The £215,000 the Hancock Museum costs to run each year is deemed to be excessive, and a substantial saving needs to be made. In addition, the Hancock, despite its renowned collections and scholarly connections, is regarded by the University as having no relevance to teaching or academic research. An alternative scheme for the Hancock's future, which relied on a major fund-raising exercise to raise capital for expansion, (and hence reduce running costs) was shelved on receipt of the Tyne and Wear option. The Council of the University asked that the budget for the Hancock be reduced to c. £70,000 per annum (a saving of £145K), an unrealistic figure for the smallest of museums! The projected saving under the Tyne and Wear option falls far short of that demanded by Council - a saving in the region of £60,000 is rumoured. So the Hancock Museum has been 'saved' - or has it? - and at what price?

Letters

Dear John

I recently received a request from Liz Hill, of the BBC Wildlife Magazine for a listing of 'Beetle-down ...' events. She is responsible for compiling the 'Whats-on' section of the magazine. I explained that there is no national 'Beetle-down ...' events listing available as each museum does its own thing.

If anyone wishes therefore to advertise an event in BBC Wildlife they should notify Liz direct at the address below. She stresses that she cannot guarantee a mention for all 'Beetle-down ...' events but will be happy to do so where space permits.

Liz Hill, BBC Wildlife Magazine, Broadcasting House, White Lady's Road, Bristol BS8 2LR

Best wishes
Paul Richards
Sheffield City Museum

Book Reviews

The Herbarium Handbook

edited by Leonard Forman and Diane Bridson

Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, 1989, pp 214.

ISBN 0 947643 20 6

This modestly priced handbook, paperback and vinyl-bound, is obviously intended for bench use. The foreword explains its origins as course documents provided by numerous Kew staff for their 'International Diploma Course in Herbarium Techniques'. It intends to deal with only the technical side of herbarium work and excepts the 'science of taxonomy itself'.

The book is neatly organised into an introduction followed by 39 numbered chapters in five sections - The Herbarium Building, Collections and Materials, Herbarium Techniques and Management, Additional Techniques, Collecting, and the Herbarium in a Wider Context. A five-page index and about 100 bibliographic references are also given. I appreciated the itemised, almost checklist style of each chapter, facilitating quick reference, together with many line drawings.

Generally speaking, the longer chapters are the best, those on herbarium techniques and management being the most comprehensive. Here, many line drawings are given showing the right and wrong ways of mounting and labelling, administering loans, visitors, etc. We are, however, still urged to place labels on the bottom right of a sheet, where fire and water damage will exert their first effects.

While the book attempts to be fully comprehensive quite often the chapters are very short, sometimes of only one page, and may convey little beyond the title. For example, computers are pretty well dismissed in chapter 28 an 'Introduction to computers' which is two pages long, and spends 40% of this space spelling out the disadvantages of using them! The single page on photographic copying of herbarium

sheets lists four methods but doesn't mention Xerox! The chapter entitled 'Checklists' is not what you would think; it tells you how to construct one, not which ones to use. Actually, nowhere in the book are we recommended checklists. 'Essential Herbarium Literature' in two and a half pages, contains just the briefest of lists, but over one page tells us how to read Roman numerals. Most chapters end with few or even only a single reference.

The book seems to assume that the herbarium contains two types of staff, and frequently makes the distinction between 'technical staff' and 'trained botanists'. However, the choice of chapters rather confuses this. For example, we have chapters of a very introductory nature such as 'What is Taxonomy' and 'The Types of Herbaria', followed by chapters which I consider rather esoteric, such as 'Dissection of Floral Organs' and 'Collectors, Itineraries, Maps and Gazetteers'. I am not sure who the otherwise excellent 21-page chapter on 'collecting' is intended for especially as there is no companion chapter on literature for identification. Are herbarium technicians normally expected to collect material for others, presumably the 'trained botanists', to identify? In practice, I expect that most users of this book will be active botanists who happen to maintain a herbarium. However, this section is actually very comprehensive and valuable, though it lacks reference to algae.

The attempt to be exhaustive results in many curious but just about relevant statements. For example, the section 'The Herbarium Building' tells us what kind of building we should choose and particularly to 'avoid areas liable to flooding or adjacent to flammable building or vegetation'. Throughout the book there is a tendency to state a problem but not supply its remedy. We are told that temperature control, humidity, ventilation, decontamination, etc., are necessary but not why we need them, how to implement them or where to get advice. However, Kew's own freezing method for decontamination is extensively dealt with on page 17-19. In fact, the chapters on pests and treatments are especially good, even giving drawings of insects, though they are not listed in the index. Similarly good are the chapters on materials and what not to use, though I could use more details on papers, their weights and finishes, acid-free treatments, etc. Glues are given very cursory treatment, only 'Evostick' is mentioned by name, despite the numerous other adhesives available, some modern PVA formulations being acid-free. In fact, there is no information given anywhere to answer my commonest herbarium enquiry 'what should I use and where can I buy it?' My copy arrived with a page of errata for inclusion from the editors.

So, while the book is certainly a herbarium handbook and at least mentions just about everything relevant, it is very short in essential detail in many areas. Rather uneven, it is, nevertheless, about the only comprehensive book of its kind and should be valuable to all curators, not just botanists.

Dr Anthony Fletcher
Leicestershire Museums Service

Natural History Museums - Directions for Growth

edited by Paisley, S. Cato and Clyde Jones.

Texas Tech University Press, Lubbock, Texas, 1991.
256 pp. Price \$25.00. ISBN 0-89672-240-6.

This monograph is made up of 18 of the 22 papers presented at a symposium 'New Directions and professional standards for natural history museums' organised for the joint meeting of the Mountain-Plains Museums Association and the Midwest Museums Conference in Kansas City in 1988.

The arrival of a review copy of this monograph when the reviewer was in the process of editing the 'Manual of Natural History Curatorship' was a cause for some alarm. Had someone beaten us to it? Was the Manual no longer needed?

It was with some relief that the monograph was found to be focussed almost exclusively on American practice and experience and that most of the papers are descriptive rather than philosophical and do not attempt an international approach.

The papers are grouped into four sections - roles and functions (3); collections (6); exhibits and education (5) and the future (4).

In the section 'roles and functions' the papers serve to emphasise that the museum world in the United States is very different from that in other countries. Humphrey looks at the problems facing university natural history museums and questions why so few scholar-curators in university museums are members of the American Association of Museums. Laerm and Edwards survey the 23 State Museums of Natural History, 13 of which are administered by state agencies, nine are within universities and one is private. An appendix provides details of the stated mission; relative importance of roles; organizational structure and funding for each of the institutions.