

# Smithsonian Institution

## Summary Proceedings of the Board of Regents

*June 12, 2006*

### **TOURING THE COLLECTIONS**

Prior to their regularly scheduled long-term planning meeting, the Regents were led by the Secretary on in-depth tours of several Smithsonian collections. Starting at the National Museum of American History, Kenneth E. Behring Center, the Regents were shown the collections care program for the military uniforms in the Armed Forces History Collection. During his introductory remarks, Museum Director Brent Glass explained that these objects have been the subject of a focused treatment program by the Museum. Curator Jennifer Locke Jones then demonstrated how uniforms can be preserved under new, optimal conditions as distinct from earlier facilities and materials that compromised both the storage and care of the objects. While the positive results of the Museum's initiative were strikingly apparent, it also was evident that many other objects in the Museum await the application of similar approaches to address other collections care problems.

At the National Museum of Natural History, Director Cristián Samper greeted the Regents with an introduction to the Museum's extensive collections. Curator of Fishes Lynne Parenti conducted a tour of the Museum's collections in alcohol storage ("wet collections") and made clear the potential danger in the use of this volatile storage medium, especially when housed in a public building. The building's outmoded storage conditions were readily apparent to the Regents and demonstrated just one of the many collections care challenges faced by that Museum. Conversely, the Museum's insect collection is housed in state-of-the-art storage facilities, which were presented by Curator of Insects Jonathan Coddington. It was noted, however, that even with this enhanced collection storage system, the Entomology collections have been affected by ongoing reductions in the Museum's collections care staff.

### **OPENING REMARKS**

After Executive Committee Chair Sant called the meeting to order, Secretary Small welcomed the Regents to the Board's first long-term planning meeting in modern history devoted to the content and management of the Institution's enormous collections. Ranging in size from more than football field-length Saturn V moon rockets to the smallest of insects, the approximately 137 million objects and specimens in the Smithsonian's holdings are highly representative of the cultural, artistic, and scientific wealth of this nation. Indeed, the intrinsic value of countless objects, such as the Star-Spangled Banner or the Wright Brothers' flyer, would be deemed priceless by that very standard.

Over the past six years the Smithsonian has engaged in a careful examination of issues related to the preservation and management of its collections. Its findings were summarized in the Office

of Policy and Analysis's report *Concern at the Core*, which was published in early 2005, and laid the foundation for a strategic approach to better address the present and future care of the Institution's holdings. During this same period, the Smithsonian also participated in the nationwide Heritage Health Index, a survey conducted by the Heritage Preservation organization with support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The results confirmed the collections care and storage issues identified in the Smithsonian's self-assessment. Both studies also recognized that proper management of museum collections includes not only the conservation and preservation of objects, but also the support of trained staff and modern information systems to manage the collections and disseminate the information they possess.

The Secretary concluded his introductory remarks by noting that the Smithsonian's building maintenance funding shortfall directly impacts the management of the Institution's collections. The Regents then directed their attention to a more in-depth overview of the Institution's extensive holdings.

## **SMITHSONIAN COLLECTIONS: PROGRESS AND PLANS**

Deputy Secretary Burke presented an illustrated, fact-filled summary of the Institution's collections, including the challenges faced by the Smithsonian. She began her talk by introducing Smithsonian National Collections Coordinator Bill Tompkins, who oversees pan-Institutional policies and procedures for Smithsonian collections.

Continuing her remarks, Ms. Burke noted that the Smithsonian's collections of some 137 million objects and specimens comprise the following categories:

- Art Collections: nearly 325,000 objects in seven museums
- History Collections: more than 10 million objects in seven units
- National Museum of Natural History: 126.5 million items
- Archives: 89,000 cubic feet of archival material
- Library Collections: 1.5 million volumes, including 40,000 rare books, in 20 libraries

Of these objects and specimens, only approximately 2% of the Institution's collections are on display at any given time. The remainder is stored in over 1.7 million square feet of collections storage space in six states and the District of Columbia. Access to those objects, the majority of which are housed in the Washington metropolitan area, is essential to the research of staff and visiting students, scientists, and historians.

The careful management and preservation of the Smithsonian's collections is critical to their ongoing access and use. *Concern at the Core*, the Smithsonian's internal study, found that declining resources to perform basic collections management activities have placed the Institution's collections increasingly at risk. Although collections care is fundamental to the health, longevity, and usefulness of the Institution's holdings, the Smithsonian saw a 17% decrease in collections care staff between 1994 and 2003. Notably, the National Museum of Natural History, which is responsible for 93% of the Institution's collections, has witnessed a

59% decrease in collections staff, while the National Museum of American History has experienced a 51% drop. It is clear that collections cannot receive appropriate care without increased support for conservation, preservation assessments, and storage.

