

MUSEUM OF COMPARATIVE ZOOLOGY

The Agassiz Museum



HARVARD UNIVERSITY
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8 September 2009

Dr. John Holdren, Director
Office of Science and Technology Policy
Executive Office of the President
725 17th Street Room 5228
Washington, DC 20502

Dear Dr. Holdren:

On behalf of the Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) I write to express strong support for the Natural Science Collections Alliance (NSCA)-proposed Executive Order for issuance by President Obama to promote the preservation and use of scientific collections.

Our nation's natural science collections, whether at the Smithsonian Institution, an independent or university-affiliated natural history museum such as the MCZ, or a science department at a small liberal arts college, are irreplaceable resources that enable us to understand the world in which we live. These specimen and data collections not only help us understand the biological and physical history of the planet Earth, they also are essential to our ability to understand how earth systems function today and how they may function in an ever-changing world.

The Museum of Comparative Zoology (MCZ) at Harvard University is a center for research and education focused on the comparative relationships of animal life. It was founded in 1859 by an act, signed into law, of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts primarily through the efforts of Louis Agassiz, a brilliant Swiss lecturer and scholar. The museum established and served as a training ground for professional zoologists and influenced many budding U.S.-based museums through this new generation. Research at the MCZ continues to follow Agassiz's vision to illuminate the structures of living things, their natural classification and relationship with their surroundings, while remaining a leading institution for the study of evolutionary and comparative biology. Present-day MCZ collections comprise approximately 21 million specimens of extant and fossil animal species, which continue to be a focus of research and teaching by students and researchers from MCZ, Harvard and beyond.

The proposed Executive Order sends a strong message to the natural science collections research and education community. In short, it would demonstrate that the Obama Administration is aware of the important role our institutions play in the nation's scientific research and education enterprise. Moreover, it would demonstrate that federal support and use of data from scientific collections has been hindered by



inadequate coordination of planning and budgets. The Executive Order would establish a formal mechanism by which federal agencies could ensure wise and strategic investments in this important and irreplaceable part of our research infrastructure.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. When you are next back in Cambridge, I would welcome the opportunity to provide you with a tour of the MCZ. Please do not hesitate to contact William Brown, NSCA President, or Robert Gropp, NSCA Director of Public Policy if you have any questions concerning the proposed Executive Order.

Sincerely yours,

James Hanken
Alexander Agassiz Professor of Zoology,
Curator in Herpetology, and Director