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## The Biology Curator

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## AMSTERDAM ETC.

### BCG Visit to the Netherlands - the inside story

Steve Garland, Bolton Museum

Does your life hold no meaning any more? Is there a void - a gap - something basic missing from your very existence? - So you didn't go on the BCG trip to the Netherlands eh!! This proved to be the usual mixture of mind-blowing museum collection experiences and a good chance to catch up on all the gossip, and to destroy the professional characters of anyone unfortunate enough not to be on the trip or who popped out of the bar for a moment!!

The visits to the museums in Amsterdam and Leiden were superb. Some of the stores contained many fascinating and historic specimens. I discovered that the Chairman knows a Blue Whale's penis when he sees one, although I couldn't find any botanists who could identify the specimen in alcohol labelled 'Groote Taja' beyond "it's a plant". It was indeed a Taja of really great proportions!

Many of the stores were of familiar design, but there was nothing for sale in the bars or on the streets of Amsterdam that could exceed the high achieved when walking out into the Vertebrate store at Leiden! A floor made from oversized perforated-zinc, about four floors up, provided a memorable experience. While my brain was still reeling I think hallucinations must have begun as I seem to remember a cupboard opening and there being an elephant and two giraffes inside; then another that was full of Crowned Pigeons!! Wow man!!

I was in a small party who enjoyed the zoo so much that we got lost. What is 'turn left after the sloths' in Dutch? The animals here all looked in tip-top condition. The reason is probably that it is right next to the museum. A slightly ill animal always perks up miraculously when the taxidermist appears with a tape measure and bag of borax!

The evenings were our own, so we explored the delights of the city of Amsterdam. We tried many things; beer, pool, table football!! We even visited the Sex Museum (and the Erotic Museum - Ed), for purely professional reason, of course. The labels were easily



"In his minds eye he could see herds of Wildebeest roaming across the African plains" Osteological storage, Amsterdam.



Mounted bird storage, Leiden

understandable (at least I think there were labels!). There were lots of photographs, displayed using a variety of mounting techniques. There were also one or two exhibits of human dummies that I can't remember seeing in the latest Gems catalogue! The audiovisual exhibits were fairly eye catching. And all done in the best possible taste; well nearly. This should be an interesting one if they go for MGC Registration!

We also observed some interesting display techniques on the streets. I really must try lighting some of our exhibits with a red light and UV light combination, because this would seem to be popular with at least fifty percent of the public!?

The return ferry journey saw the Group dividing into cinema buffs and disco enthusiasts. However, this could only happen after the Committee had dutifully met in a quiet (quiet?- Ed) corner to make a few important decisions (floating voters!). The dancing went on into the night, while outside the ferry passed through flocks of migrating Redwings heading south and calling gently in the darkness.

Many thanks to all the people in the Netherlands who organised a marvellous range of visits and kept us fed and watered. Also thanks to Kathie Way for organising what was not just a study visit, but yet another chapter in the BCG history books!

### Report on Study Visit to Amsterdam Zoological Museum.

Thursday 3rd November 1994.

Charles Pettitt, Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester, M13 9PL

After some twenty hours on coach and ferry, we arrived at the Museum about 10.00am. After coffee, the Director, Dr. Wouter Los, welcomed us in the Museum Library under the watchful eye of a portrait of Carl Linnaeus. He gave us a general introduction to the Museum and the collections. The Zoological Museum, Amsterdam is part of the Research Institute of





Illustration depicting the "cuckholding" behaviour of blue tit females, who sometimes have one of their eggs fertilised by an older male.  
*[From the Catalogue of Temporary Exhibition entitled 'Fakes, frauds and deception' at the Amsterdam Zoological Museum.]*

