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2008 NATURAL SCIENCE COLLECTIONS ALLIANCE ECONOMIC IMPACT SURVEY

ROBERT GROPP AND MICHAEL A. MARES

BOOK REVIEW: *TOURISTS OF HISTORY*

TONY MARES



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Contributions may be solicited by the Editor from museum professionals not affiliated with the MALS Museum Studies Program. All submissions are reviewed by one or more members of the Editorial Board or by outside reviewers.

COVER ILLUSTRATION: A drawer of tropical birds in the Bird Collection of the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History. Photo by Michael A. Mares.

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Kangaroo rats. University of New Mexico. Museum of Southwestern Biology

2008 Natural Science Collections Alliance Economic Impacts Survey

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The Natural Science Collections Alliance (NSC Alliance) is the nation's leading non-profit organization dedicated to advancing the interests of natural science collections, their human resources, the institutions that house them, and their research activities for the benefit of science and society. NSC Alliance members are part of an international community of museums, botanical gardens, herbariums, universities and other institutions that house natural science collections gathered over centuries of exploration and utilize them in research such as biodiversity studies, global climate change, patterns of extinction, global habitat changes, the pace of environmental destruction, emerging diseases, genetic research, pest invasion biology, and agricultural and public health threats, mineral and geosciences research, among others (Suarez and Tsutsui 2004). Collections are also used in exhibitions, in academic and informal science education, and in outreach activities to tens of millions of people each year.

Abstract. *The National Science Collections Alliance conducted a survey of natural science collections in October 2008. The survey was designed to capture the impact of the economic recession on natural science collections in the United States. Private and government funding accounts for half of support for natural history and natural science museums, therefore it was expected that natural science collections would be negatively impacted by the ailing U.S. economy. Two thirds of the 88 collections that completed the survey anticipate a budget cut in the coming 12-24 months. Of the 86 percent of respondents that receive philanthropic donations, about half expect to see reduced donations in the coming 12-24 months. Half of the collections anticipate that government grants and contracts will play a more important role in research and education programs in the future. Despite uncertainty about future funding, natural science collections continue to provide public education: 87 percent of collections report stable or increased public attendance in the previous 12-24 months. The results of the survey highlight the need for collections to prepare for institutional budget cuts, build partnerships in their community, and work with other collections to share best practices. Actions by the federal government could also help to relieve the burden on science collections. The President should establish an interagency council to facilitate coordination among federal programs that fund or manage collections-related research and education. Finally, both the President and Congress should seek significant increases in federal funding for collections-based research and education programs.*

In 2008, the economic condition of the United States was weakening. By the fall, domestic and global economies were in recession and indicators of economic health were in decline (Bureau of Economic Analysis 2009, Landler 2008, Rooney 2008, and Wall Street Journal 2008). Across the nation, state budgets began to tighten as tax revenues decreased (NGA/NASBO 2008). Bank failures loomed, home foreclosures increased, major companies failed, and unemployment rates increased (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009). This combination of economic factors affected all sectors, including public and private educational institutions, museums, philanthropic charities, and endowments (Blumenstyk 2009, Masterson 2009, and Vogel 2008).

Economic conditions impact natural science collections directly, whether the collection is part of a large natural history museum or a science department at a small liberal arts college. Regardless of whether a collection supports fundamental research and development, K-16 education, public education, or government decision-makers that require ready access to the irreplaceable information stored in the nation's natural science collections, operational budgets are built from a mix of federal grants and contracts, state and local revenue sources, corporate donations, philanthropic donations, and endowments—all sectors that lost significant revenue/value in 2008.

In recent years—even prior to the current recessionary environment—many of these funding streams were strained as more public interests sought financial resources to maintain operations. Notably, natural science collections that rely on government grants and contracts have struggled over the years, as the budgets for many of these government programs have been stagnant at best. For instance, the United States' premiere federal agency responsible for funding fundamental scientific research, undergraduate and graduate students in science, early career scientists, and informal science education is the National Science Foundation (NSF). Despite repeated pledges and promises by policymakers in

the executive and legislative branches to increase investments in NSF-supported research, funding for collections through competitive grant programs such as those administered by the NSF's Biological Sciences Directorate have declined (Gropp and Lymn 2008). Indeed, it is widely recognized among museum professionals that many natural science collections had their survival threatened even before the impending economic collapse (Dalton 2003, Gropp 2003). Consequently, institutions that require funds for these programs in order to conduct research or upgrade facilities have allocated more time to securing an NSF grant or pursuing funding from other agencies (e.g., US Geological Survey, US Department of Agriculture, Environmental Protection Agency). Such alternative funding sources, however, have had few resources to fund collections infrastructure or research. Moreover, other research and education groups also compete for the increasingly limited resources from foundations and other agencies. Thus, researchers and institutional administrators are allocating more time to the pursuit of revenue than they are to the research and education activities that contribute to our nation's economic growth and international competitiveness.

In addition to stagnant federal investments in collections-related research and education programs, state budgets have tightened. For fiscal year 2009, more than half the states saw negative growth in general fund expenditures and revenue collections after accounting for inflation (NGA/NASBO 2008). These conditions may directly impact state funding for public universities or state collections/museums, potentially negatively impacting collection care, education programs and outreach, exhibits, and research. As illustrated by high-profile cases, such as California, states are struggling to balance budgets; making necessary investments in healthcare programs, K-12 education, and basic infrastructure. Thus, fewer financial resources are available for public higher education institutions, and the collections affiliated with these institutions. Consequently, university administrators are forced to press collection managers to secure increased funding from federal agencies—funding that is either not available or extremely difficult to obtain.

