

**TESTIMONY OF SCOTT S. DAHL  
INSPECTOR GENERAL, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION  
ON COLLECTIONS STEWARDSHIP AT THE SMITHSONIAN  
COMMITTEE ON HOUSE ADMINISTRATION  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
JULY 17, 2013**

Chairman Miller, Ranking Member Brady, and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the Smithsonian Institution's collections care challenges. Collections are at the core of the Smithsonian's mission, and their care is an essential and critical part of management's responsibilities and the OIG's oversight function. I will focus my attention on systemic issues involving collections care at the Smithsonian that we identified in prior work and our oversight plans to ensure improved stewardship of the nation's treasured artifacts.

**Importance of Collections Care at SI**

The Smithsonian Institution is the world's largest museum and research complex, including 19 museums and galleries, 9 research facilities, and the National Zoological Park. The total number of artifacts, works of art and specimens in Smithsonian is currently estimated at more than 137 million, the bulk of which is housed at the National Museum of Natural History. Most artifacts are donated by individuals, collectors, and federal agencies to form the Smithsonian's permanent collections, held in trust for the American public.

Among these collections are irreplaceable national icons and specimens vital to the study of the world's scientific and cultural heritage, ranging from insects and dinosaur bones, to President Abraham Lincoln's top hat and the Space Shuttle Discovery. Less than 2 percent of the Smithsonian's collections are on display in the museums at any given time. Smithsonian collections serve as resources for answering significant scientific questions or educating the public. As such, the collections play a vital role in advancing scientific knowledge, addressing societal issues, and increasing the historical literacy of the nation.

Collections care and preservation are important to reduce the loss of the educational, research, and exhibit value of the objects. Collections continue to grow, standards in preservation evolve, and new technologies are introduced, all creating increased demands on the collections, making their care essential. Therefore, collections care should be viewed and managed as a critical part of the Smithsonian's mission.

**OIG Oversight**

Over the last several years, we conducted collections management audits on the three largest and most visible museums on the National Mall (National Museum of Natural History, National Air and Space Museum, and National Museum of American

History), as well as the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York. Through these audits, we identified a pattern of issues concerning collections care, such as inadequate preservation practices, insufficient inventory controls, and security of collections areas not meeting Smithsonian standards.

### *Inadequate Preservation Practices*

During our audit of National Museum of American History (NMAH), we found that many collections were stored in substandard conditions not conducive to long-term preservation. Some storage equipment and buildings were deteriorating and contained potentially damaging or hazardous materials, such as lead, asbestos or arsenic, that posed risks to both staff and collections. In some cases, pipes and conduits were exposed, resulting in frequent leaks that also threatened collections. Furthermore, NMAH did not have a comprehensive preservation program to mitigate the deterioration of objects.

We were particularly troubled by the collections storage conditions at the Paul E. Garber Facility in Suitland, Maryland. Approximately 400,000 objects stored at this facility were especially at risk of damage. Built in the 1950s and 1960s, these buildings have exceeded their intended useful lives as temporary storage. Some are contaminated with hazardous substances, and many are inadequate to withstand natural disasters. With the collapse of one of the buildings from snow and wind in February 2010, and damage to other buildings from the earthquake in August 2011, the risk to the collections has been clearly demonstrated.

As a result of these findings, we made recommendations to Smithsonian management that addressed these deficiencies, including: developing a prioritized plan for addressing pan-Institutional collections storage needs; exploring opportunities to increase or maximize existing storage space; replacing substandard storage equipment; developing and implementing a plan to remove and decontaminate objects from storage facilities containing hazardous materials; and establishing and implementing a preservation program at NMAH.

Smithsonian management concurred with all of our recommendations. In response, management has developed a prioritized, project-specific plan to replace substandard storage equipment and housing materials in collection storage areas. Management has implemented this plan in three specific collecting divisions at the museum. In addition, management has drafted a *Collections Space Framework Plan* with recommendations for addressing current and projected Smithsonian-wide space requirements. Management also has commenced work to address some of the collections space deficiencies at the Garber Facility.

### *Insufficient Inventory Controls*

In our audit of NMAH on inventory issues, we found that collecting units had not developed or consistently followed inventory plans. Cyclical inventories, including those of highly sensitive objects, were lacking, and inventory records were often

incomplete and inaccurate. The lack of inventory controls leaves collections objects vulnerable to loss or theft, diminishes accountability, and reduces the scholarly value of the objects.

