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## The Biology Curator

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### Biology Curators Group Study Trip Paris, 7-10th November, 1996

The assembled throng of biology curators at Waterloo were soon herded aboard Eurostar and after clunking through the Kent countryside and a brief 20 minutes in the tunnel emerged in France, which looked remarkably like the English countryside we had left behind but going past at greater speed.

Arrival at Gare Du Nord in Paris was complicated by what turned out to be a bomb scare, which passed most people by, and as the hotel was only a few hundred metres from the station many people elected to walk. The Hotel Orange was located in a side street just off Lafayette not far from Montmartre and memories of the crush at Waterloo station were revisited as everyone acquired their keys in the compact and bijou hotel reception. After clothes were unpacked and hotel facilities explored people set off for food, sightseeing and possibly the odd beer or two. Our little group had a pleasant meal in a Turkish restaurant once we had translated the Turkish into French menu into English, all with barely a French 'O' Level between us.

Next morning tales of Paris nightlife, bars and ballet were swapped over breakfast and maps consulted to sort out routes to the Muséum National D'Histoire Naturelle.

Navigating the Paris Metro proved much less trouble than the London Underground, and a few trains and a short walk later we arrived at the Jardin des Plantes and the Museum. The museum itself is set in a large public garden complete with tropical glass house and zoo. Set outside the main entrance to the museum were two large display cases offering a taster for 'Meteors', the temporary exhibition inside. One case contained a large meteor weighing several tons on open access, and the other a large American car which had been hit on the boot by a meteor about half the size of a football, which had unsurprisingly meted out some hefty damage to said cars boot.

Not having been on the previous Paris trip the interior of the museum was a real surprise. Inside the museum is essentially a large hall which reminded me of a very large impressive Victorian railway station, with mezzanine floors running round the walls. It was also quite dark but certainly did not feel gloomy or oppressive. A brief introductory talk was then given by Genevieve Meurges and a colleague about the history of the museum and the development of the current galleries while stood in front of two very impressive skeletons of whales. Then into the museum proper to view the new displays with some people taking a guided tour and others opting to view independently.

The ground floor continued the oceanic theme set by the whale skeletons with some very impressive marine displays. Traditional dioramas had been eschewed in favour of a more minimalist display technique with much use of glass and perspex to mount and display specimens. Like the rest of the museum it was quite dark but very effective use of spotlights and fibre optics illuminated the specimens well and the overall effect was quite atmospheric. Spirit specimens of jellyfish and other soft bodied marine animals were displayed particularly well on a blue background, with each specimen illuminated by individual micro-spots. One impressive technique was achieved by attaching specimens from the back onto glass panels which were lit from the bottom using different coloured light filters to create an underwater effect. Marine plants and algae were displayed in a similar way sandwiched between perspex and glass sheets. Diagrams and scales were often ground into the glass giving it an interpretative use as well as acting as a barrier such as with the marine plants and invertebrates display graded from littoral to a depth of 200 metres, with specimens placed at

#### REQUEST FOR INFORMATION

Per Alstrom is trying to trace the holotype of *Seicerus b. burkii* (Yellow-eyed Flycatcher Warbler). It was originally lodged in the Army Medical Department, Chatham, UK but a search there has proved unsuccessful. If you can help with further information please contact:

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the appropriate level. Much use was made of IT type exhibits with video sequences and many touch screens. On the next level was the 'Caravane Africaine', which was a long parade of African mammals led by a large bull elephant followed by hippos, rhinos, giraffes, aardvarks and a vast assemblage of other mammals. The animals were displayed on a plain wooden floor at the same level as the visitor with minimal interpretation and no 'realistic' diorama and this worked very well! Dotted around the exhibits were numerous touchscreens (all working) on various subjects such as different habitat types found in France. All had language options including English and German and were very intuitive and easy to use, as I found out when initially trying one in French having missed the language option screen. Also dotted around the building were benches which were used more and more as people moved round the deceptively large mezzanine floors. One nice feature of the benches were more in-depth labels expanding on elements of the exhibition on drop-in slats in the middle of the benches, again in a number of languages.

Next came the tour of the underground spirit stores, the *Zootheque*. Moving from the superb exhibitions to the stores was a bit of a shock. The free, open well presented space of the gallery was replaced by a labyrinth of passageways of unsealed concrete which left a fine layer of concrete dust over everything. The stores were also at the same level as the Seine and this has caused problems with relative humidity levels and mould has been a problem. In the store rooms themselves the bulk of the collections were stored on roller racking though overcrowding was still a problem. While much more could be stored in the (large) space available the disadvantage of this was clearly illustrated when the racks were moved in the fish store and the specimens could be seen banging into the sides of their jars. Some specimens were suspended by glass floats which elicited lots of 'ooh look glass floats, that's clever' type comments. Visits were also made to the mollusc and bird stores (complete with a large outstretched wing waiting to be crushed by racking, ouch!). After getting slightly lost in the maze of passageways and criss-crossing other groups of BCG members a break for lunch was called.

In the afternoon the next tour was of the 'Microzoo' of soil arthropods. The Microzoo was housed in a strange roman temple type building in the Menagerie. After a brief talk on the ideas behind the Microzoo we were split into groups to look at the various 'stations'. Off the main chamber of the building were a number of rooms covering different subjects, each of which contained identical microscope stations and blowups of photomicrograph and electron microscope photos. The viewer sat at the microscope and put on a headset and again there was a choice of language of French or English. Each station was fully automated and the taped commentary told you how to use the microscope and what to look for in each of the viewed samples. Subjects covered included soil arthropods, invertebrates in food (illustrated by some cheese alive with cheese mites) and meadow invertebrate fauna. The microscopes were excellent quality and the stations easy to use but many of the specimens were totally bleached white by the high intensity illumination and a number of the stations not working. While a good concept and the design of

the stations impressive, many people felt that a lot of money had been spent with limited effect. After a quick whirl round the Zoo, cut short due to the weather it was back to the museum for a final look before an extended stay in the excellent museum shop and then back to the hotel.

The final day was left free for sightseeing, where the usual art galleries, museums and the ubiquitous Eiffel Tower were visited. The next day it was back to the Gare du Nord and high speed run though the French countryside, a lorry fire-free dash through the tunnel and a slower run through the English countryside back to London. Once again the trip was a great success, especially to see how other museums cope with the many of the problems faced by our own museums and collections, as well as the excellent new displays from which many ideas were no doubt generated. Finally thanks must go to Kathie Way for organising another superb study trip.

Nick Gordon, Saffron Walden Museum.