Given these trends and conditions, collections have looked to private or corporate and philanthropic donations—as well as institutional endowments—for resources to maintain on-going programs or to provide funding to sustain projects until financial conditions improve. As economic conditions deteriorated in 2008, the value of stock-laden endowments plummeted. Harvard and Yale, for example, reported reductions of billions of dollars in their endowments, while the Field Museum in Chicago recently reported a decline in its endowment of more than \$100 million dollars, resulting in significant staff and operations cutbacks. Reports began to surface that some universities were reevaluating campus initiatives and infrastructure projects due to budget concerns (Blumenstyk 2009).

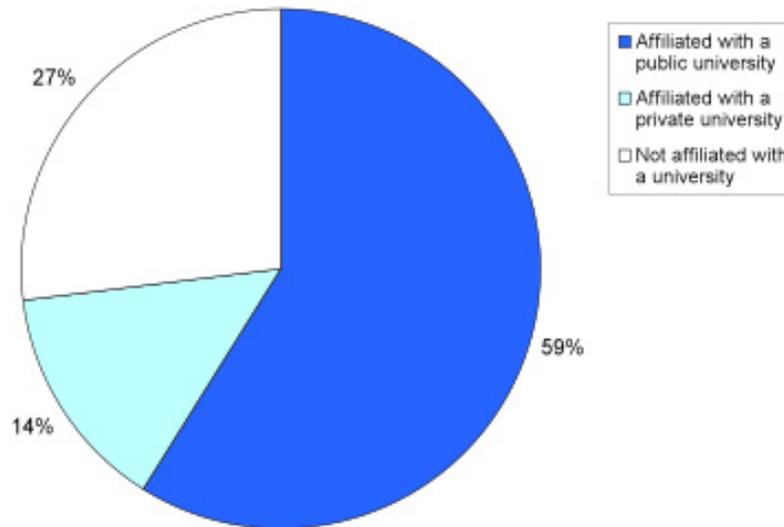


Fig. 1. Institutional affiliation of survey respondents.

Recognizing that these conditions offer both opportunities and challenges for natural science collections, the NSC Alliance surveyed collection institutions in October 2008 to obtain a baseline understanding of how collections are being impacted by and responding to the declining economic conditions. This report summarizes the findings from this first NSC Alliance Economic Impacts Survey.

In response to the factors reported above, from 15-30 October 2008 the NSC Alliance conducted an online survey of natural science collections to gather information about how the negative economic environment is affecting scientific collections. [Survey questions are given in Appendix 1.] Of note, the survey was conducted in the same quarter that United States and global stock markets began a cataclysmic decline leading to the loss of trillions of dollars in equity. Thus, the true magnitude of the current economic environment may not be reflected in this report. Moreover, the significant lag period in increasing unemployment numbers and declining state and federal budgets that follows such a sudden downturn in the economy may be several years, thus the true effects of the economic collapse have not yet been felt by most organizations.

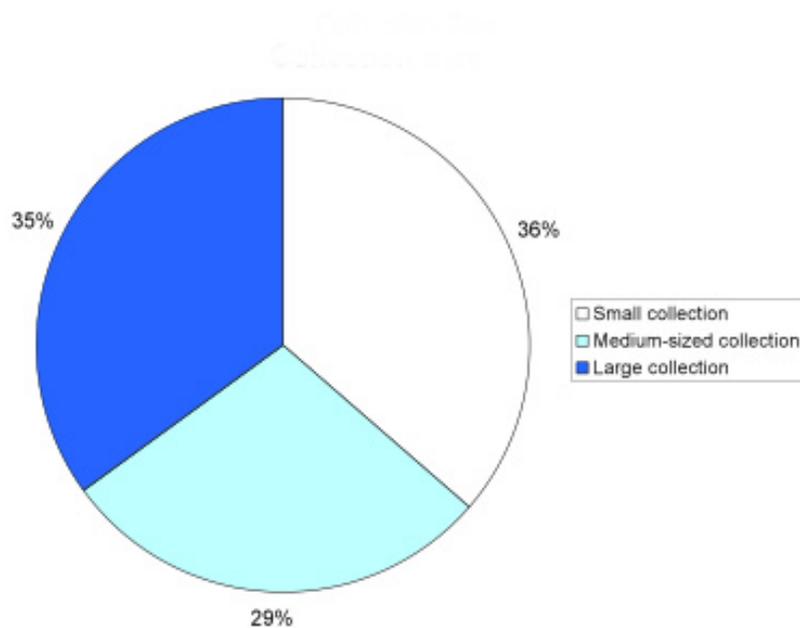


Fig. 2. Self-reported collection size.

Characteristics of Responding Collections

All natural science collections, including those unaffiliated with the NSC Alliance, were encouraged to complete the survey. Eighty-eight (88) institutions completed the survey. These institutions represented the diversity of natural science collections and were from all geographic regions of the United States. One non-US collection completed the survey.

