



NATURAL SCIENCE COLLECTIONS ALLIANCE

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June 18, 2010

The Honorable Madeleine Bordallo
Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife
United States House of Representatives
1324 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Re: Hearing on “Ocean Science and Data Limits in a Time of Crisis”

Dear Ms. Chairwoman:

As President of the Natural Science Collections Alliance (NSC Alliance), I thank you for recognizing the importance of biological collections during the Subcommittee’s recent hearing about science and its role in understanding and responding to the problems associated with the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

The NSC Alliance is a 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. Our 100 institutional members 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.

As you know, Dr. Jonathan Coddington, associate director of research and collections at the National Museum of Natural History, testified before your subcommittee about the importance of natural history collections. As Dr. Coddington noted, the Smithsonian’s collections of marine biological specimens represent a unique and now irreplaceable resource to describe quantitatively the pre-spill Gulf of Mexico ecosystem. These collections document the biological diversity of the region prior to the oil spill, and will contribute to assessments of the spill’s environmental impacts and will help to guide ecological restoration efforts.

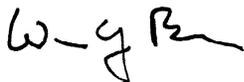
Scientific collections held by other institutions will also contribute valuable scientific knowledge to the oil spill response. As Dr. Coddington noted, an estimated 42 percent of publically available biological specimens from the Gulf of Mexico are held by entities other than the Smithsonian Institution. Numerous universities, museums, and non-profit research centers hold biological specimens collected from the region. These collections serve as vital sources of biological information about the Gulf of Mexico and the southeastern United States.

Our nation's natural history collections, whether held at a national museum or in a university science department, contain genetic, tissue, organism, and environmental samples that constitute a library of Earth history. These specimens and associated data drive cutting edge research on the significant challenges facing modern society. Beyond informing oil spill response and restoration, these specimens enable researchers to answer questions about the effects of climate change, the spread of invasive species and pathogens, and the loss of biological diversity and its effects on ecosystem function. In short, natural history collection specimens and associated data enable scientists and natural resource managers to develop the knowledge required to inform environmental management.

Unfortunately, for too many years, the federal government has failed to make an adequate or coordinated investment in natural science collections. Thus, we often hear from curators about backlogs of specimens that have yet to be identified or properly curated. There is also a need to digitally capture and make available information about key holdings. For these and other reasons, the NSC Alliance has requested that the President promulgate an Executive Order establishing a formalized interagency process for the preservation and use of the nation's science collections, both federal and non-federal. Information about the NSC Alliance proposed order is available on our Web site at <http://nscalliance.org/?p=139>.

Once again, thank you for focusing attention on the importance of science collections to responding to environmental and public health crises. I would welcome an opportunity to discuss with you the importance of a sustained and coordinated federal investment in the nation's scientific collections. Please do not hesitate to contact me at 215-299-1016 or wbrown@ansp.org, or Dr. Robert Gropp, Director of Public Policy, at 202-628-1500 x 250 or rgropp@aibs.org.

Sincerely,



William Y. Brown
President
Natural Science Collections Alliance