

# Concern at the Core: Managing Smithsonian Collections

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**✧ A Summary of Key Points ✧**

Office of Policy and Analysis

January, 2005

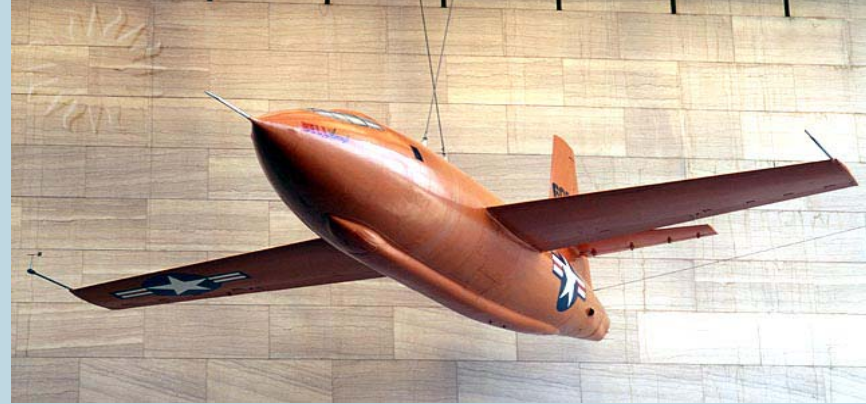
A dark, dense forest of snow-covered trees. The branches are heavily laden with snow, creating a complex, intricate pattern of white against the dark background. The overall tone is somber and wintry.

**A COMPLEX PICTURE**



## Diversity across units

- Numbers
- Types
- Histories



## Enormous scale in some units

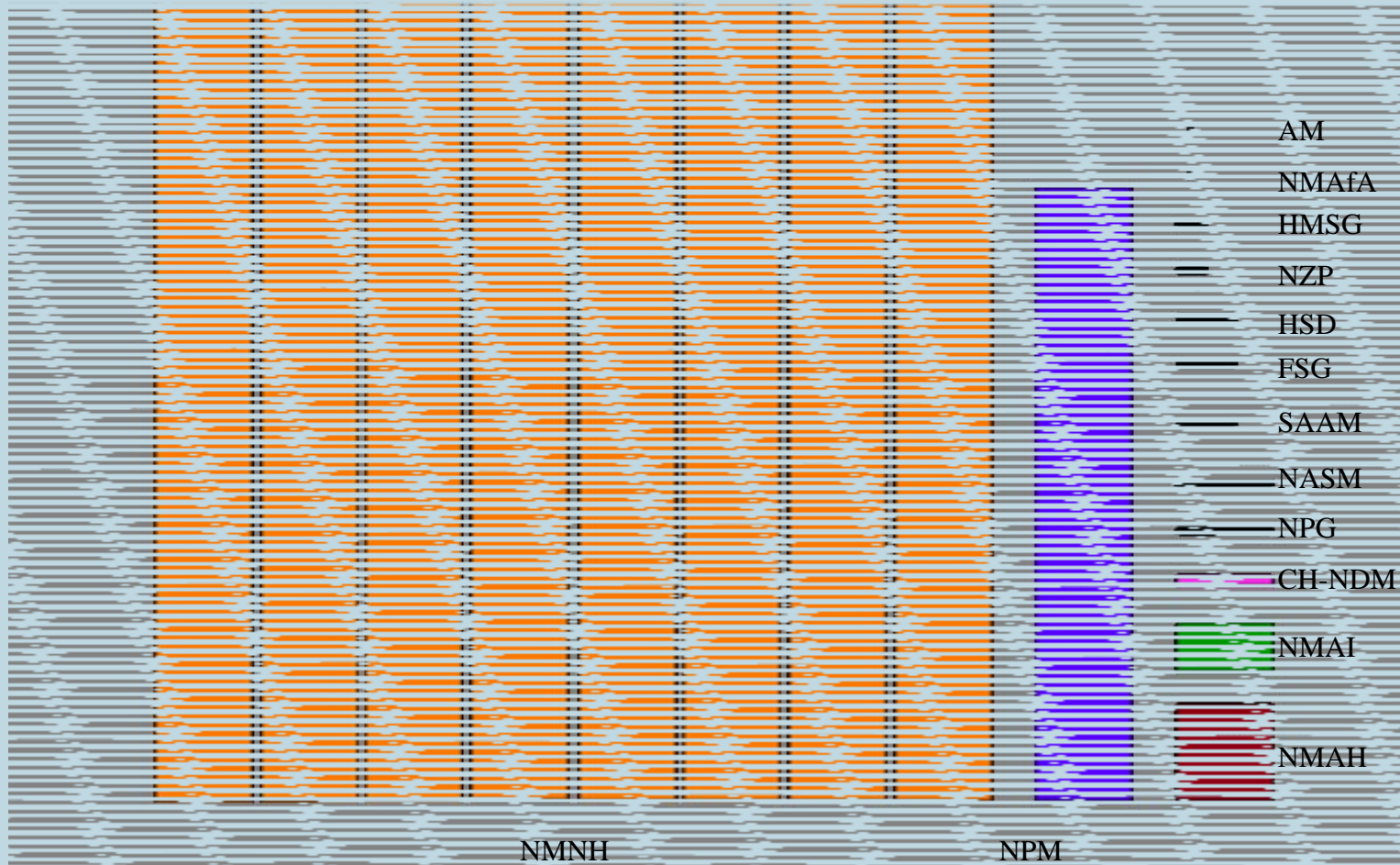
- NMNH (number)
- NASM (size)