The majority of survey respondents (59%) were from a collection affiliated with a public university, 14% were affiliated with a private university and 27% were not affiliated with a university (Fig. 1). The survey requested that institutions self-identify as a) large, b) medium, or c) small collections. Large collections accounted for 35% of responses, medium-sized collections accounted for 29% and small collections 36% of responses (Fig. 2). NSC Alliance member institutions accounted for 57 % of responses (Fig. 3).

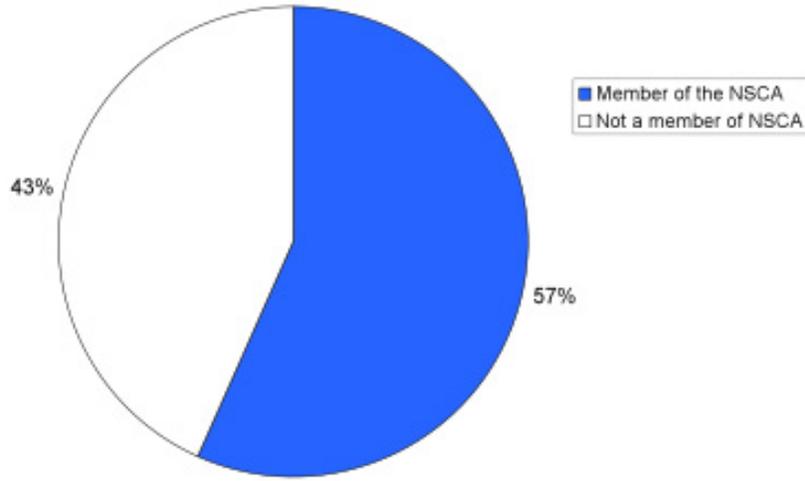


Fig. 3. NSC Alliance membership status.

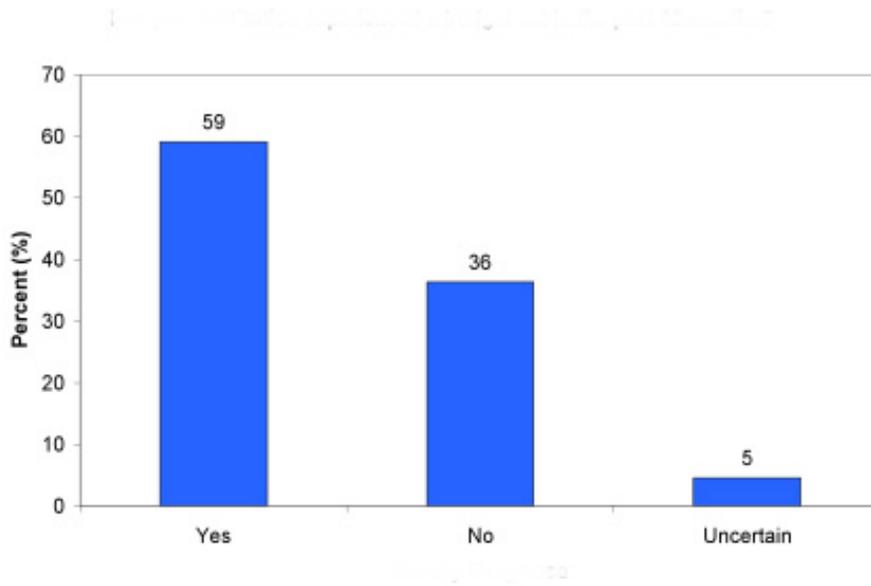


Fig. 4. The percent of natural science collections that experienced a budget cut in 2008.

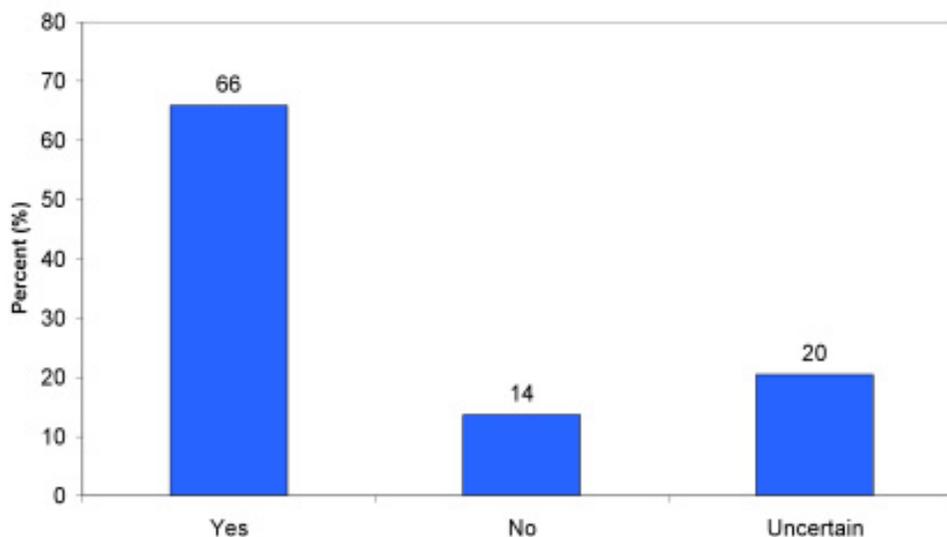


Fig. 5. Percent of natural science collections anticipating a budget cut in the next two years.

