

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS



The public expects the Smithsonian to serve as the collector and protector of the nation's cultural, natural, and artistic legacies, and to make these materials available to a variety of users.

These roles entail a number of collections-related public trust obligations: developing collections; researching them; making them accessible to outside researchers and the general public; and preserving a material record of the nation's heritage. These roles are integral to the Institution's mission, and failure to perform them adequately would undermine widely held public expectations that are fundamental to accomplishing the Institution's mandate and maintaining its credibility.

Two of the principal questions this study sought to answer are how well the Smithsonian has done with its collections obligations, and what the answer means for collections management in the future. The OP&A study team's findings suggest a range of answers.

- **Access** presents a mixed picture. Some units with smaller collections have virtually complete electronic catalogues, often with enriched documentation. Others have not yet developed an accessible central electronic catalogue or even a complete inventory of their holdings.
- As to **care of collections**, some units have performed admirably — most notably the art museums. However, others have performed less well, even taking into account differences in scale and current efforts to resolve difficulties.
- In the case of **collections development**, most units could be doing more to ensure the relevance of collections to their mission and programs. Too often, the rationale for holding particular collections is unclear or unpersuasive, and linkages between collections and other programs are not always obvious. Some units appeared to have substantial holdings that were not suitable, given current standards, missions, programs, and resources. Further, units had not adequately explored alternatives to the norms of independent collecting and sole ownership.

- At many units, **resources** (most notably staff) were not adequate to meet day-to-day collections management responsibilities or to address accumulated problems in such areas as cataloguing, conservation, and access.

This chapter draws some of the threads from earlier chapters together into general conclusions about how collections management at the Smithsonian might be strengthened. The conclusions, and subsequent recommendations, are addressed primarily to policy makers, and principally concern exceptional collections management needs beyond the everyday problems that any collecting unit faces. They offer lessons and insights that will have relevance for all of the Institution's collecting units as they manage their collections in the future.

It is important to point out that many of the problems with Smithsonian collections cannot be laid at the doorstep of current management. Most problems have been building over many decades and are found at a great many collecting units, both in the United States and outside. Many have been exacerbated by the changed external environment in which collecting units now operate and to which they need to adapt. The study represents a first step toward change.

Some of the problems identified in this study will require considerable resources to redress. However, it is possible for the Smithsonian to address many others without significant additional resources. In many cases, it is mainly a matter of identifying important neglected collections management functions, and redeploying existing resources wisely. Excellence in collections development, stewardship, and access is fundamentally a matter of sound management, and Smithsonian management has already initiated reforms in this area.

an overall assessment

Collections must continue to be a core priority for the Smithsonian. But other important priorities also exist, especially research and exhibitions, and it is important that Smithsonian management realistically align the Institution's programmatic responsibilities with available resources. Achieving the right balance between responsibilities and resources will not be simple, and may require fundamental changes in both approaches to collections management and the relative priority of collections management vis-à-vis other functions. The OP&A study team believes that one core guiding principle that must underlie such balancing is that **Smithsonian management has an obligation not to permit conditions to reach a point where collections at any unit are placed in jeopardy.** Some units may already be in that situation, or will soon find themselves there.

Although Smithsonian management is moving on many fronts to address the problems, it will need to do more. In some cases, the impetus for change has been an outside factor, such as the well-publicized animals deaths at the zoo or a critical report by an outside review group. Successfully addressing the issues mentioned in this study will require a sustained and systematic approach that is not primarily driven by crises and outside criticism. The OP&A study team hopes that this study will be a catalyst for change, and will provide Smithsonian management with a sense of the steps it must take to achieve the goal of management excellence in the collections arena.

Solving the problems in collections management will require focused attention and leadership in several areas: sharpening strategic guidance from senior management; improving long-term collections management planning by units; addressing weaknesses in decision making processes; achieving better coordination of the decentralized organization of collections management at the Smithsonian; reforming deeply entrenched aspects of professional culture that are no longer appropriate in

today’s environment; and strengthening accountability. These are discussed separately below.

strategic guidance

Inadequate guidance lies at the heart of many collections problems. Thus, the OP&A study team sees a need for stronger guidance from senior management, both at the central and unit levels.

In part, the inadequacy of guidance stems from an absence, dating back to the Smithsonian’s beginnings, of any clear delineation of the role of collections within the context of a **national** institution with **national** collecting units. The initial collections that the Congress assigned to the Smithsonian were an eclectic mix transferred from other federal agencies; there was no focus on systematically creating “national” collections in any of the senses discussed in Chapter 2. Later, the Congress designated the Smithsonian as the repository for natural history collections owned by other federal agencies, but did not explicitly link these collections to a systematic national program of natural history collecting or research. Nor did it specify the national role of other Smithsonian collections, such as art and history. The question of how the diverse Smithsonian collecting units relate to one another and to the Institution as a whole has never been explicitly addressed. By contrast, authorizing legislation for national (government) museums in other countries usually states that they are to hold the nation’s heritage, and provides specific criteria to define what that heritage is.

