

exhibition on cell biology in which the museum's collections played no essential part. That dubious success seems to have gone to the museum's head. Professionally mounted exhibitions have become central to its work. (Of such a one, in 1981, this journal found it necessary to complain that the museum was telling an ambiguous tale on evolution, as if it were sited in Tennessee or Louisiana — see *Nature* 291, 373; 1981.) Since then, and especially since the introduction of admission charges in 1987, the museum has become a more skilled and circumspect exhibitor. How else to stimulate demand? What the plan says is that there will now be more of that, despite the decision that exhibition staff should share in the job cuts.

This is where the dilemma bites. Nobody will deny that countries such as Britain need better public understanding of science, or that the prospectus now issued will be valuable to that end. A sufficiently tough-minded management may also be able to persuade its visitors that technical activities are not merely a threat to public health and the environment (the soft options), but such exciting and beneficial ways of transforming natural conditions that declining recruitment to science studies will be reversed. But there is no reason why the NHM research programme should be sacrificed for this purpose, however admirable. By using its ingenuity to live within its arbitrarily decreed budget, the new management at the NHM has allowed itself to be forced into a false position.

That is the essential error of what is fashionably, but laughably, called the corporate plan. If put forward to an agency other than a government committee, last week's document would excite only derision. At one stage it boasts that "income-generating activities" have increased to 25 per cent of the total budget, and are due to increase to 30 per cent in the next five years. But these are gross figures, and take no account of overheads. This year, for example, the museum expects to make a profit of £400,000 on sales of £2.5 million at its shops, but without taking account of costs such as occupancy, heat and light. The museum would do better to disencumber itself of management tasks for which it has little flair by selling a concession to a commercial organization, as airports do.

Shabby

That is but one reason why the museum's management should be ashamed of its shabby document. There can hardly ever have been a piece of paper about the future of a great scientific institution so devoid of scientific content. The fear is that the future pattern of its public work will similarly be content-free. Thus the plan says that "with the new and increasing concern about man's effect on the global environment, the Museum's knowledge and expertise are of greater relevance than ever before". Really? That claim may carry some weight with the Office of Arts and Libraries, but the taxonomists who make up NHM's constituency will be entitled to a hollow laugh.

What has happened and is happening to the NHM is what has happened to other British institutions faced with shortages of funds in the past decade, the British univer-

sity system for example. Able and intelligent people have been persuaded to administer them in ways that offend their purpose. The managers find themselves in the position of trusted prisoners in most jails, tricked into believing that they will do the dirty work more sympathetically and sensitively than can the jailers. Aesop's dog's dilemma is, in this case, the more piquant because both the bone and its reflection are worth having: Britain needs both a centre for taxonomic research and the superb general exhibition of science. There would have been a case for a reassessment of the research programme, and for appropriate reforms, as well as for a less self-congratulatory essay in public exhibition. But the museum should have firmly told the government that it cannot have both functions for the price of one, especially in a building in which the cost of maintenance will this year amount to a third of the total budget. □

Arms control hiatus

The prospects for agreements on strategic arms and conventional forces in Europe have recently dimmed.

1990 MAY not, after all, be the wonder year for arms control. Both the talks on strategic arms at Geneva and those on conventional forces in Europe at Vienna are said by sources in the West to have run into Soviet inflexibility of a kind that has been unfamiliar for several months. That development is understandably disconcerting, but not surprising. If Soviet unwillingness to make the last few compromises is more than a tactical manoeuvre, the explanation probably lies in Soviet misgivings about the uncertain outlook for European security as a whole.

The obvious stumbling block is the future of the formal European alliances, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact. Mr Mikhail Gorbachev, by insisting that the formal right of Eastern European states to self-determination should be taken seriously, has made possible the changes in Central Europe that have dominated the past few months. But now he is faced with the determination of East Germany to unite with West Germany constitutionally, and the prospect that the reunited country will remain a member of NATO. Seen from Moscow, this is an uncovenanted setback, which will be resolved only when a new framework for European security has been devised. Western governments have been slow to appreciate the need for a resolution of this difficulty, without which German reunification can hardly be more than a formality. It is true that the issue may be clarified in June, when there is to be a conference at Vienna within the framework of the Helsinki agreements of 1978, but it will be a shame if the arms control agreements also have to wait until there has been progress in those talks. Should not Western governments say now, in advance of what are certain to be protracted negotiations, what changes they have in mind? The best course would be an amalgamation of the two alliances. □