Institutional Budgets

The majority of respondents (59%) reported that their budget had been cut in the past 12 months (Fig. 4). An even higher number (66 %) anticipate a budget cut within the next two years, although 14% and 20% report not anticipating or being uncertain about whether their institution will be forced to cut its budget in the coming 12 to 24 months, respectively (Fig. 5). However, the survey was developed in response to a very sudden economic collapse and the scale and scope of the problem were not (and are not) yet fully understood.

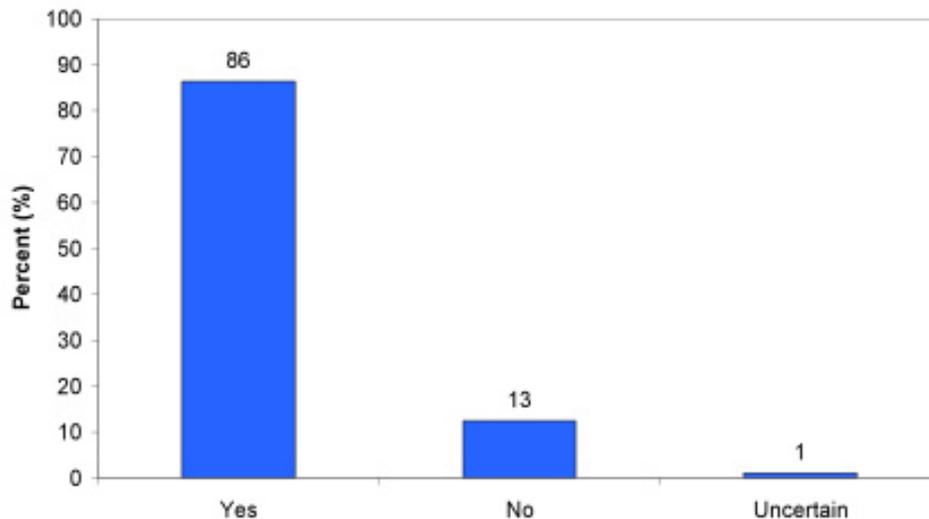


Fig. 6 Percent of natural science collections that receive philanthropic support..

Funding: Philanthropic and Corporate

An overwhelming majority of collections (86%) reported receiving philanthropic donations (Fig. 6). Almost half (48%) of collections receiving such support anticipate reduced giving in the next 12 to 24 months. An additional one-third of collections (33%) were uncertain whether or not charitable giving would decline, while 19% expected giving to remain stable or to increase (Fig. 7). Nearly half (49%) of survey respondents reported receiving corporate donations, while 35% and 16% do not receive corporate funds or were uncertain whether their institution receives funding from corporations, respectively (Fig. 8). Forty-seven percent of collections believe that corporate giving will decrease in the next two years, while 44% believe that corporate donations will not change over this time period (Fig. 9). A small number of institutions answered the question about near-term corporate giving rates. Of these respondents, a mere 8% (n=3) expected corporate giving to increase in the next 12 to 24 months, while 47% and 44%, respectively, anticipate decreased or unchanged corporate giving.

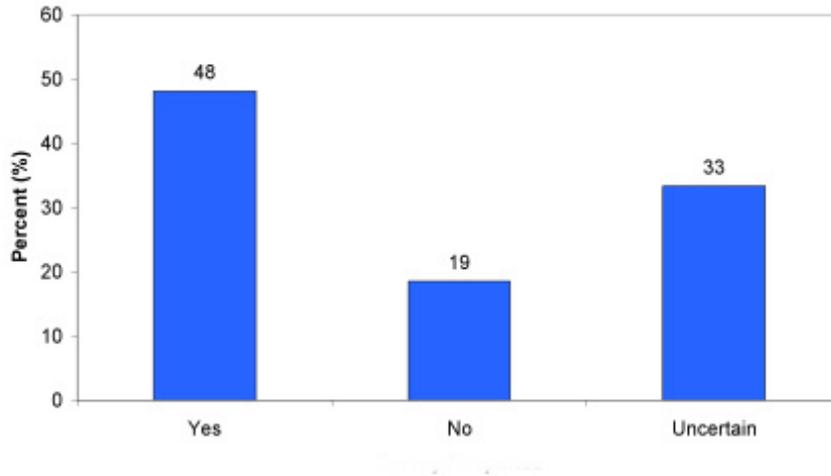


Fig. 7. Anticipate reductions in giving among collections receiving philanthropic support.

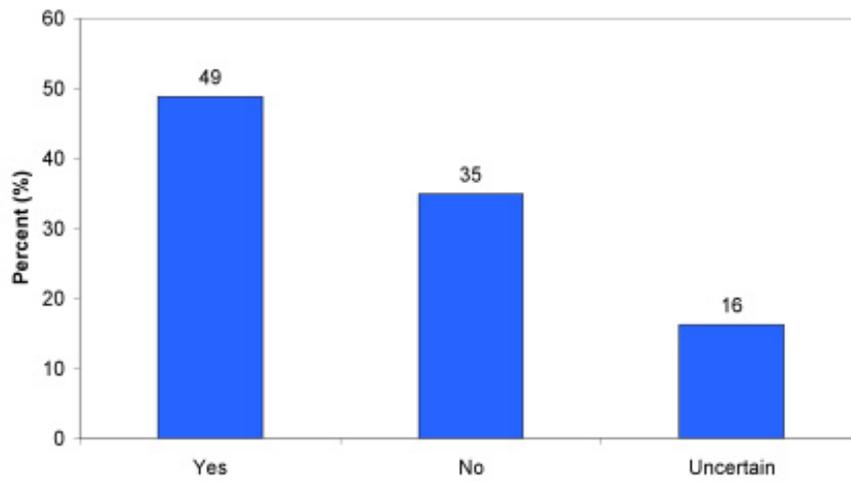


Fig. 8. Percentage of collections receiving corporate donations.