Currently, the central Smithsonian administration issues five-year strategic plans on a rolling annual basis. These plans contain broad goals, objectives, and strategies that provide a framework for plans and operations at the unit level. The language in these strategic plans tends to be quite sweeping, and in itself does not provide sufficient practical guidance on the roles, focus, and content of the national

collections. Another important Institution-wide document providing collections management guidance, SD 600, defines an end-state for collections management consistent with the ethics and standards established by professional associations. However, once again, this guidance is typically broad and does not reach the level of specificity needed to guide collections development, care, and access at the unit level. It does not, for example, define the relative priorities of various program functions; mechanisms for addressing near- and long-term deficiencies; or minimum standards of care to be in compliance with SD 600. Nor does it clarify who is responsible for ensuring an appropriate level of performance.

The OP&A study team identified several key areas of collections management that would benefit from more explicit guidance from Smithsonian leadership. First, **there is confusion over the meaning and therefore the nature of *national* collections at the Smithsonian overall and, to varying degrees, at the individual collecting units.** For example, the current Smithsonian strategic plan states that the Institution should “[continue] disciplined acquisition of the most significant objects and collections that document the nation’s and the world’s cultural and scientific heritage.” However, the plan does not define what “significance” means, how it is to be assessed, or what qualifies as “heritage.” More generally, central guidance fails to grapple explicitly with questions like: What are the basic collecting roles of the Smithsonian’s national museums, archives, and libraries? Are they the primary custodians of the nation’s cultural and natural heritage, or should they see themselves as part of a network of institutions that collectively ensure the preservation of that heritage? What are the most important materials for the Smithsonian to acquire? This lack of clarity in turn leaves unanswered some important questions about the national roles of several Smithsonian units. For example:

- What national interests (economic, public health, security, and so on) do Smithsonian natural history collections serve? How should the Smithsonian deal with the need to collect natural history specimens extensively in the face of an accelerating rate of destruction? Should

NMNH be a repository of last resort for US natural history collections at risk of loss? Should it continue to accept federal repository collections even if it lacks sufficient resources to document, store, and maintain them?

- Should NMAH collect primarily for the sake of public programs, scholarly research, or the preservation of national treasures? If the latter, what constitutes a national treasure? Should NMAH coordinate its collecting efforts with other organizations that exist to preserve a material record of the nation's past and present? How should minority groups and communities be represented in NMAH's collections?
- What is the role of SAAM's collections vis-à-vis the nation, other Smithsonian art collections, and other American art museums? What is the national role of collections of art from other cultures at units such as NMAfA and FSG?
- What will be the collecting mission of the new National Museum of African-American Culture and History? How will the collections of other Smithsonian museums be used in this new museum? How will future collecting of African-American materials be divided among the new museum and other Smithsonian units, particularly NMAH?

Second, **the importance of collections at the Smithsonian relative to other programs and activities is not clear.** How should the Institution's major responsibilities — public programming, research, and collections care — be prioritized? Do collections primarily exist to support other activities? Or does their purpose transcend any uses they might have in other activities? How do the answers to such questions vary by collecting unit?

Collections occupy an ambiguous position at the Smithsonian. On the one hand, statements about their importance abound. The curatorial staff — with whom the major responsibility for collections resides — are a strong influence within the

Institution. The FY2004-08 Smithsonian strategic plan lists as an objective “[to improve] the stewardship of the national collections for present and future generations (Smithsonian Institution 2003a, 16),” and establishes as a performance indicator the percentage of units meeting or exceeding an Institutional measure for care and storage (Smithsonian Institution 2003b, Appendix A — Performance Indicators, 9). On the other hand, the Smithsonian has not defined a minimum standard of care, let alone how the performance indicator is to be measured. Some collections have had no curator/scientist attached to them and have not been processed or used since the departure of the person who brought them to the Smithsonian. The number of collections care staff has been decreasing steadily as resources are redeployed to noncollections functions. These examples and other evidence seem to suggest that collections in fact have a secondary status.

In all likelihood, units will be reluctant to invest resources in the correction of longstanding collections management deficiencies without a clear indication from Smithsonian leadership that collections stewardship is a high Institutional priority. This is all the more so when the central administration explicitly designates other program initiatives as high priorities, as is currently the case with exhibitions and affiliate loans. This emphasis on other public programs will tend to accelerate the resource shift away from collections care unless steps are taken to avoid this outcome. The OP&A study team believes there is a near-term need for central management to define clear priorities for collections, before crises emerge that require immediate responses. Responses made under those circumstances tend not to be the most effective ones. At the unit level, decision making would benefit from identification of core collections and priority collections management responsibilities.