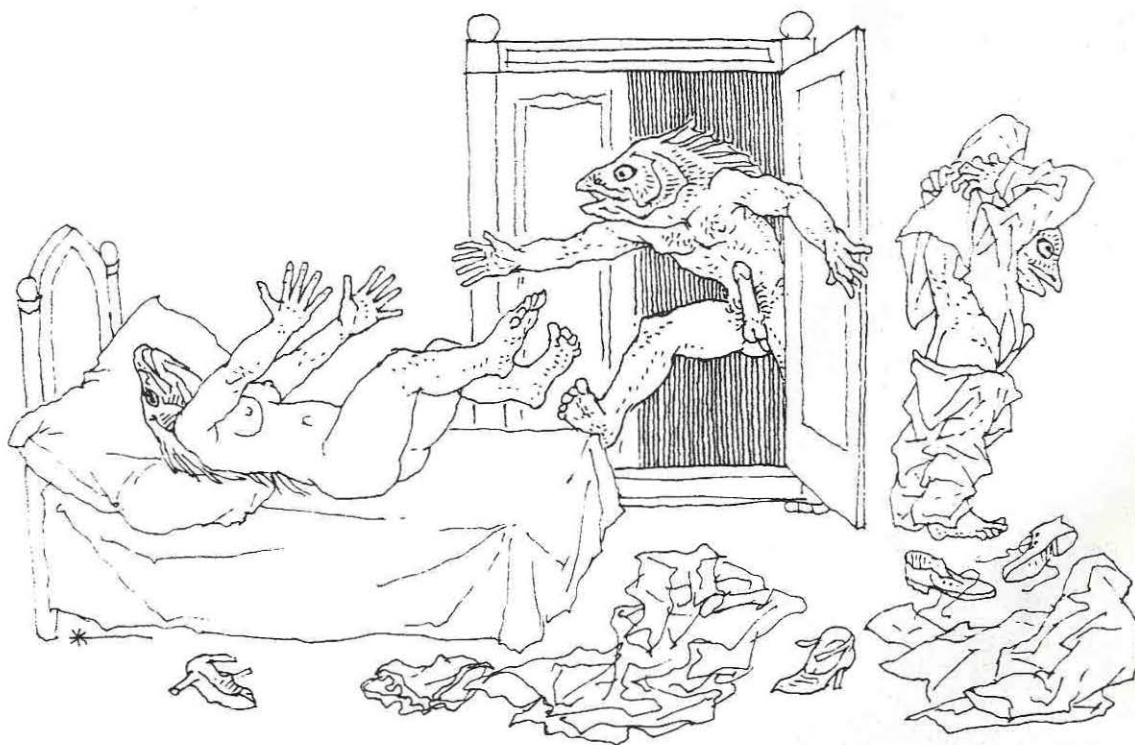


Illustration depicting underhand male behaviour among American Blue-gilled Sunfish. Small males wait at the edge of a nesting territory until another male induces the female to spawn, then the sneak male dashes in and ejects his sperm at high tempo. This happens so fast it can only be seen on a film when this is run back at slow speed.

*[From the Catalogue of Temporary Exhibition entitled 'Fakes, frauds and deception' at the Amsterdam Zoological Museum.]*



Systematics and Population Biology within Amsterdam University. The Institute is the coordinator of the Netherlands Research School Biodiversity.

Founded in 1938, the Museum has about 10 million specimens; its special strengths are SE Asian and South American/Caribbean fauna.

Florence Pieters, Curator of the Artis Library, then gave a lively talk on the conflict between use and conservation in an old library, taking as her example a wonderful folio of zoological drawings dating from ca 1720. A number of the plates from this work were on the tables for us to examine, held in loose archival mounts. Would that I had such works in my own Museum library.

Dr. Los then explained the (familiar) tale of how he has restructured the staffing in the Museum, with three 'ranks' of curatorial staff, A,B,C, related to the extent of their duties. The equivalence of these ranks seemed to be: A = Keeper, B = Collection Manager and C = Technician.

We then split into five parties to visit various sections of the Museum. I and a few others went with Dr. Moolenbeek to inspect the Mollusca section. The first surprise was the Section Library, which appeared to have

every malacological work one could think of - Reeve's *Conchologia Iconica*, Martini & Chemnitz, Buonanni etc. Such a refreshing difference of attitude to that prevailing at Manchester, where most such books get locked away down at the Rylands Library because they are "Colour Plate books" and much too precious to let grubby fingered keepers use them to help curate their collections.