Funding: Government

With respect to government grants and contracts, 50% of collections think that government grants and contracts will play a more important role in their institution's research and educational programs in the next 12 to 24 months. The balance of respondents were not yet certain (19%) or did not expect (31%) that government funding would play a more significant role in their research and education budgets in the next two years (Fig. 10).

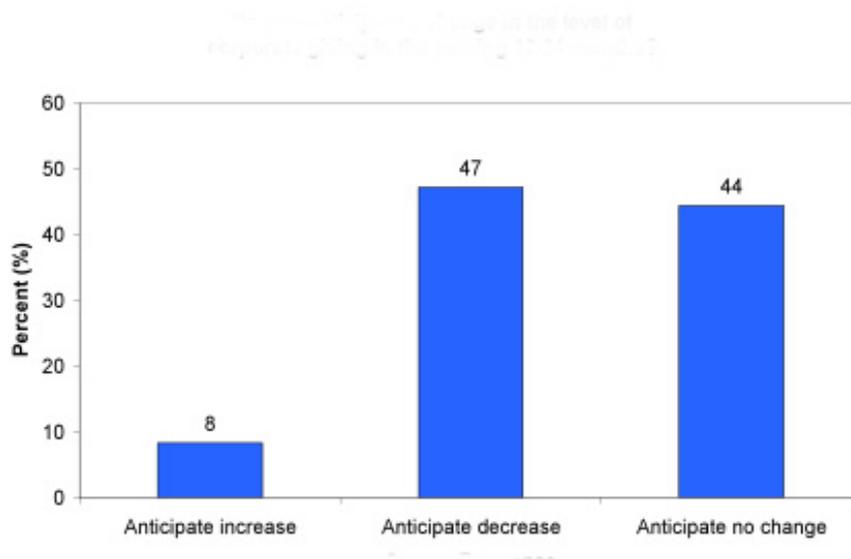


Fig. 9. Anticipate changes in corporate giving within the next two years.

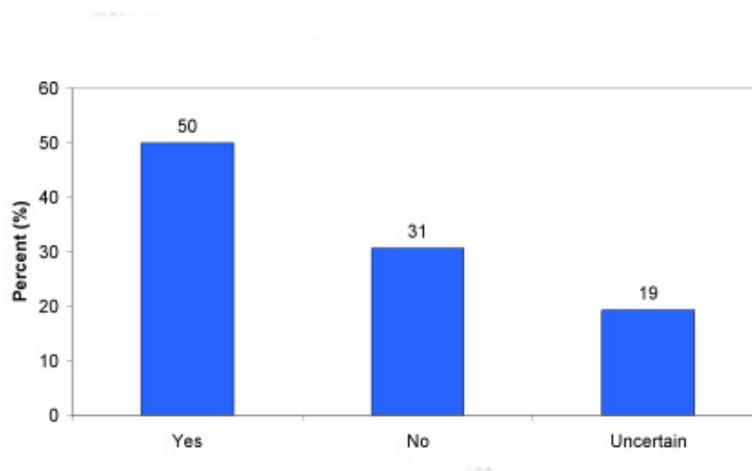


Fig. 10. Increased importance of government grants and contracts to research and education programs at natural science collections in the coming 12–24 months.

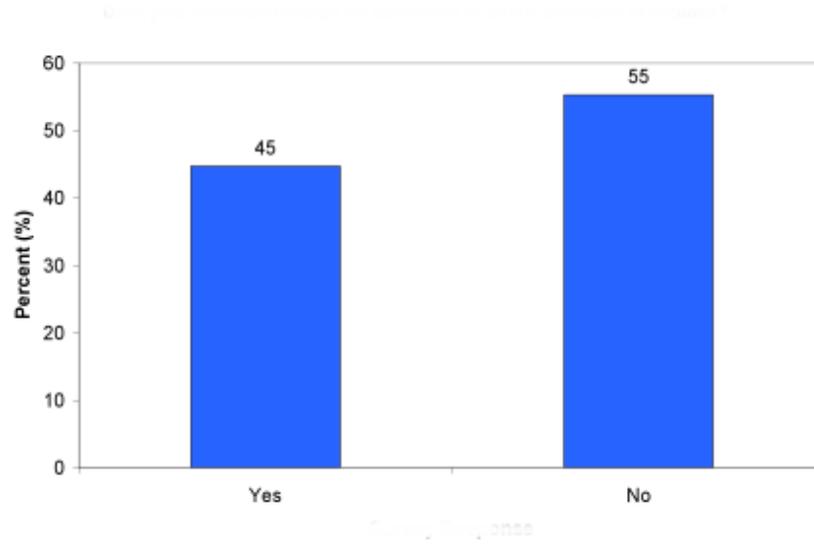


Fig. 11. Percent of natural science collection charging admission for public programs or exhibits.

