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*The Manager
Australian Science Capability Review
Department of Industry, Science and Resources*

September 27, 2000

Chief Scientist, Dr Robin Batterham's – "The Chance to Change" discussion paper

I write as Secretary of the Society of Australian Systematic Biologists (SASB). The SASB represents the professional interests of 300 systematic and evolutionary biologists throughout Australia, including botanists, zoologists, parasitologists and mycologists. These scientists are responsible for studies on the taxonomy and diversity of Australia's biota.

Our Society supports the general thrust of the discussion paper recently released by Chief Scientist Dr Robin Batterham, "The Chance to Change", which addresses issues of vital interest and importance to our members and to Australia as a whole. We welcome the recommendations, and we look forward to the implementation of the recommendations in the near future.

The Report's conclusion that Australia must nurture its basic research is indisputable, as findings made by our scientists provide the foundation on which innovation, application and utilization are built. However, in addition to the core disciplines Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics that are highlighted in the Report, we feel that it is important to include Biology, which is an integral part of the "natural sciences". Submissions to the Australian Science Capability Review were made by a number of biological organizations, but their contributions, and the pertinent points that they made, have not been explicitly incorporated into the Report.

Basic research in cell and molecular biology, and in environmental sciences, underpins all of Australia's biological activities, such as agriculture and forestry, biotechnology, and the health sciences. It also underlies all decision-making on environmental and biodiversity issues. There is much still to be learnt in basic biology, and this cannot be derived solely from research in the other disciplines.

We would particularly highlight the role of biodiversity research in this regard. Australia has one of the world's megadiverse biotas and yet a large proportion of it is not even named. The skills required for this most basic of tasks in the discovery and understanding of our biota are diminishing - many taxonomists are either soon to retire or are already retired and vacated positions are not being filled. The reasons for this decline in positions and the lack of recruits is largely due to the perception that there are few job opportunities and, even with a job, very limited opportunities for funding. This perception appears to be largely valid.

From this perspective, herbaria and museums are unfortunately not explicitly referred to in the Report. These organizations are significant research agencies in Australia, especially in areas of systematics and biodiversity assessment. They also address arguably the widest audience of all learning institutions (life-long learning in the literal sense), as they have programs for primary and secondary school children, their staff co-supervise post-graduate students in many tertiary institutions, and they provide learning facilities and opportunities for the general public.

If museums and herbaria are not a prominent feature in discussion papers on science then their contribution will continue to be under-valued or even overlooked. It is important that smaller research organizations, and organizations with important public educational roles, are not forgotten.

The Society would like to congratulate those involved in putting this Report together. However, we

strongly urge consideration of the fundamental ingredients outlined above that are needed to enhance and strengthen the strategies proposed.

Yours sincerely,

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