For example, during our sample inventories of collections, the museum could not locate 10% of the objects in our sample. The missing items included ancient Greek, Roman, and Arabic coins; silver and bronze medals; gold timepieces and watches; and items from a large collection of coins and tokens featured on national television.

We made recommendations for management to fix these problems, such as to develop and implement a prioritized plan to conduct and document inventories in accordance with Smithsonian policy. We further recommended that management develop and implement criteria to identify all of its highly sensitive objects, as well as standards for tracking these objects within the collections information system.

In response to our recommendations, management has developed a collections stewardship plan which addresses management's methodology for implementing several of our inventory recommendations, including procedures for conducting and documenting inventories, reconciling the results, and ensuring that all objects have complete and accurate collections records. Management has also developed and implemented criteria to identify highly sensitive objects and track these objects in the museum's collection information system.

In addition, the museum management continues to implement its collections stewardship plan through a prioritized, project-specific approach. NMAH is currently assessing staffing needs in order to make accurate and informed budget requests.

Addressing these inventory issues is important for safeguarding the collections. In addition to the items that could not be located during our audit sample inventories, insufficient inventory controls have also impeded our investigative inquiries into missing objects at the Smithsonian. Often, due to lack of sound inventory practices, we could not determine if the items were lost, misplaced, disposed of, broken, or stolen.

#### *Inadequate Collections Security Controls*

In our collections audits, we found that several collections storage areas had inoperable or malfunctioning security devices. Additionally, some museums permitted improper access to their collections and collections records. This included unsupervised access to collection storage areas by researchers and volunteers, inadequate screening of individuals with access, and poor controls over keys to collections storage areas. These security deficiencies increased the risk of theft, loss, or damage to objects.

We recommended that the Smithsonian implement security policies and procedures to improve security controls in collections storage areas. At NMAH, Smithsonian management prioritized security device upgrades, improved controls over keys to collection storage areas, and refined and implemented stricter access to collections storage areas.

Similarly, in our investigations, we have looked into thefts of objects that may have occurred due to insufficient security measures identified in our audit work. In one instance, during our investigation of stolen objects, we found malfunctioning security devices on a door, poor key control, and inadequate screening of volunteers. These problems were factors that allowed the theft to occur.

*Process for Evaluating Recommendation Implementation*

Management has completed most of the recommended actions in our collections audits. As part of our process for ensuring completion, we reviewed the requested plans and evaluated the implementation measures where applicable. The work involved to fully implement several of these recommendations is ongoing, and we continue to monitor management’s progress.

**Pan-Institutional Approach**

In reviewing our prior collections audits, we found many of the same issues relating to inventory controls and security across several museums. See charts below.

INVENTORY					
MUSEUM	Date Report Issued	Lack of cyclical inventories	Incomplete object records	Missing objects	Insufficient resources allocated to collections management
NMAI Move	Oct. 2001		X		
NMNH	Sept. 2006	X	X		
NASM	Mar. 2010	X	X		
NMAH Phase I	Feb. 2011	X	X	X	X
Cooper-Hewitt	Sept. 2011		X	X	

SECURITY					
MUSEUM	Date Report Issued	Missing or broken devices	Unlocked doors and cabinets or poor key control	Required security devices not installed	Improper Segregation of Duties: Access to Objects and Records
NMAI Move	Oct. 2001	X	X		X
NMNH	Sept. 2006	X	X		
NASM	Mar. 2010	X			
Cooper-Hewitt	Sept. 2011				
NMAH Phase II	Sept. 2011	X	X	X	X

To better address these patterns, we decided to approach collection care issues from a pan-Institutional perspective. Rather than conduct an audit of another museum just to find the same types of issues, we instead urged management to use our previous audit recommendations, including those directed to specific museums, for addressing the problems across the Institution.

For example, on inventory controls, we recommended in one audit that management “establish and implement a plan to conduct a full inventory of the museum’s collections” that includes a prioritized list of the inventory needs. In addition, we recommended that management “strengthen and standardize collections management elements in performance plans” for museum management that includes requirements to conduct cyclical inventories. These recommendations have clear pan-Institutional application.

Likewise, on collections security standards, we recommended in the same audit that management “develop and implement a prioritized plan” to bring the museum’s collections storage areas into compliance with Smithsonian space security standards. This recommendation also could be applied across the Institution.

We also found pan-Institutional applications for several of our recommendations involving preservation issues identified in our most recent audit of NMAH. In one recommendation, we asked Smithsonian management to develop a prioritized plan for addressing storage needs. Furthermore, we recommended that management “establish and implement a Preservation Program,” as required by Smithsonian Directive 600 “Collections Management,” including prioritized plans for conducting staffing and preservation assessments, as well as preservation and curatorial staff training.