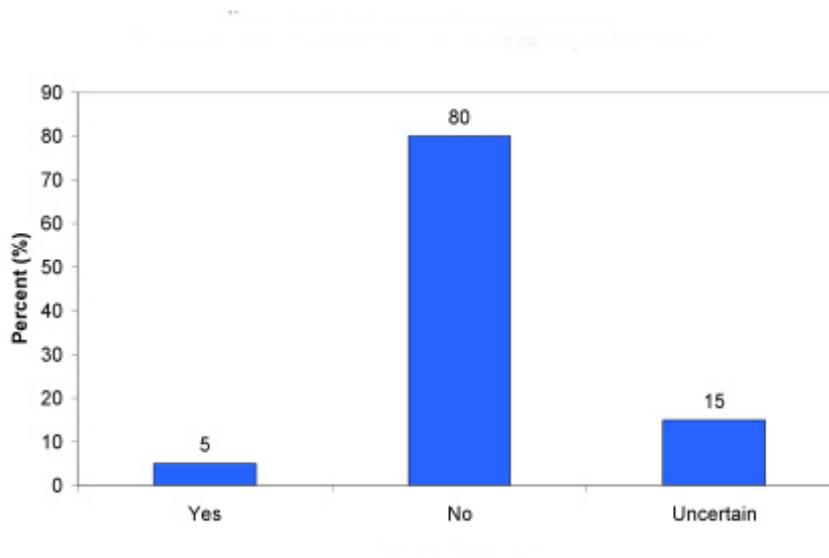


Fig. 12. Percent of natural science collections which anticipate changing their institutional program admission fee policy.

Public Benefit: Attendance

The majority of natural science collections that offer public educational programs and exhibits do not charge admission (Fig. 11). Moreover, despite the current negative economic environment, the overwhelming majority (80%) of collections do not anticipate changing their policies concerning admission fees. (Fig. 12) More importantly, however, 55% of collections report a slight or significant increase in attendance during the past 12 months and an impressive 42 % report no significant change in attendance (Fig. 13).

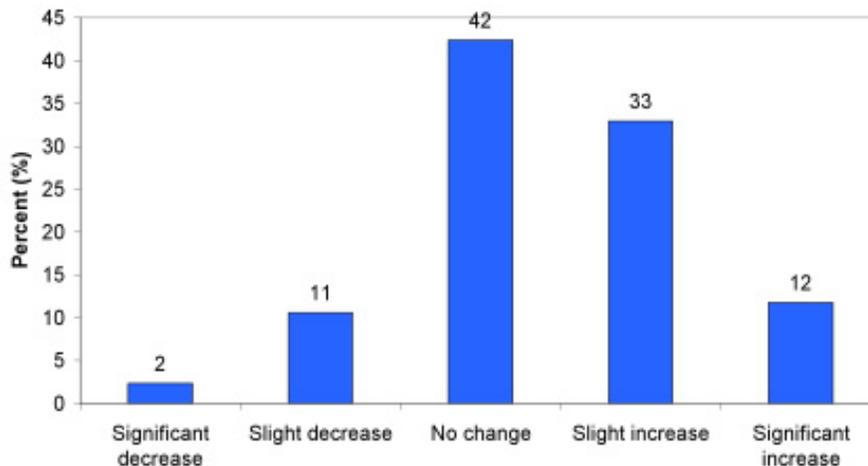


Fig. 13. Changes in public attendance during the past year.

Conclusions

These data suggest that during times of economic stress, more American families may view natural history museums and natural science collections as important, low-cost sources of family entertainment. It may, however, also be that as children and parents have become increasingly aware of the potential impacts of climate change and biodiversity loss on their environment, they are more interested in visiting science collections that help explain the natural world (Mares 2009). Regardless of the underlying cause, it remains the case that public attendance at natural science collections increased in 2008.



Baskets, Ethnology Collection, SNOUMCA

Recommendations

1. Collections should anticipate and prepare for new or additional institutional budget cuts.
2. Collections are valued community educational and recreational resources. Collection administrators should actively work to build community partnerships that can demonstrate support for the collection and help defend the institution from disproportionately large budget cuts.
3. Collections should increasingly work together to share information and develop best practices that may be shared among institutions to ensure that the nation's collections remain robust.
4. The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) should release the federal government's report on the findings of the survey conducted by the Interagency Working Group on Scientific Collections. This survey is believed to include data on the health of federal scientific collections and could serve as a blueprint for strengthening the nation's collections.
5. The President should issue an Executive Order establishing a federal interagency council that will facilitate increased coordination among federal programs that fund or manage collections-related research, education, and data collection and management.

6. The President should seek significant increased federal funding for the federal programs administered by the National Science Foundation, US Geological Survey, US Department of Agriculture, Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Commerce, Department of Energy, National Institutes of Health, Department of Defense, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services which fund collections or compensate private collections for holding government collections.

7. Congress should provide significant increased appropriations for collections-based research and educational programs.

Acknowledgments

We thank Megan Debranski Kelhart (formerly with the AIBS Public Policy Office) and Sarah Smiley, 2008 AIBS--American Society of Mammalogists graduate student science policy fellow, for their help in creating, administering, and compiling the results of the collections survey. We also thank the many museum directors and staff members who responded to the survey.

