Concern at the Core:
Managing Smithsonian Collections

A Summary of Key Points

Office of Policy and Analysis
January, 2005
A COMPLEX PICTURE
Diversity across units
  – Numbers
  – Types
  – Histories

Enormous scale in some units
  – NMNH (number)
  – NASM (size)

Interrelated with other programs
  – Exhibitions
  – Research
  – Education
By number, NMNH holds 88% of SI museum collections
By area, NMNH holds 42% of all SI collections storage
Average Growth Rate is 0.4% per Year

6% Growth over 15 Years
Units have different problems to different degrees

At-risk Collections
Poor Storage
Poor Equipment
Insufficient Staff
Some Recent Accomplishments
New storage and facilities
  – NMAI, NASM, POB

Digitization
  – NMAI, NASM
  – Art museums’ CIS

Best practices
  – NMNH profiling, offsite enhancement
  – SIL/SIA paper conservation program
  – Deaccessioning and disposal at HMSG and NPM

New planning initiatives
  – NMAH intellectual framework
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pressing Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Garber Storage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collections Care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Garber Storage

- Asbestos-contaminated objects
- Fragile, expired containment
- Crowded, inadequate space
NMAH

Multi-MIMSY

• Insufficient staff
• Insufficient funds
Collections Care

• Insufficient collections staff
• Insufficient conservation staff
• Inadequate storage space
Acquisitions

- Orphaned collections
- Endangered and rare species
- New species

NMNH
Longer-term Issues
• Inadequate storage

All Storage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Optimal</th>
<th>Acceptable</th>
<th>Below Acceptable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Leased Facilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Optimal</th>
<th>Acceptable</th>
<th>Below Acceptable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Collections care staff store items, maintain collections data, ensure the physical condition of the collections and make them accessible to users.
• Incomplete catalogues, inventories, and condition assessments

• Reluctance to deaccession and dispose
• Resources insufficient to meet desired standards of care and access
Pressures on Smithsonian Collections Are Constant

Collections continue to grow
Standards in preservation keep rising
New technologies create new demands
Demands for greater access keep increasing
Collections Should Be Viewed And Managed as a Critical Part of the Smithsonian Mission
Unless collections are approached strategically, the long-term problems with collections will persist and, likely, grow.
A Disciplined Approach

Five Steps to Strengthening
SI Collections Management
1. Define what “national” means and identify a core purpose

One way of looking at this….

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encyclopedic</td>
<td>Build Collections for Research/Reference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Identity</td>
<td>Display Objects Representative of the Nation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject Specialist</td>
<td>Display Objects Representative of the Subject</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Align unit priorities and resources to protect the core purpose

- Obtain additional staff and funds.
- Limit inadequately funded non-core activities.
- Serve first the primary users.
- Pursue one-time deaccession and disposal.
3. Sharpen decision-making by

- Eliminating processing backlogs
- Addressing inventory backlogs
- Profiling SI core collections
- Re-writing collection plans
4. Monitor progress

- Set performance goals
- Establish performance measures
- Collect performance measurement data
- Report and assess results
5. Exercise leadership and hold staff accountable at all levels