## Interrelated with other programs

- Exhibitions
- Research
- Education

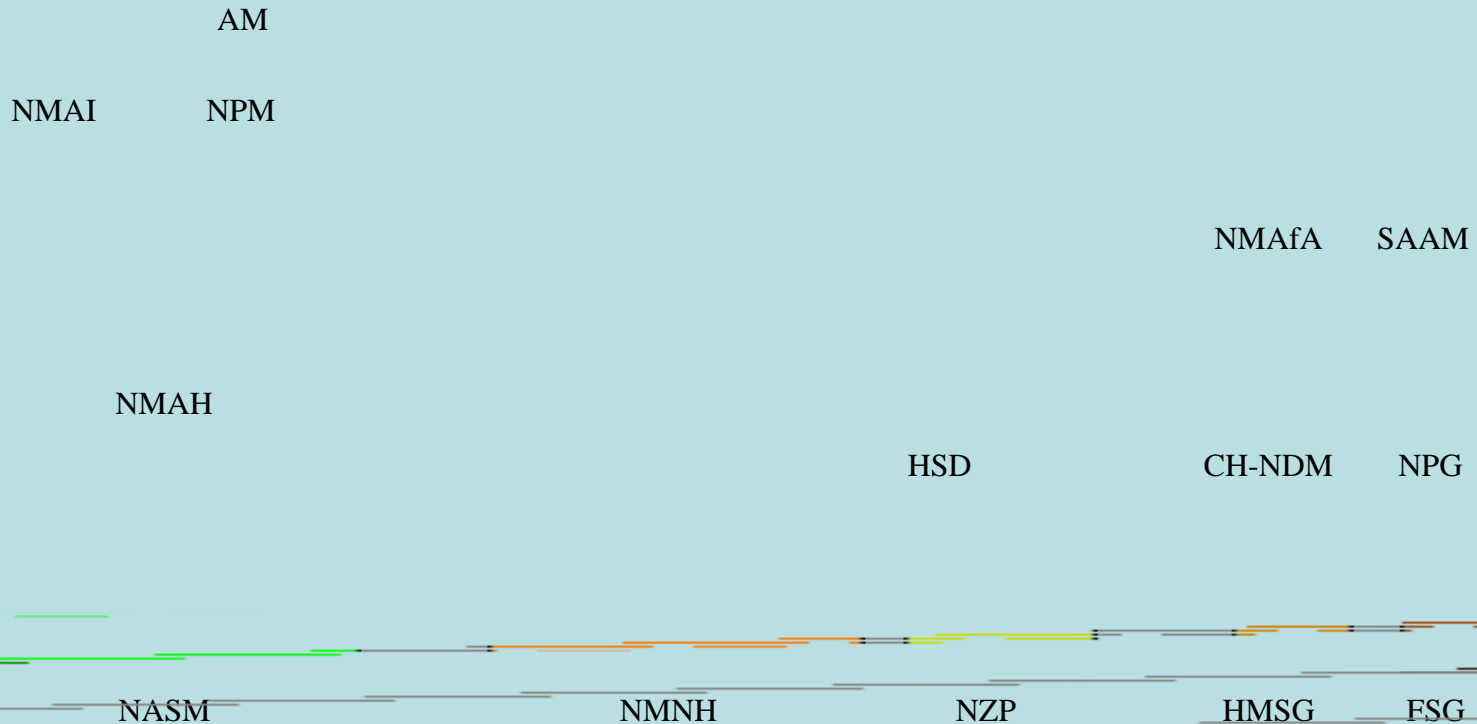


By number, NMNH holds 88%  
of SI museum collections



# By area, NMNH holds 42% of all SI collections storage

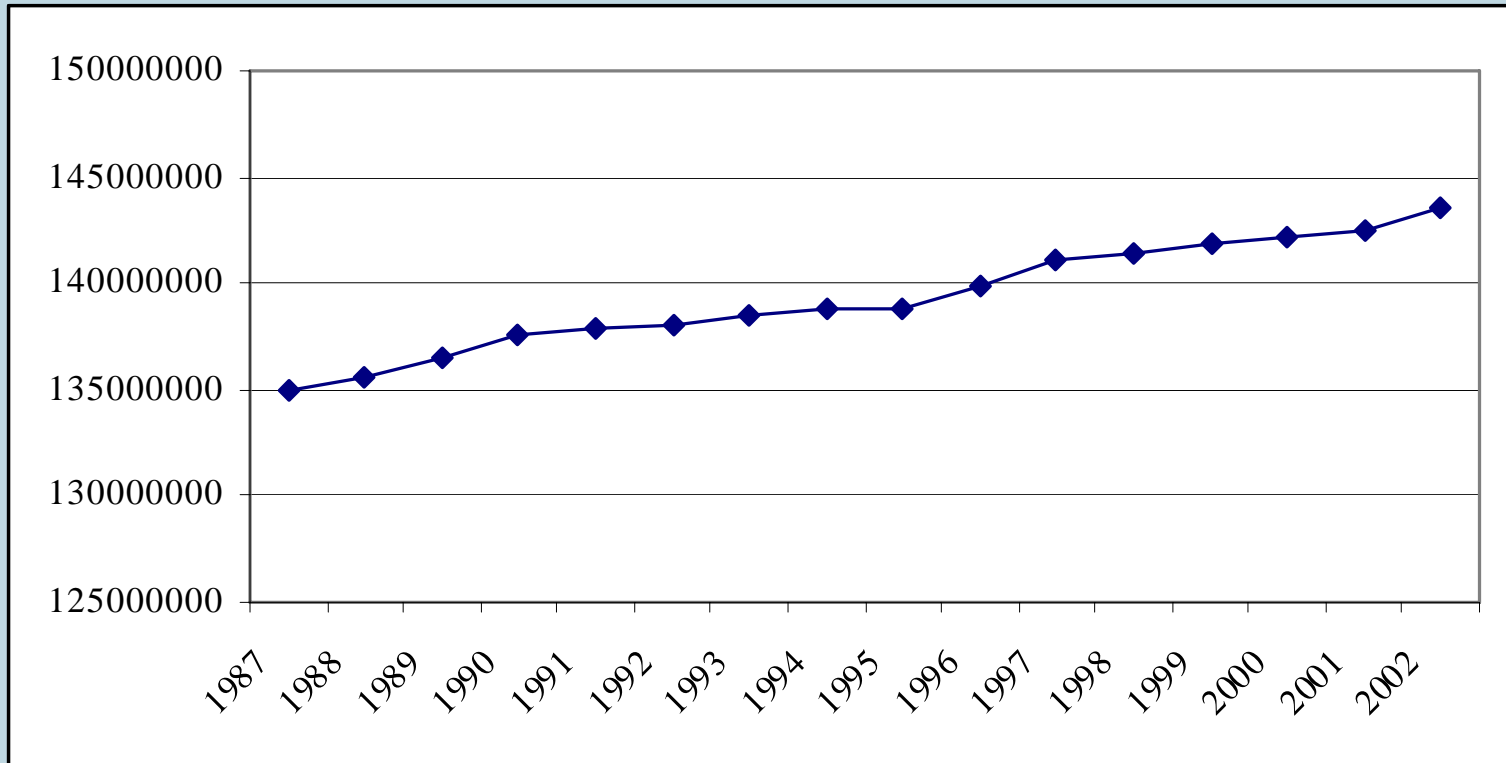
## MUSEUMS



SIA SAO CFCH AAA OAHP SCMRE