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Appendix 1: Survey Questions

1. Has your institution/collection experienced a budget cut in the past 12 months?

Yes/No/Uncertain

2. Do you anticipate a budget cut in the coming 12-24 months?

Yes/No/Uncertain & Text Box with “Please describe the potential magnitude and how it may impact research, education and staffing.”

3. Does your institution receive philanthropic donations?

Yes/No/Not Certain

4. If your institution receives philanthropic support, do you anticipate reduced giving in the coming 12-24 months? If yes, please use the text box to describe the potential impact this may have on your educational and research programs.

Yes/No/Not Certain & Text Box with “Please describe the impact of reduced giving on your programs.”

5. Does your institution receive corporate donations? Do you anticipate a change in the level of corporate giving in the coming 12-24 months? If yes, please use the text box below to describe how this may impact your programs. You may select more than one box.

Yes, we receive corporate funding

No, We do not receive corporate funding

Not certain

Yes, we anticipate increased corporate giving

Yes, we anticipate reduced corporate giving

We do not anticipate any change in corporate giving

6. Has your institution experienced a change in public attendance during the past 12 months?

No change in attendance

Slight increase in public attendance

Significant increase in public attendance

Slight decrease in public attendance

Significant decrease in public attendance

7. Does your institution charge for admission to public programs or exhibits?

Yes/No & Text Box with “What is the range of fees charged?”

8. If your institution does not charge admission, do you anticipate changing this policy in the coming 12-24 months?

Yes/No/Not certain & Text Box with “What factors may influence the decision to begin charging or to change the amount charged?”

2008 NSCA Survey: Gropp & Mares

9. Do you anticipate that government grants and contracts will play a more important role in your research and education programs in the coming 12-24 months?

Yes, government funding will be more important to our institution

No, government funding will be more important to our institution

Not certain yet

Text Box with “Which federal agencies and grant programs are most important to your institution?”

10. Please select the boxes below that best describe your institution.

Located in the northern US

Located in the southern US

Located in the eastern US

Located in the western US

Located outside of the US

Affiliated with a public university

Affiliated with a private university

Not affiliated with an university

We are a small collection

We are a medium-sized collection

We are a large collection

We are a member of the Natural Science Collections Alliance

We are not a member of the Natural Science Collections Alliance

Text Box with “Please provide the name of your collection. This information will not be disclosed or shared—it is being requested to ensure that only one response per collection/institution is included in the final analysis.

Book Review

Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero, by Marita Sturken. Duke University Press, 2007. 344



Oklahoma City Bombing Memorial

Tony Mares

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Since Marita Sturken's *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism* first appeared two years ago the issues she addresses have, if anything, become even more relevant to our times. She writes about the ways we memorialize the dead in America. She is concerned about the ways a culture of consumerism and comfort mediates legitimate mourning and channels it into naïve and closed sentimental responses that foreclose serious consideration of complex political and socioeconomic issues. We still have people dying violently in suicide bombings, in designer wars of choice, and in the daily road kill of a nation gone insane over the accessibility and use of guns. We still lock convicted persons away in privatized prisons where business, commercial, and community job incentives exert political pressure to keep the jails open indefinitely. The ways in which we memorialize the dead speak loudly about our values and about how we perceive ourselves as innocent and exceptional in relation to other societies and other cultures. This is the central concern of Dr. Sturken's book. We are tourists of history, she argues, because the way we memorialize tragic events is so problematic in relation to history:

It is my intent to call attention to how American cultural responses to traumatic historical events enable naïve political responses to those events. They do this precisely because these cultural responses allow American history to be seen in isolation, as exceptional and unique, as if it were not part of the rest of world history and as if it were something to be consumed. . . . Sites of American history . . . have had long histories of consumerism and commercialism.¹

There are two broad categories of memorials in the United States. There are the roadside markers of grief such as the *descansos* we often see, especially in the Southwest, as we drive along the highways. These memorials, for the most part, commemorate victims of automobile accidents and the custom of the *descanso*, brought to America from Spain into New Mexico and the greater Southwest, has spread across the country.² Even these are not without controversy. Recently, the New York Times published an article reviewing the pros and cons of such roadside markers. On the one side, the defenders of public property and personal safety deploy their arguments against private use and against those who point out that traditional customs of mourning deserve respect and should not be underestimated. Sylvia Grider, professor emerita of anthropology at Texas A&M writes:

Those who feel the need to memorialize their loved ones near the roadways where they died will continue to do so, regardless of legislation and other attempts at control.³

Then there are the largescale, often national in scope, memorials that commemorate those who have died in catastrophic events such as the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building bombing in Oklahoma City and the World Trade Center destruction of September 11, 2001. It is with this latter type of memorialization that Dr. Sturken is primarily concerned.

There are many ways of considering history. You can think about, reflect upon, and try to internalize some crucial meaning of a historical event or set of circumstances. At the Gettysburg Memorial, for example, you may ponder the extreme loss of life, the futility of war, the violence that seems to be in our DNA, or you may consider the patriotic sacrifice to keep the United States together as one nation, or the heroism of those who died on both sides of the conflict. The possibilities of serious reflection at such a memorial are boundless. Or, as we are wont to do, we may trivialize the experience. It is this trivialization of our own lived experience that so concerns Dr. Sturken, who is professor of culture and communication at New York University. At the heart of trivialization, is the concept of kitsch. The Oklahoma City bombing and the World Trade Center attack have garnered much serious attention, but they have also become the sites where kitsch cheapens these events.

