

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY



MICHAEL J. NOVACEK, PH.D.
*Senior Vice President and
Provost of Science
Curator of Paleontology*

PHONE: 212-769-5805
FAX: 212-769-5495
novacek@amnh.org

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The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States of America
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), we write to enlist your support for an Executive Order promoting the preservation and use of the nation's scientific research collections.

Scientific collections, held in hundreds of museums and universities throughout the country and around the world, represent the legacy resources and natural heritage of all humankind. They provide a monumental record of nature, life, and human culture, and are key not only to understanding the past and present, but also to unlocking the secrets of the future. In addition to the important academic inquiries these collections allow, they are central to our efforts to confront some of the great environmental and health challenges of our time—providing us a baseline for understanding the effects of global climate change, the identification of both host and parasite organisms responsible for the spread of infectious diseases, the actual and potential ranges of invasive pests of potential crop plants, the status of changes in fisheries and other marine resources, and the basic data to help model biotic and abiotic planetary systems.

Most of the world's science collections, encompassing more than a billion specimens, currently reside within the United States, with a substantial minority under Federal control. The large majority of these collections fall outside of the Federal system, held mostly in the great natural history museums, botanical gardens, and major research universities. The AMNH alone, a private organization, holds some 32 million specimens and artifacts that support research on the development of the universe, the Earth, and the diversification and patterns of the distribution of life, as well as document the evolution of human cultures.

In order to cogently focus the resources of all these collections and research institutions, we request that you adopt and issue the Executive Order recently suggested by Dr. William Brown, President of the Natural Science Collections Alliance, to Dr. John Holdren, Director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), which would mandate a leadership role for the OSTP for all scientific research collections in the

United States—not just federally supported and owned collections—in order to better preserve and apply the study of this part of our national heritage. Dr. Brown's letter of request and a draft of the Order are enclosed.

The OSTP has already taken a leadership position in the Interagency Working Group on Scientific Collections (IWGSC), with regard to federally supported collections. The IWGSC released, in December 2008, an extremely thoughtful report, "Scientific Collections: Mission-critical Infrastructure for Federal Science Agencies," which provides important documentation on the value of collections for, among other purposes, maintaining international trade, combating agricultural threats, elucidating human trade and cultural history, and documenting changes in air and water quality over time. The report, however, only addressed the scientific collections held or supported by the Federal Government, but as noted above, the great majority of scientific collections and specimens in the United States are not federally owned or supported. The proposed Order would expand the scope to encompass all scientific collections, thereby including a hugely significant component of our country's natural heritage.

We believe that the suggested Executive Order is a necessary next step for bringing the power of collections-based research to bear on global climate change, human health, and the other critical issues of our time. We urge you to adopt it and in so doing help to apply all our collections resources, collaboratively, to prepare our nation for an uncertain future.

Sincerely,

Michael D. Novacek, Ph.D.
Provost and Senior Vice President for Science

Darrel R. Frost, Ph.D.
Associate Dean of Science for Collections

Enclosures