The collections were a revelation - all well housed, curated, labelled, and vast! The Spirit Collection of Mollusca alone was several times larger than our entire spirit collections, and every jar was clean, well labelled internally, and there were very few jars in need of topping up. Types are segregated.

We were intrigued to discover several collections that we had lost sight of, such as Mary Saul's collection and Kuiper's *Pisidium* collection (probably the best in the world). I have persuaded Dr. Moolenbeek to write up the collections added since 1940 for the *Biology Curator* (there is an article in *Basteria* detailing those there in 1939). The documentation system is Museum-wide, but tailored to each section. The Museum is networked, but databases are held on departmental machines. In Mollusca, a volunteer (ex Naval officer) has typed in the entire classification of Vaught, which is now becoming the standard for arranging molluscan collections; previously Amsterdam was arranged by Thiele (1935). I was impressed with the label generation facilities of the documentation program.

After a light lunch, at which milk was the drink of choice (the Dutch being very proud of their dairy products), our 'team' moved on to look at the Exhibition Galleries. These are housed in the Amsterdam Zoo ("Artis"), and consist almost entirely of a large long-stay temporary exhibition; there is a small charge for public entrance. The current exhibition is on "Fakes, Frauds and Deceptions" - covering such things as mimicry etc. Some of the display headings, and the illustrations in the Guidebook (see figures) were eye-openers to say the least! The general impression is of a lot of space (three large rooms) with the exhibition struggling to fill it. However, when you discover the Exhibition section is only the Designer/Dogsbody (his definition), a taxidermist (whose very competent work we saw) and a technician, the result is most credible. At the end of the exhibition galleries one goes up some steps into a darkened area, wherein is the most remarkable Diorama I have seen. It is of the Dutch coast, and occupies the area of a medium-sized exhibition gallery! One sits on a bench and the view is so realistic it is hard to describe; the diorama contains only a dozen or so birds and mammals, but perhaps is even more effective for the restraint. It dates from ca 1927 and now has 'preservation' status!

To reach the exhibition one has to pass the aquarium, and this again was 'something else'. There were upwards of forty marine tanks, some of them large, and all the animals in them seemed in excellent health. Apart from a plethora of fish, including moray eels, there were



Sixteenth century herbaria, Leiden.

