Managerial mediocrity

SIR—Walter Bodmer's defence of the corporate plan for the Natural History Museum (*Nature* **345**, 509; 1990), makes strange reading, and does little to allay fears that a disaster is looming. He chides some of us for not having "the time or the inclination to read the Corporate Plan carefully", but acknowledges himself that it is only an outline. More importantly, nowhere is any justification given for the closure of certain areas. Why (it is said) are studies of parasitic worms (human health), gems and building stones (mineral resources), archaeozoology (human origins), diatoms (environmental quality) and fossil plants (biodiversity) to be stopped and on the authority of what expertise?

Bodmer stresses that the museum is not immune to "stringent periodic review by distinguished assessors". How very curious that the corporate plan escaped such valuable external guidance. But the plan is much more fundamental to the future of the museum than just loss of posts. It heralds a radical reorganization. The museum appears to regard the plan as a *fait accompli*, and nowhere do I read of real flexibility, let alone dialogue.

The corporate plan is now contentedly grazing in the lush pastures of managerial mediocrity. Morale in the museum is at rock bottom. What Bodmer refers to as an "enormous response" is almost entirely critical of the plan. He writes also that "we have no alternatives but to live within our means". Nobody doubts this. But means are relative, and the promise of European support linked to the great museums in France and Germany needs urgent exploration. At the moment we had better write c/o Natural History Mausoleum, and leave the final comment with the chief trustee who invites us "to learn . . . from the wonders of Disneyland". Words fail me.

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SIR—It is widely held that there is only one way to do science, this way being paradigmatically that of physics. There are consequently phenomena such as what has been called[1] physics envy, where a science is distorted by some to conform as closely as possible to physics, and a *scala scientiae*, where sciences are ranked from physics at the top to systematics at the bottom.

Indeed, systematics is not physics. It is also not stamp collecting, with which it is sometimes more or less equated, initially by a physicist. Papers in systematics are written so that their surface is legible to nonsystematists. Their real meaning is not thereby made intelligible.

The meaning of systematics is the underlying structure and form of evolution[2]. This is not a trivial problem; its astronomical equivalent is the structure and history of the Universe. That the diverse methods of systematics do not approximate to those of physics should be a source of enlightenment rather than disdain.

For science really is done in very different ways. The basic methods predominant in systematics are historical and comparative; Gould[3] has recently celebrated their significance. And there are reasons for these methods. It is ironic that systematics should be savaged at a time when its literally dependent offspring, comparative biology, palaeobiology and conservation biology, are ascendant.

It is also ironic that systematics celebrates diversity but is itself a victim of stereotypy and the narrow minds of others. For many years, the Natural History Museum in London was overall the leading centre of systematics in the world. This function of the museum is not for exhibition; it is not for service to others. The museum is, extraordinarily, denigrating the very science in which it has been pre-eminent in order to take on the flashy and the faddish.

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1. Cohen, J. E. *Science* **172**, 674–675 (1971).
2. Van Valen, L. M. *Nature* **323**, 664 (1986).
3. Gould, S. J. *Wonderful Life.* (New York, Norton, 1989).

Censors leave gaps

SIR—In the survey on the state of science in Eastern Europe (*Nature* **344**, 599; 1990), transfer of information is justly mentioned as one of the prerequisites indispensable for future science policy in the countries involved. The dearth of hard-currency literature is really crippling, and in view of our economic problems, as well as ever increasing prices of Western books and journals, the prospects for the near future are not bright.

We do not share, however, the pessimistic view that decades will pass before information technology in these countries makes affordable general access to journals abroad. One promising project in this field is already under way: the SatelLife library project for linking national centres of Eastern Europe with the British Medical Association Library.

One specific problem we were faced with in the 1970s and 1980s should, we hope, remain only a remembrance of the bitter past: censorship of Western scientific journals. Hundreds of expurgated issues are missing, and gaps in collections of Czechoslovak academic libraries have to be filled up. The favourite victims of censorship on the list of periodicals to which the National Medical Library in Prague subscribed were *Nature*, *Science*, *British Medical Journal* and *Lancet*.

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Second class scientists?

SIR—In a recent issue of *Nature* (26 April 1990, Classified 11), the University of Auckland advertised a Senior Lectureship in Medical Molecular Biology. The salary range was 30–43 per cent higher for medically qualified incumbents than for those not medically qualified: What possible purpose can such a discriminatory difference in salaries serve?

No doubt the University of Auckland, along with many similar institutions, feels that it needs to offer high salaries to attract candidates with medical qualifications away from more remunerative activities. If so, this should set the rate for that position. On review of the applicants, the appointments committee may find that a candidate without medical qualification is, nevertheless, the best qualified for the position. Subsequently to offer that candidate a substantially lower salary because he or she failed to come through the medical profession is a clear insult. At the very least, it sends a sharp message about the level of respect a non-medically qualified incumbent can expect from his medical colleagues.

The pity is that most self-respecting scientists without a medical qualification are unlikely willingly to face such a gratuitous insult. This can only be a loss to any medical faculty that truly seeks the broad spectrum of ideas and interest essential to the pursuit of science and teaching.

In such circumstances, one has to wonder what the term 'equal employment opportunity employer' means. In the present case, it presumably indicates an undertaking of fair treatment in being offered employment, but no guarantee of fair treatment thereafter. Scientists without medical training are very clearly to be considered second-class citizens.

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