



NATURAL SCIENCE COLLECTIONS ALLIANCE

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May 25, 2010

Dr. Robert Guralnick
Writing Committee, Digitization of Biological Collections
Via email: Robert.Guralnick@colorado.edu

Re: Comments on the Final Draft Strategic Plan for Establishing a National Digital Biological Collections Resource

Dear Dr. Guralnick and Members of the Writing Committee:

The Natural Science Collections Alliance (NSC Alliance) commends the Writing Committee for its dedication and commitment to the development of a Strategic Plan for the Establishment of a National Digital Biological Collections Resource. The NSC Alliance appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Final Draft Strategic Plan. We strongly endorse the proposed initiative and look forward to working with the Writing Committee, Federal agencies, non-governmental organizations, and the scientific community to develop and implement the National Digital Biological Collections Resource.

The Natural Science Collections Alliance (NSC Alliance, www.nscalliance.org) is a Washington, DC-based nonprofit association that supports natural science collections, their human resources, the institutions that house them, and their research activities for the benefit of science and society. The roughly 100 member institutions of the NSC Alliance are part of an international community of museums, botanical gardens, herbariums, universities and other institutions that house natural science collections and utilize them in research, exhibitions, academic and informal science education, and outreach activities.

Evidence of the need to digitize the nation's biological collections was provided in May 2010 when a fire swept through Brazil's Butantan Institute. As media reports have chronicled, the fire destroyed one of the world's largest collections of snakes, spiders, and scorpions. As at least one news report noted, the collection in Sao Paulo contained

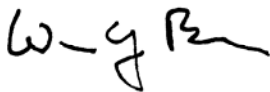
roughly 500,000 specimens collected over 100 years. The specimens were preserved for research into the creation of serums and vaccines. However, given threats to biological diversity in many areas of South America, it is likely that the fire not only destroyed specimens essential for medical research, but also specimens that demonstrate and explain biological diversity that is no longer found in nature.

Biological collections in the United States are also in jeopardy. A fire, flood, earthquake, or other disastrous event could easily destroy irreplaceable biological collections held in facilities across the nation. Data from the 2005 Heritage Health Index report illustrates how ill-prepared many collections are to protect specimens from catastrophic events. Although not a substitute for the original collections, digitized resources do provide a record of an institution's holdings and data. Thus, if physical specimens are lost, a record would remain and some research would still be possible.

As discussed in the Strategic Plan, a National Digital Biological Resource would contribute to technological innovations. This effort would also build a national platform that would provide scientists, students, and decision-makers (public and private) with access to specimens and data that will advance science, improve education, and provide for informed policy development. Thus, the NSC Alliance recommends that any national plan to digitize collections have the appropriate support and participation, both financial and technical, of all Federal agencies that maintain collections or have collections housed at non-Federal facilities.

Again, the NSC Alliance enthusiastically supports the Draft Strategic Plan for Establishing a National Digital Biological Collections Resource. The NSC Alliance looks forward to working with all stakeholders to implement the proposed plan.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'W-Y Brown', with a stylized flourish at the end.

William Y. Brown, Ph.D.
President