Visit to the Linnean Society by HM the Emperor of Japan, 29th May 2007

Response by Dr Richard Fortey to the Emperor's address

Your Imperial Majesties, Your Excellency the Ambassador, members of His Majesty's official suite, Fellows of the Linnean Society, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great honour for me to stand before you and to respond to His Imperial Majesty. His Majesty has given us a most interesting and thought provoking talk on Linnaeus and we are honoured that he has chosen this venue for his keynote address in the Tercentenary year. Here and elsewhere His Imperial Majesty has made clear the importance of history and tradition in science – and, as one who specialises in creatures that existed several hundred million years ago, I would certainly agree with him. I would also fully support his views about the importance of preserving specimens and I laud the work of our predecessors in this Society for all that they have done to make sure that so many of Linnaeus's specimens are still available to us.

Linnaeus only knew a little about Japan but he had an international outlook and great curiosity. I am sure that he would be deeply gratified to know that his Tercentenary was being celebrated all over the world, and that the Emperor of Japan had come all the way to Europe to take part in the celebrations in Sweden and in London.

As His Imperial Majesty has pointed out Linnaeus was a great scientist who was dedicated to his subject. With his immense hard work he set an example to us all but he was also a great enthusiast. I think that it is the combination of these two qualities which are the key to success in science. Both qualities are desperately needed in addressing the key challenges we face now – the need to save species and conserve biodiversity

The Linnaean inheritance is very much a living one. In another context His Imperial Majesty has given an excellent example of the continuing value of Linnaean nomenclature by pointing out that the trees in the garden of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo are labelled with their binomial names so that any foreign visitor can immediately recognise the species. What has been striking over the last few decades is an increasing sense that the systematic community is one – worldwide. The universality of Linnaean nomenclature is a symbol of this internationalism. One might say that the earlier days of

systematics and discovery were intimately linked with national pride – our collection is more comprehensive or includes more rarities than your collection – that kind of thing. This was in a context of a static world: the scientist only had to go out into the field to pluck the fruits of nature.

How things have changed! It seems that many of those fruits before anyone has even had a chance to gather them. This is not the occasion to re-iterate the problems imposed on the natural world by climate change and human population growth. But one effect of the growing crisis has been to unite scientists together in unprecedented ways, sharing knowledge, making national collections world resources. The Linnean Society is dedicated to this ecumenical spirit – not just by making most of the precious information the Society holds available anywhere through the internet. Organismic biologists are a single community – the fine traditions of our Japanese colleagues a vital thread in the whole tapestry.

I am a palaeontologist, and thus have under my purview some 3.5 billion years of history of life on earth. We palaeontologists are accustomed to taking the long view! And as a relatively small band of specialists it can sometimes seem daunting to try to document a rich past when the riches of the present are still imperfectly known. But I believe that it is vital to understand how we got here – how the earth and life have collaborated over the vast stretches of geological time to establish the ecologies that adorn the world today. This is not a matter for an esoteric bunch of scientists – it should be a matter of common culture. Everyone should know about my trilobites, as they should about feathered dinosaurs or *Homo heidelbergensis*.
So I also believe we scientists have a duty to make our work known outside our own academies – through writing for the general public, through TV programmes, and increasingly, through websites. Only by heightening awareness of the complexity of the natural world will we (I profoundly hope) stimulate a buried instinct for its wise stewardship.

As some of you will know, I am a longstanding member of the Linnean Society, but I am an equally longstanding member of the Geological Society – indeed I am currently the President of that Society. I know that His Imperial Majesty is also an expert on the reactions of fishes to fault movements – so he, too, embraces the concerns of both

societies. We live in an age when the old boundaries of disciplines are blurring – and a good thing too!

His Imperial Majesty may be interested to know that three of the societies in this Courtyard are celebrating major anniversaries this year – whilst the Linnean Society celebrates the Tercentenary of the birth of Linnaeus, the Society of Antiquaries is celebrating its own Tercentenary, and the Geological Society is celebrating its Bicentenary. I am delighted to say that these events have brought the societies together and we have had, or are planning a number of joint Courtyard events.

We know that His Imperial Majesty has taken a great interest in the history of science in Japan and the relationships which developed very early on between western and Japanese practitioners, particularly in the field of medicine. Just as Linnaeus would have been gratified to see what an inheritance he has left I am sure that he would be deeply impressed by the scale of modern scientific collaboration. Japan is now a leading scientific nation that most scientists in Britain will have visited at least once and there are many collaborative projects. In all this the Imperial family has given an outstanding lead for which we are all grateful.