



NATURAL SCIENCE COLLECTIONS ALLIANCE

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August 19, 2011

Ms. Susan Hildreth
Director, Institute of Museum and Library Services
1800 M Street, NW, 9th Floor
Washington, DC 20036-4600

Dear Ms. Hildreth,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Institute of Museum and Library Services' (IMLS) strategic planning.

The Natural Science Collections Alliance (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 nearly 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.

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

As an important federal partner to museums, IMLS should provide financial support, training opportunities, and other resources to assist with the digitization of U.S. based scientific collections. The IMLS should also help natural history museums develop and implement disaster and safety plans that will safeguard collections and protect museum personnel and visitors in the event of a catastrophic event.

Evidence of the need to digitize the nation's biological collections and to ensure museums have adequate safety procedures to protect collections and people was provided in May 2010 when a

fire swept through Brazil's Butantan Institute. As news reports 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. 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.

On behalf of NSC Alliance, I encourage IMLS to increase the federal commitment to digitizing our nation's scientific collections. Moreover, NSC Alliance would be happy to work with IMLS to help ensure that natural science collections and natural history museums have the resources required to prepare for a natural or human-induced catastrophic event.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration of these comments. Please do not hesitate to contact me at wycbrown@gmail.com, or NSC Alliance Director of Public Policy Dr. Robert Gropp at 202-628-1500 x 250 or rgropp@aibs.org if you have any questions or if we may provide additional information.

Sincerely,

William Y. Brown
President