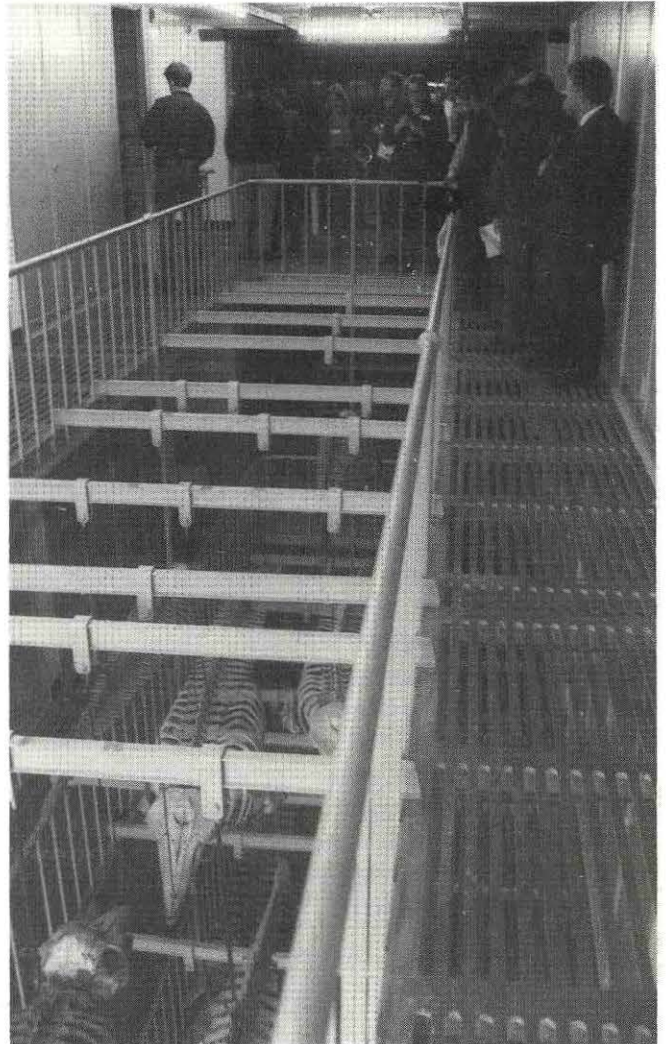


crustacea, molluscs (including a cypraeid and nudibranch), corals, and anemones in profusion. My favourite was a small octopus. Because of the wealth of visual experience in the aquarium we never made it to the zoo, so all I can say is they have antelopes, 'cos I saw them from the Library window in the morning.

At 1600 hrs we had a talk from Agnes Brokerhof, of the Central Research Laboratory for Objects of Art and Science, on "Conservation problems and how we cope in Holland". Her starting point was the Madrid Congress of 1992, from when it was felt that the time had come to focus attention on natural history collections. There is a Dutch group for the exchange of information on the conservation of dry NH collections, and a Working Party on wet collections is based in the Amsterdam Dept. of Pathology. At present still "determining priorities". Agnes has a project on storage materials, with a growing database of available materials and test results. She strongly emphasised the importance of good and bad microclimates within sealed containers. Much of this work applies to ethnographic objects also. At present the Rentokil bubble is the fumigation method of choice, but Agnes' team are trying to develop a nitrogen based system with a local (and cheaper) firm. Freezing seems effective for e.g. paper and organic materials. Leiden has done work on adapting commercial vacuum cleaners to cleaning taxidermy mounts. Her major point was that NH collections are now an 'issue', and that this represents an advance. At the reception afterwards I chatted to her and asked that the materials database be made available on the Internet, an idea she seemed receptive to, and promised to follow up.

Then Dr. Ronald Schliesh gave us a talk about the European Taxonomic Institute [ETI], a UNESCO related organisation. He started from the 'Biodiversity Crisis' and pointed out there is also a crisis in the supply of information to counter the biodiversity crisis. Information is needed about organisms and about their distribution. ETI is attempting to bridge this information gap. The goal is the World Biodiversity Database, on which presently 1.4 million organisms are described. However, one needs to know the name of an organism before accessing the database, and therefore ETI is developing also unique, non-specialist useable identification tools, especially using computers. For the biogeographic information a program called MAPIT is used, and a separate package LINNAEUS II is being distributed (free) to cooperating scientists, so that taxonomic information can be recorded in a consistent way for adding to the database. He also demonstrated ETI CD-Rom products, notably 'Birds of Europe' which combines pictures, text, calls (with sonograms) and flight patterns into a multimedia presentation; this currently contains some 420 species.

We were then treated to a wine and cheese reception, and had the chance to meet various other members of staff. Finally arrived at our (very comfortable - well done Kathie) hotel about 1800hrs for a welcome shower, then



*Vertebrate storage, Leiden.*

out for a meal amidst the fascinating sights of Old Amsterdam (over which I draw a veil, but upon which I am assured our Honourable Chairman is an authority, having lived in Holland for six months some years ago).

All in all a tiring but most illuminating visit.

### **Report on the study visit to Leiden**

Friday November 4th 1994

*Michael Taylor, Perth Museum and Art Gallery*

The second day of BCG's continental foray saw the coach retracing its route south for forty miles to the university town of Leiden to visit the National Museum of Natural History (NNM) and the Rijksherbarium.

Originally founded in 1820 as the 'Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie' the NNM had the explicit objectives of exploring the zoological and geological resources of overseas territories and providing an educational resource to the public and specifically to the University of Leiden. The first director was the famous C.J. Temminck and he inherited several older 'cabinets' to form the basis of his