

## The museum director's view . . .

SIR—Many of this museum's scientists have for years used their taxonomic skills to carry out distinguished research on human diseases such as leishmaniasis and schistosomiasis; others have monitored the effects of air and water pollution through their research on lichens, protozoa and meiofauna. Still others are involved in long-term research programmes of insects in tropical rainforests.

All of these and many other of our scientific staff will have been astonished and insulted by your leading article "A major museum goes populist" (*Nature* 345, 1; 1990) where you suggest that the museum has no expertise in areas of human health or environmental biology. Work in these important areas will continue and will be strongly supported in the future, as will taxonomic research in many

areas of pure research. Your leading article is equally at fault when it suggests that taxonomic and evolutionary work will be restricted to one research programme only: taxonomy must and will continue to pervade all our scientific programmes.

The major question that we must face in the museum, and from which your leading article runs away, is one of scientific priorities. No natural history museum, however great, is able to carry out taxonomic research across the whole range of present-day animal and plant life, together with minerals and fossils. There are simply too many species for this to be possible. The only way forward is for our museums to be selective, and we have chosen to concentrate on those areas of taxonomic research where we already have the greatest strength, and where we

see the greatest potential for the future. We have identified six such areas — biodiversity, environmental quality, mineral resources, agricultural resources, human evolution and human health.

All these programmes are totally dependent upon our scientists' taxonomic skills and several of them will benefit from close collaboration with scientists from other disciplines in other institutions.

The need to focus our research is made all the more acute by our funding position. In our corporate plan, we call upon our sponsoring department for additional funding over the next five years. I hope that the many scientists who value our museum, and who recognize it as the unique treasure house that it is, will give us their support as we press our case.

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## . . . and the views of the onlookers

SIR—You have reported in some detail the corporate plan for 1990–95 of the Natural History Museum. In fact the plan is one of the most blatant pieces of bandwagon-jumping seen in recent years. It almost beggars belief that the whole basis of the research work of one of our greatest scientific institutions can be changed at a stroke, without consultation with users outside the museum, and apparently without adequate consultation inside either (see for example *The Times* of 25 April).

As recently as November 1987, the museum commissioned from the University of Manchester an "Evaluation of the research activities of the British Museum (Natural History)", to which I and many others responded. One aim of this survey was stated to be to "assess the relevance of the Museum's research to other workers in the same, or related, fields". I have not seen the confidential report, but selective summaries (for example in *The Guardian* of 20 April 1988) quoted it as saying that the museum "represents a world class activity" but predicted that the decline in real terms of government funding, and the failure of other sources of revenue to compensate, would cause it to lose this pre-eminence. It also noted that the museum's "ceasing research [of the present kind, implied] would be highly damaging for a large number of researchers outside the museum" (and, it might have added, to other users in government service and in industry).

Yet this is precisely what is now proposed. Instead of research being systematically related to the collections and the animal and plant groups that they represent, it will be diverted to "biodiversity, environmental quality, living resources, mineral resources, human health and human origins". As John Evans recently

pointed out in his presidential address to the Geologists' Association, this means that the museum is abandoning the fields in which it is supreme and unchallengeable for topics some of which are of "ephemeral fashionability", in which it will be in competition with other bodies which are better adapted to such activities.

What is needed, and what the management of the museum has singularly failed to provide, to the evident dismay of many staff, is reaffirmation of the museum's role as a world centre of research in biology. This is not to say that its research must not change. It has changed a great deal since the last century under the anti-darwinian Owen, when identifying, cataloguing and labelling were almost the sole preoccupation of staff. But it must change by evolution, not by *diktat*.

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SIR—The Natural History Museum in London is universally acclaimed as one of the foremost research institutes of natural science worldwide, a remarkable institution with a splendid record of solid contribution.

Those of us concerned with the history, as well as the present and future, of life on this planet regard this institution as an invaluable repository of relevant knowledge, experience, and literally unique and irreplaceable, scientific collections. Until recently, we felt secure in also regarding the museum as a certain source of major advance in the years to come. Henry Gee's note (*Nature* 344, 805; 1990) suggests that because of financial squeeze, with "one of six [science] jobs to go", that

expectation may not be realized.

As one who spent 1989 as a visiting scientist in the museum, I am convinced that Neil Chalmers, the director, is trying to do his best for the institution under exceedingly difficult financial constraints. In fact, it seems to me that far too little credit is given to the director and his staff for the strides the museum has taken towards becoming a more 'user-friendly' sort of place.

The museum has a new image, fine exhibitions, markedly improved public facilities (especially for school children). Moreover, the financial squeeze is by no means limited to the Natural History Museum. What about Kew Gardens? And the V & A? And the venerable British Museum? From my perspective, all seem plagued by the same disease.

But with the financial squeeze in place, who is the loser? The answer is all of us — just as we all benefit from the scientific accomplishments of the museum, we will all lose if those contributions are curtailed. Indeed, in this age of scientific advance, of increased awareness of the importance of environmental quality and of the fragility of our global future, what we need is expansion of the museum's scientific role, not cutbacks.

As a concerned bystander, with a vested interest in the future of the museum, its staff, its scientific prowess, its collections, I can only hope that the Office of Arts and Libraries will accede to the request of the director to increase aid substantially. The museum is a world resource, relied upon not only by its staff but by the scientific community worldwide; clearly, increased support will benefit us all.

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