Moreover, we highlighted these systemic patterns of collections care problems in our 2012 report on "Top Management Challenges," which identified the most critical issues that the Smithsonian faces. In that report, we emphasized the need for the Smithsonian to address collections care pan-institutionally. Consistent with our audit findings, the three primary challenges we listed are: (1) improving preservation practices; (2) strengthening inventory controls; and (3) meeting collections security standards.

Management agreed in general with our pan-Institutional emphasis on collections care. Rather than applying our audit recommendations Institution-wide, the Deputy Under Secretary for Collections and Interdisciplinary Support (DUSCIS) had already moved forward on strategic initiatives for collections stewardship in the following three areas: digitization, physical condition of collections, and collections space planning.

Management's three strategic initiatives partially overlap with the collections care areas we identified in the Top Management Challenges. We are presently evaluating the impact that management's initiatives are having on collections care challenges in our recently announced review.

In the meantime, we have evaluated plans from both museum and Smithsonian management addressing our inventory, preservation, and security recommendations. These plans are an important first step, and management has begun implementation of these plans. However, the full implementation of many of these plans is at risk because implementation is largely contingent on increased funding levels, rather than assuming existing resources.

In fact, in response to many of our recommendations, management cites resource constraints as an impediment to full and timely implementation. We acknowledge the decline in funding for collections care, and in the current federal budget environment, we do not expect that trend to change. This fiscal constraint was previously articulated by my predecessor, A. Sprightley Ryan, in her December 2009 testimony before the House Committee on Appropriations (Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies):

We understand the resource constraints that prevent more comprehensive collections stewardship, from accurate and complete inventories to sound preservation, but we believe that the Institution could do more pan-Institutional planning and prioritizing to use whatever resources are available.

This funding challenge also was identified in 2005 by management's own consulting arm, the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A), in its lengthy report entitled "Concern at the Core: Managing Smithsonian Collections." In that report, OP&A predicted:

It is unlikely that the Congress will provide all the funds required to bring ongoing collections management up to desired levels. Indeed, the Congress may not even provide sufficient funds for priority projects such as the completion of basic inventories and collection profiles. . . .

OP&A therefore recommended that Smithsonian seek other avenues for additional funding for collections care activities, including fundraising from private sources. OP&A pointed out that “[n]either the central administration nor the individual collecting units have engaged in major efforts to solicit philanthropic funds for collections management, other than for acquisitions.”

In addition, OP&A identified another impediment to effective collections management. Despite a Smithsonian-wide collections management policy, collecting units “are free to set their own standards and allocate resources.” In this decentralized approach to collection management, “the level of attention devoted to collections care largely comes down to the priorities of unit directors.” OP&A recommended that a centralized authority work with museums to clearly define standards of care for compliance with Smithsonian policy — including conducting inventories and significance assessments — and then monitor whether museums are adhering to those standards.

While management has made some progress in establishing these standards, the DUSCIS does not have authority to enforce compliance or make material resource allocation decisions concerning collections care. That authority, involving resource management of collection care, still resides primarily with the museum directors.

### **Going Forward**

We will continue to monitor Smithsonian’s implementation of our previous audit recommendations. In addition, we have launched two reviews that further examine collections care challenges.

In June 2013, we initiated a review of Smithsonian’s pan-Institutional collections care initiatives discussed above. This review will continue our ongoing monitoring and assessment of the Smithsonian’s progress towards improved collections stewardship. Our objectives are to evaluate the impact that Smithsonian initiatives have on collections care, assess management’s plans for using the data collected to date in addressing collection care issues Smithsonian-wide, and examine future funding and contingency plans for collections care.

Earlier in 2013, we initiated an audit of high-value object transportation security. For this audit, we will review the security protocol and standards for transporting high-value and high-risk value objects. However, management currently has in process a draft policy that would address many of the issues we intended to review. To allow management time to implement the changes, we suspended this audit but will resume the review of this important area next fiscal year once the policy is in place.

As SI management moves forward on its pan-Institutional initiatives, we urge management to continue to make it a high priority to further mitigate the significant risks posed by the substandard storage conditions at the Garber Facility.

Through ongoing monitoring of implementation and future audits, we will continue to emphasize the need for the Smithsonian to address collections care issues Institution-wide. Collections are at the core of the Smithsonian, and the challenges increase due to growing collections and tighter budgets. By more effectively addressing these perennial challenges, Smithsonian will ensure that its invaluable collections will be available for generations to come.