## ARCHIVES, LIBRARIES, AND OTHER UNITS

# 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

# Pressing Problems

Garber Storage

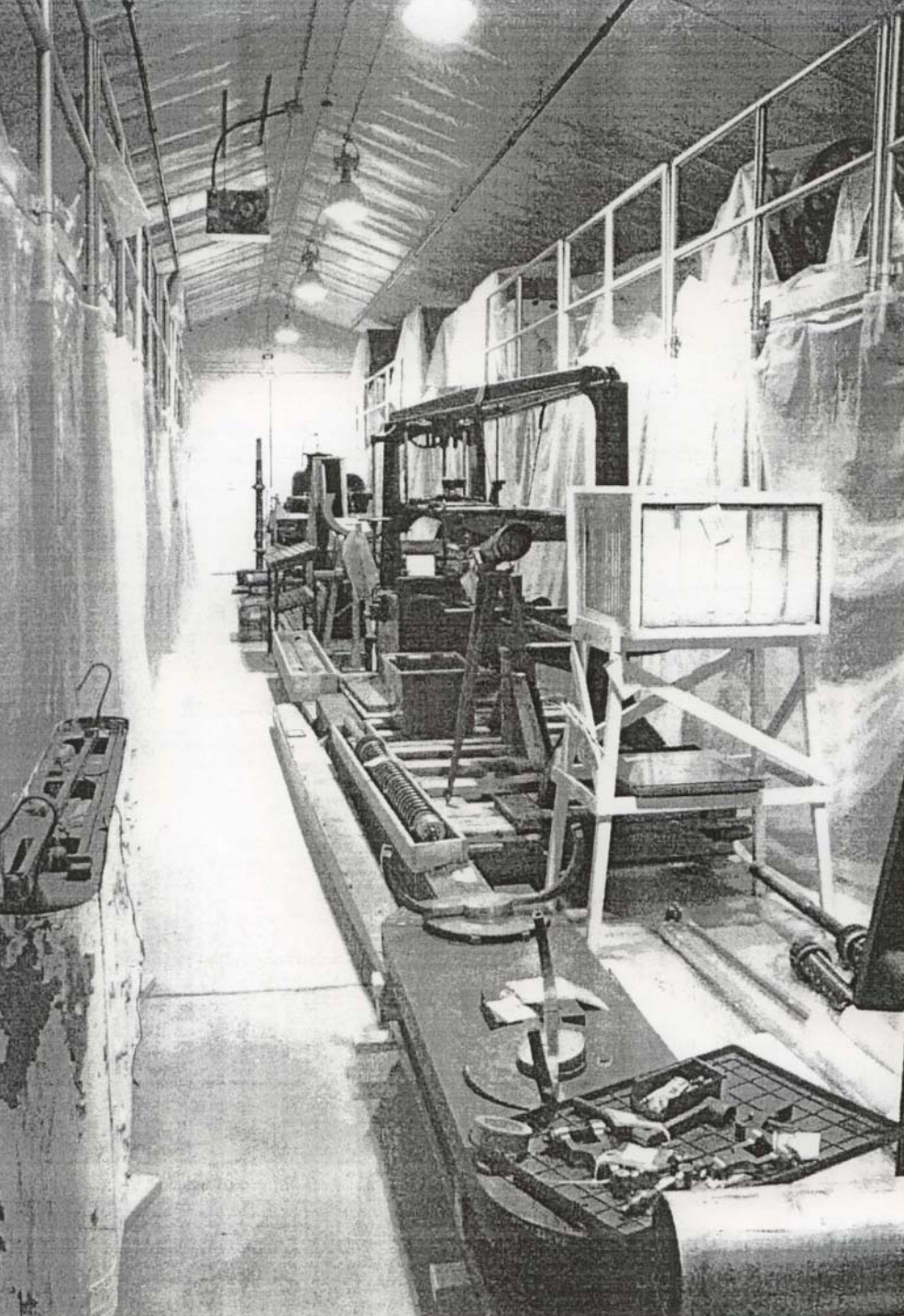
**NMAH**

Multi-MIMSY

Collections Care

**NMNH**

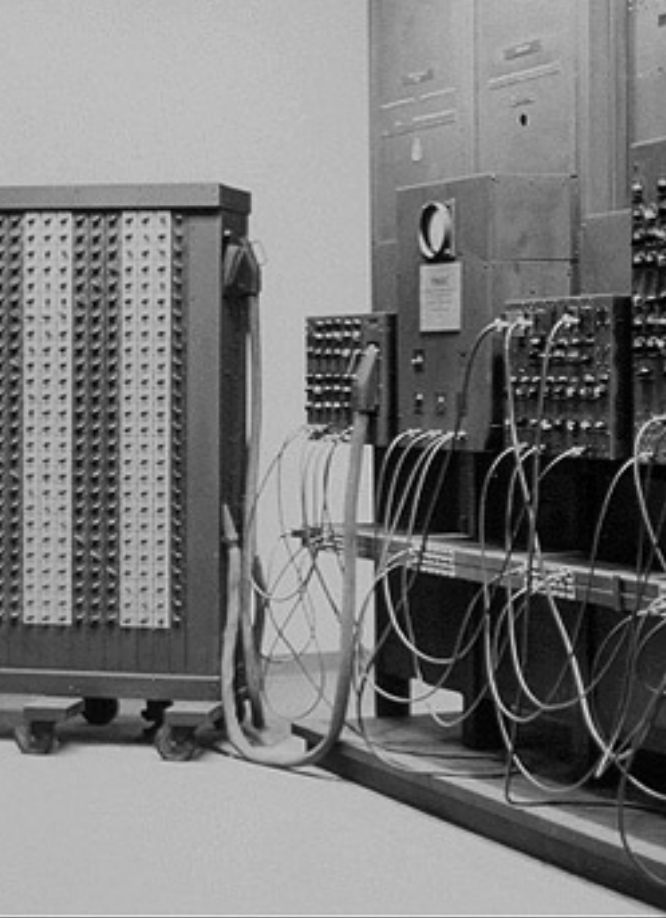
Acquisitions



## NMAH

### Garber Storage

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



# NMAH

## Multi-MIMSY

- Insufficient staff
- Insufficient funds

# NMNH

## Collections Care

- Insufficient collections staff
- Insufficient conservation staff
- Inadequate storage space



# NMNH

## Acquisitions

- Orphaned collections
- Endangered and rare species
- New species

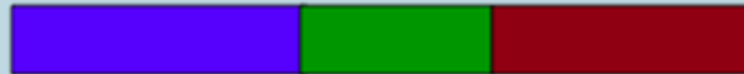


A photograph of the Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights) in shades of green and blue, dancing across a dark night sky. The aurora is seen over a silhouette of a mountain range. The text 'Longer-term Issues' is overlaid in a yellow serif font at the bottom center.

