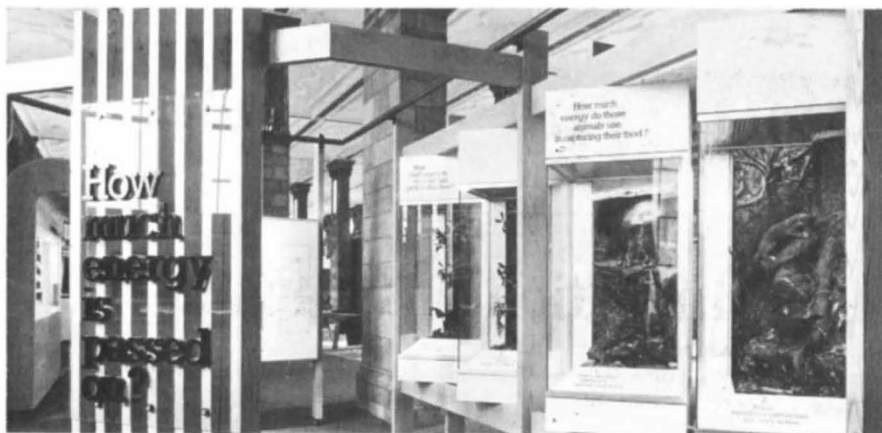


The new exhibition schemes at the British Museum (Natural History) and the consequent changes in the more traditional exhibits have caused some consternation amongst interested scientists. At the recent symposium on Vertebrate Palaeontology and Comparative Anatomy held at Reading, Dr R. S. Miles, Head of the Public Services Department of the Museum explained the Museum's present policy towards its public exhibitions, and we present a summary of his talk below. Dr B. Halstead of the Department of Geology, University of Reading presents an opposing view (right).



A new exhibition on ecology (see above) opens this week . . .

The public's right to know

THE policy of the Public Services Department about what we do in the galleries is not the whim of any one person in the Natural History Museum. It originates with the 1753 Act of Parliament for the purchase of the Hans Sloane Collection. The British Museum Bill says: "The said Museum or Collection may be preserved and maintained, not only for the Inspection and Entertainment of the learned and the curious, but for the general Use and Benefit of the public." The Bill, in other words, distinguished between research and public functions for the museum.

What do we know about the visitors that come? The 'most common' age groups are children below 11 years of age; 26% are adults between 25 and 34 years of age. Of particular interest is the fact that children between 11 and 16 form only 3% of our visitors and young adults between 17 and 20 form only 11%. There is therefore some justification for regarding the Natural History Museum as a 'kids' museum, for children under 11. It appears that people come as young children, only to return when they are parents with their own children. So the vital years in education between 11 and 20 provide less than a quarter of our audience.

Approximately two-thirds of our visitors have completed their full-time education but eight out of ten have no qualifications in biology. Half of all visitors are visiting the museum for the first time and eight out of ten have not visited the museum on a previous occasion within the past year.

But in a summary of results in 1977 from our Annual Visitor Survey we found that many people set out to visit the museum with the expectation of learning something; when they left they had learnt practically nothing, or, more to the point, they gave no evidence of having learned anything, and not one that we interviewed had been stimulated to search out information for him or herself.

I think we are entitled to draw a few tentative conclusions from this. There is little evidence that we are fulfilling the Advisory Board for the Research Council's stated aim for the museum of attracting youngsters to science; and there is little sign of the university student who is supposed to make so much use of the public galleries in the museum. There would seem to be a distinct need for a new approach if we are going to fulfil the terms of the 1753 Bill.

A paper submitted to Trustees for their consideration in February 1972 initiated the new exhibition scheme. Entitled 'A Proposal for a New Approach to the Visiting Public', it starts by discussing the existing exhibition: "it is piecemeal and conceptually static, neglectful of natural processes and reflects to its loss the division of the museum into five separate departments." The 1972 paper says that the new

exhibition should deal with all forms of life, with the origin of the Earth and its life, and with the major geological processes which have affected life. It should point out areas of doubt and speculation and should complement the other national museums in London. It would have a uniquely comprehensive opportunity to display the full range of natural history. The paper suggests that the content of the new exhibition should be grouped under four headings: man, ecology, life processes and behaviour, and evolution and diversity.

There is no intention of reducing the number of organisms on display. On the contrary, the policy is to expand the exhibits illustrating diversity especially in invertebrates and plants which will be dealt with properly for the first time in the history of the museum.

My department of public services was created in January 1975 specifically to implement this new exhibition scheme. We want to make the museum an exciting place where the layman can enjoy exploring and discovering natural history. We need to attract an audience that is representative of the general public. We must recognise the need to motivate visitors.

Departmental policy gives rise to a long-term plan, which was represented by four documents written by museum scientists, members of all the departments. About 40 were involved in all and the four documents cover the four themes. The first three documents have been in the library of the museum since November 1972, the fourth, on evolution and diversity, since October 1973, and open for people to read and send in their comments. The evolution and diversity document, for example, says: ". . . the aim of the new exhibits on these topics should demonstrate the varied form and structure of species now existing; the historical relationships between them, and their status in the latest stage of continuing process of change on the surface of the Earth." These exhibits will contain the vast majority of the material now on show in the museum. The public will expect us to continue to provide what they have always found to be the most entertaining aspect of the museum halls of monsters. On a more profound level, we hope the visitor will be able to derive an intellectually satisfying explanation of his origins, his unity with terrestrial life, and his uniqueness and his role. The exhibits will include Recent and fossil species and will be ordered systematically by relationships.

There is a problem to be solved: the diffusion of knowledge to the general public. It is not easily solved, but by a process of trial and error it is possible to develop better solutions. Our whole approach to the operation of mounting the exhibits is based on this assumption. □