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It is because the staff structures of most of our provincial museums still echo the disciplinary divisions of the more traditional of our universities and that, even now, we find it difficult to ignore or cross these boundaries? Given the opportunity, what a pity that this excellent initiative in Hampshire could not dispense with the artificial distinction between 'science' and 'history' once and for all.

I am sorry to be so 'crabbit', as they say in our new home, but unless curators can communicate amongst themselves with logic and lucidity, what hope have we of capturing the minds and imaginations of the public at large?

Yours sincerely

Ian M. Evans

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Dear Editor – I and my colleagues at Hampshire County Museums Service feel that Ian Evan's letter in response to my item on our new natural science based education centre, SEARCH (BCG Newsletter 6:3) has essentially missed the point. The piece was intended to introduce the project in the context of our natural science display provision for our museums within Hampshire. My underlying argument was that the displays that we currently have do not generally provide a service which supports the delivery of the national curriculum in our local schools.

We have evidence for this conclusion in the form of feedback from various consultations with local education authority inspectors; a specific feasibility study looking at the development of educational opportunities in a fairly new but small natural history display in one of our local museums; and from the findings of professionally undertaken market research.

The development of SEARCH for Science is also important for us in this context. It allows us to concentrate our very limited education resources into one project with good facilities rather than spreading them thinly around nine museums cramped for space. The content and operation of SEARCH was not described fully enough for Ian to comment but the argument that in the real world "history" and "natural sciences" cannot be separated is valid, however, from a practical teaching viewpoint, the national curriculum in

England demands this is done for the ease of covering specific topics. The content and delivery of topics is being developed with the help of teachers and is currently "on trial" with several local schools. It should be remembered that this is essentially an educational facility and its survival depends on providing a service that schools want and are willing to pay for. We cannot afford to "experiment" at this stage but once we have (hopefully) gained a reputation and the confidence of the education establishment then we can look at introducing more integrated topics and begin to influence course content locally.

My note was certainly not intended, and nor was it, in my opinion, a philosophical argument (or judgement) on the current state of "natural science provision" in the museum world (all in one paragraph!). Ian should not be so keen and fast to draw conclusions from an item which was an introduction to another subject (SEARCH development) and not an argument in itself. That said I would still take issue with many of the specific points he raises in his letter.

I should state before going any further that as well as being Keeper of Biology for the Service that I am also Curator of Havant Museum which is operated jointly by the county and district authorities. It is a fairly small community museum consisting largely of local history displays (no natural history!) Since I wrote the text for and was heavily involved with organising most of the local history displays there are some days when I wish I was confined by "the disciplinary divisions of the more traditional of our universities"! In addition, I report to a Havant Museum Committee, which includes district and county councillors, as well as being heavily involved with a museum friends organisation, both of which to some degree reflect the opinions of our public.

My experience as a local curator dealing daily with enquiries from the public convinces me that the demand for local history is very "parochial" (dictionary definition "confined to a narrow area"). I would of course agree with the work of W H Hoskins, and within our own local history displays we do try to put the local example into a wider context, nevertheless, what most people are interested in is the "minutiae" of the history of their neighbourhood, their street, the house

they live in. The historical context may be the same but the examples shown in the displays are different in say Havant to that in Fareham. I admit I would be hard pressed to provide such unique examples to illustrate the topic of urban wildlife, for example, within each community, and so, I would suggest, would most other biologists. Why did I use the words "trap" and "solely"? Well it is perfectly natural to wish to interpret the wildlife habitats close to a museum without necessarily questioning whether this is the most appropriate use of the collections or whether the museum is the most relevant location for the display. For example, in the Borough of Havant the only significant broad-leaved woodland lies within a Country Park. Surely it is more appropriate for us to seek to interpret this type of habitat on site in conjunction with park staff rather than in the limited confines of the museum?

As it happens, we are planning a new natural history gallery at Havant which will deal in detail with the wildlife at the interface between land, freshwater and the marine environment. A totally appropriate subject for Havant with Chichester and Langstone Harbours on its doorstep. But it would also be highly appropriate for Fareham Museum close to the margins of Portsmouth Harbour. But what is the point of repeating this topic using the same examples when another appropriate "in depth" subject could be chosen for the very limited space available? Anyway we simply do not have the collections to be able to do similar displays in all nine of our local museums. This is what I meant by a "strategic approach" and I was certainly not advocating installing "straightforward taxonomic displays" in each of our local museums, merely that they should be considered as part of the blend within the overall provision for the permanent and temporary exhibition programme. Is Ian really trying to imply that a touring exhibition on bats or owls has no place at Havant Museum simply because we have no records for the Greater Horseshoe Bat or Snowy Owl or that such a display would have no general appeal?

In contrast to Ian's assertion that "most people's interest in the natural world is aroused by and builds on their experience of their local environment", it is my experience that it is the popular, topical and global conservation issues which fire the imagination of

today's public, used to a diet of quality natural history television programmes and raised on school or Brownie projects which deal with these themes. Surely the difficulty today is for museums to demonstrate that our local invertebrates are just as important to "save" as seals off the coast of Canada. We can also have an important role in explaining the processes and principles which lie behind these issues and museum biological and geological material is often ideal for this purpose.

Museum displays are not the only means to achieve these objectives. Gilbert White is after all remembered for his writings, not his museum displays. A museum should be judged on

its total provision in terms of access to the collections, specialist workshops, the acquisition and dissemination of data in addition to whatever displays it does or doesn't have. Surely "the recording of the minutiae" both for the natural and human worlds are best dealt with by publications or in the context of a local studies room, much as we have done in each of our local museums in Hampshire, rather than as a book-on-the-wall!

I had hoped that by writing a piece in the BCG Newsletter introducing SEARCH for Science in the context of our overall display policy in Hampshire rather than as just an isolated point of information I might have

been communicating with other curators "with logic and lucidity", but in this I am obviously mistaken! However, I would like to extend to Ian, and any other BCG member, an invitation to visit SEARCH to see for themselves what we are trying to achieve, especially anyone who was unable to see the presentation by Ann Nicol and Isabel Hughes at the Oxford meeting in April.

Yours sincerely

Dr Chris Palmer

Keeper of Biology and Curator of

Havant Museum

Hampshire County Museum Service