# Longer-term Issues

- Inadequate storage

## All Storage



**Optimal**

**Acceptable**

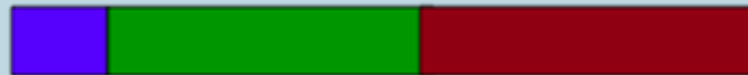
**Below  
Acceptable**

39%

25%

36%

## Leased Facilities



**Optimal**

**Acceptable**

**Below  
Acceptable**

12%

43%

45%



- Collections care staff losses

May 1994

413 Collections Care Staff



May 2000

380 Collections Care Staff

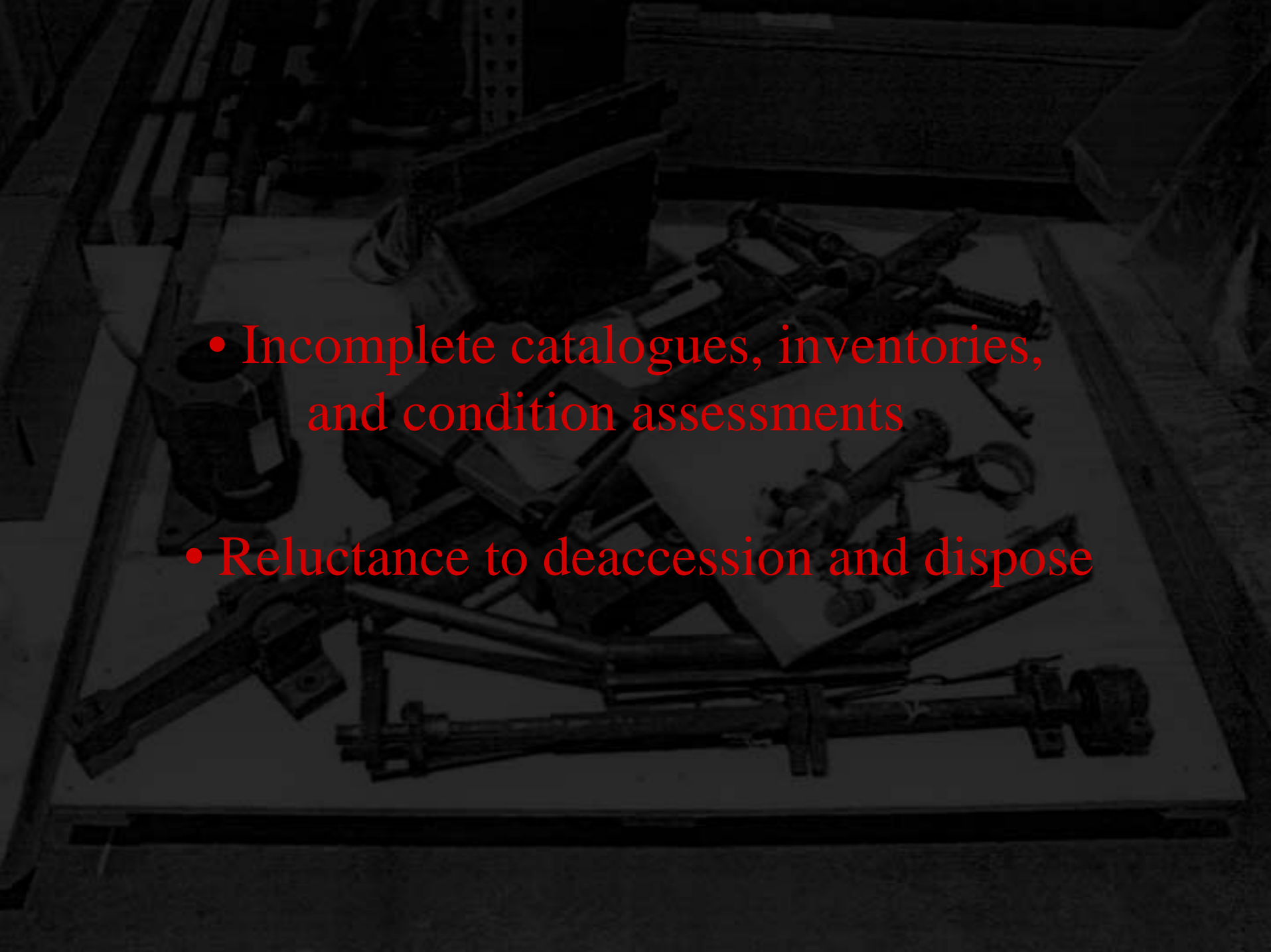


May 2004

330 Collections Care Staff



Collections care staff store items, maintain collections data, ensure the physical condition of the collections and make them accessible to users.

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- 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....

Type

Purpose

**Encyclopedic**

**Build Collections for Research/Reference**

**National Identity**

**Display Objects Representative of the Nation**

**Subject Specialist**

**Display Objects Representative of the Subject**



## **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**