The Heritage Health Index's nationwide survey of 2004–05, which documented the condition and preservation needs of the nation's cultural heritage, emphasized that Smithsonian collection holdings represent a large percentage of the nation's collections in specific disciplines. The study reported that the Institution's cultural history objects represent 21% of the total national historic collections and that its natural science specimens represent 15% of the national scientific collections. Alarming, the study also found that:

- 77% of Smithsonian collecting units have experienced damage to their collections due to improper storage
- 75% need additional collections storage to safely and appropriately accommodate all collections
- 78% have a significant backlog in cataloguing their collections

It is important to note, however, that the Institution also has made significant advances in the care of its collections over the last decade or more. The Museum Support Center, which opened in 1983, now holds over 32 million objects and specimens in its state-of-the-art storage and conservation facility in Suitland, Maryland. Similarly, the National Museum of Natural History's entomology collections are now housed in optimum storage conditions that were constructed in the 1990s. Completed in 1999, the National Museum of the American Indian's Cultural Resources Center in Suitland, Maryland, now houses approximately 800,000 Native American objects and has become the "gold standard" for modern collections storage. Some 1,500 objects, including 82 aircraft, are now accessible to the public in the National Air and Space Museum's Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center, which opened in northern Virginia in 2003. The July 2006 opening of the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture will witness the debut of two state-of-the-art collections management facilities: the Luce Foundation Center, the first visible art storage and study center in Washington, D.C., and the Lunder Conservation Center, the first art conservation center that allows permanent behind-the-scenes viewing of the process of preservation.

Another important collections storage undertaking has been the construction of an additional pod at the Museum Support Center. Pod 5, which is scheduled to be completed in April 2007, is a high-priority safety and security project designed to isolate Smithsonian collections preserved in alcohol. These collections presently are stored in six different locations throughout the National Museum of Natural History, none of which comply with fire code regulations.

The Institution also has launched a number of collection initiatives designed to improve the stewardship of Smithsonian collections. The first-ever Smithsonian Collections Advisory Committee was created in 2005 to assist senior management in establishing Institutional priorities for collections. In addition, collections-specific performance metrics were developed for senior management and unit directors; the Smithsonian collections management policy was revised; and a two-day symposium was held in February 2006 to discuss collections planning and set short- and long-term collection goals for each unit. Current Smithsonian collections storage space is being inventoried, and units' collections storage space requirements are being

identified. Also, the Smithsonian secured \$1 million in its fiscal year 2006 Federal appropriation to establish the Collections Care and Preservation Fund, an Institution-wide program to address systematically the critical needs in collections care.

The management and care of the Smithsonian's collections presents three primary categories of need:

- Collections storage
- Collections staffing
- Collections information systems

In addition to addressing staffing needs, which continue to be impacted by budget cuts, the Institution must digitize its collections. Currently, only a quarter of the collections are documented in an electronic information system, and only a third of those records are available to the public. Addressing such issues requires resources, and to that end Federal and private funding will continue to be aggressively sought. A recent example of a successful private funding initiative is the \$3.6 million grant secured from the Terra Foundation, which will support the digitization of the collections of the Archives of American Art.

An effective strategy for addressing Smithsonian collection challenges is dependent upon a coordinated, pan-Institutional approach, as the challenges faced in each category are inextricably linked. For example, the Institution is taking a strategic, integrated approach to collections development and growth, which has an impact on its collections storage needs. This in turn will inform the development of a Smithsonian-wide collections storage plan. Therefore, the Institution is addressing its collection challenges by:

- Establishing short- and long-term priorities, goals, and objectives
- Addressing systematically the critical needs of collections
- Continuing to seek Federal and private funds for collections care

Having laid out the successes and challenges in the care and management of the Smithsonian's collections, the Deputy Secretary advanced the Regents' meeting into a discussion of potential funding sources, noting that raising private sector funds, exploring Federal budget strategies, and partnering with sister institutions will help address the Institution's current and future collections needs and challenges.

## **REGENTS' DISCUSSION**

The discussion of the management and care of the Smithsonian's collections especially focused on securing the means to address staffing, storage, and information systems challenges. It was agreed that appeals for significant increases in Federal appropriations for collections care would be fruitless at this time because of the Administration's continued focus on the war on terror, aid to disaster-stricken areas, and closing the Federal budget deficit. The possibility of creating partnerships with other collecting agencies of the Federal government also was discussed. The Regents concurred that under present circumstances the greatest potential will lie in securing donations earmarked for specific, significant issues. The Donald W. Reynolds Center for

American Art and Portraiture was cited as a notable example of such a successful development initiative.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

The Regents concluded this meeting at about 11:45 a.m., after which the Regents held a 30-minute Executive Session with the Secretary and Deputy Secretary.

## **REGENTS' DINNER AND MONDAY MORNING EVENTS**

On Sunday evening, the Regents, senior officers, and their spouses attended a casual dinner in the Patrons' Lounge of the National Museum of the American Indian. As previously noted, on Monday morning the Regents embarked on informative tours of select collections at the National Museum of American History, Kenneth E. Behring Center, and the National Museum of Natural History. An informal luncheon was offered after the Regents' productive discussions of the challenges faced in the care of the Smithsonian's collections.