Review: Tourists of History: Mares

Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Murrah Building in 1995 and the resulting deaths of 168 persons, including many children, and injuries to over six hundred other persons, traumatized the nation. Yet even this trauma would be surpassed on September 11, 2001, with the airplanes-as-missiles suicide attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon, and the failed attack that resulted in a plane crash in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, killing all aboard. The death totals from these attacks were 2,993, including the airplane hijackers.

Obviously, these serious and tragic acts of destruction merit our fullest attention. We owe it to ourselves to analyze what happened, why they occurred, who the perpetrators were, and what motivated and drove them to sacrifice their own lives for their vision of what the good was, whether we like their vision or not. The problem is that kitsch deflects away from all serious consideration of these tragedies. Kitsch also deflects introspection. After all, if we are only bystanders and observers of history, tourists as it were, and we are wrapped in the protective blankets of American innocence and exceptionalism, then kitsch may actually comfort us. Kitsch proscribes deeply reflective responses to tragic events. As Dr. Sturken writes:

A kitsch object can thus be seen not only as embodying a prepackaged sentiment, but also as conveying the message that this sentiment is one that is universally shared.

So Dr. Sturken raises the question: How appropriate is it to sell teddy bears and snow globes at the Oklahoma Memorial or at the World Trade Center site? More importantly, what is it that kitsch points us towards, and deflects us away from considering? In her view, kitsch objects reinforce a sense of comfort in a nation besotted with the idea of comfort. Kitsch objects help prevent us from considering what role we might have in the rise of domestic and foreign terrorism. Kitsch sentimentality turned Timothy McVeigh into a kind of rock star cultural icon for a brief period before and leading up to his execution. In other words, kitsch functions to deflect our attention away from the politics of domestic and global confrontations that relate to the very real political, social, and economic needs of various communities and cultures around the globe.

Kitsch helps prevent us from thinking about the size and scope of the empire the United States has built. With our bloated defense budgets and huge military, whom precisely are we defending against? German and Japanese imperialism has been vanquished. The Soviet Union has collapsed. China, a growing world power, is focused on its own vast sphere of influence, but unlike us, it doesn't have huge military bases scattered around the globe. The only empire left is us. So we may hug our teddy bears with their NYFD tags or shake our snow globes with the flag still flying over the Murrah building, but while such sentimentality and shirtsleeve patriotism may comfort us, it also leads us away from deeper issues we should probably be thinking about:

The promise of the teddy bear is that it will help to heal those most directly affected by trauma – that it will be able to make them feel better. But such a teddy bear also disables certain kinds of responses. It is not a versatile object that can be employed for a range of responses; it is a circumscribed object precisely because of the message of sentimentality and reassurance it offers. However overstated this may sound, such a teddy bear is ultimately not an innocent object.⁵

Dr. Sturken acknowledges the deep hurt of victims and their families in these tragic events. Her sympathy and support is always with them even as she points out how their honest sentiment is manipulated by political and consumer interests. She applauds the citizens of Oklahoma and Oklahoma City for the ways in which they have been able to preserve and convey a deep sense of human dignity in the Oklahoma Memorial. At the same time, she discusses the far more complex and contradictory responses to the World Trade Center disaster. Rising out of the smoke, the ruins, and above all the dust, of the collapsed Twin Towers, is a story of human grief pitted against commercial interests, individual and familial sorrow pitted against a hollow and distorting patriotism. As debate raged over the Freedom Center at the World Trade Center site, family opposition to the distortions of the proposed Freedom Center began to surface:

. . . family members who were opposed to [the Freedom Center] began to argue that their loved ones had *not* died for freedom; rather, they had died because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. One relative stated, “These people didn’t die for freedom – they were murdered,” and Charles Wolf, whose wife died at the World Trade Center, said, “It’s a hook to turn 9/11 people who went to work that day into part of this bigger idea for freedom. My wife was not a god-dam freedom fighter. All she was fighting for was a chance that we might move to a bigger apartment.”⁶



World Trade Center Tribute

Dr. Sturken offers no easy answers to the dilemmas raised by our processes of memorialization at the individual and communal level. She is painfully aware of the domestic and foreign deaths, the forever mounting body counts that our numbed psyche seems incapable of, or unwilling to see, beyond the sentimental and politically safe distortions induced by kitsch. She writes at length about the distortion of memory induced by kitsch and mediated by consumerism. We, as a nation, are often the aggressor in international affairs, but kitsch blinds us to thinking about this. Her book should be read by all who consider themselves thinking Americans and she deserves the last word here:

These are the stakes, finally, in why we must look at the practices of remembrance, the consequences of the equation of consumerism with citizenship, the political acquiescence that is enabled by kitsch objects of comfort, and the constant and consistent erasure of the vast majority of U. S. citizens and residents from public discourses. American culture clings tenaciously to its tourism of history, to its belief that the world and its ills are somewhere else. To see these connections is thus to demand that Americans bring

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² The Editors, New York Times. http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/12/should_roadsi...

³ Ibid.

⁴ Sturken, Ibid., p. 22

⁵ Ibid., p. 13

⁶ Ibid., p. 274

⁷ Ibid., pp. 292-293.

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