Third, in an environment of constrained resources — a situation that the OP&A study team does not expect to change in the foreseeable future — **the Smithsonian will need to pursue less traditional approaches, such as sharing collecting and stewardship responsibilities with other organizations.** Thus, the relationship of

Smithsonian collecting units to other collecting units nationally and globally requires elaboration. Three issues merit particular mention:

- The OP&A study team believes the nation benefits from centralized natural history collections, accepts that the Smithsonian is in principle an appropriate repository for such collections, and applauds the Institution's partnerships with other federal agencies to research and manage such collections. However, the US government still lacks a clear national policy on federal natural history collections. Collecting by various agencies (NMNH, NPS, ARS, USGS, and others) has taken place in the absence of any overall national framework for managing, storing, and supporting these collections. One result is that the Smithsonian appears to lack the resources to adequately care for, and provide access to, some of the natural history collections that have come to it.

- Along the same lines, more specific guidance is required on the Smithsonian's responsibility for collections orphaned by other collecting units, particularly natural history collections. What role should the Smithsonian play in rescuing collections of national significance that others can no longer afford to hold? And how will the nation support that role?

- The OP&A study team believes there are opportunities for sharing collecting and stewardship responsibilities with other organizations of which the Smithsonian has not taken full advantage. In light of tightening resource constraints, greater collaboration within the community of national (and in some cases, international) collecting units would be a logical strategy for strengthening collections development, stewardship, and access. Increased links among collaborating organizations would serve the nation well, and the Smithsonian has the stature — and the need — to be a catalyst in this area.

long-term planning by the units

Every Smithsonian collecting unit has collections policies and plans, but they generally do not provide practical guidance on issues such as interrelationships among programs or priorities among collections management activities. In some cases, they have not been updated for many years, despite the requirement in SD 600 that this be done regularly.

The latest revision of SD 600 requires long-term collections management planning, and the OP&A study team regards implementation of this requirement as a top priority. The study team believes that each unit should formulate a comprehensive collections management plan that covers the universe of collections-specific functions, including care, documentation, access, development, staffing, and policy development. Other, more detailed plans specific to particular functions — such as digitization, cyclical inventories, preservation, and acquisition and disposal — should flow from and support the comprehensive unit collections management plan.

The following are necessary elements in an effective collections management plan:

- ∞ **Setting overarching conceptual directions that frame and integrate programs within individual units.** Depending on the unit and its mission, these might be topical (conservation of biodiversity); aesthetic (acquisition of the best available examples of a particular type of art); thematic (settlement of the Americas); or something else.
- ∞ **Definition of the role and priority of collections in relation to a unit's mission and other programs.** As one part of this clarification, plans must establish appropriate base levels of activity in the broad areas of collections, research, and public programs (as well as other relevant programs), consistent with resources.

- **Resolution of longstanding collections management deficiencies** — such as inventory and cataloguing backlogs, items awaiting disposal, and inadequate storage — and creation of procedures for preventing their recurrence.

- **Formulation of long-term responses to resource shortfalls** — or, to put it another way, developing collections management plans that are consistent with resources. Such responses can take a number of forms, from traditional practices (such as reallocating unit resources to priority needs) to more radical measures (such as retrenchment of collections to levels that are consistent with the resources; closing curatorial departments until they have inventoried and profiled at least their core collections; and collaborative collecting with other organizations). The OP&A study team also believes that units could make greater use of common sense practices such as fundraising explicitly for collections management, routine requests that maintenance endowments accompany donations or bequests of collections, and inclusion of funding for collections-related activities in budgets for exhibition and research projects.

- **Delineation of specific, prioritized performance objectives and practical unit performance measures** to gauge progress in areas such as collections development, documentation, access, and fundraising. Examples of possible performance measures might include the percentage of core collections accessible physically or via the Web; percentage of core collections receiving annual condition assessments; reductions in the percentage of collections that are uncatalogued or not fully processed; adherence to cyclical inventory schedules; percentage of collections in acceptable storage; and FTEs devoted to processing loans. Performance objectives should be accompanied by a realistic timetable for achieving milestones, particularly the resolution of identified problems.

➤ **Regular review and revision of plans** to address inevitable changes. The environment in which collecting units operate is extraordinarily dynamic. Elements of this environment that must be recognized in the formulation and revision of collections plans include the increasing costs of collections management; rising standards for collections care; increasing expectations for user access, especially via the Web; changing collections care technologies; growing noncollections program demands; rising interest in transparency and accountability on the part of donors, the Congress, and the public; and the inherent tension between researching, caring for, and providing access to collections presently held on the one hand, and acquiring additional materials on the other. Sound collections management requires that units respond to inevitable changes appropriately, which means periodic examination of the relevance of all parts of their collections and collections management plans, and ongoing exploration of different ways to satisfy their public trust mandates.

decision making

The OP&A study team believes some characteristics of collections management decision making at the Smithsonian have contributed significantly to the problems. First, **difficult and perhaps unpopular decisions needed to accommodate resource realities have often been avoided or deferred.** Although collections responsibilities have exceeded the resources available to support them for years, the units have regularly initiated new programs that exacerbate the situation by increasing the collections management workload or by drawing resources away from collections. Some units have reached the point where they are spreading dwindling resources over so many activities that they cannot provide adequate collections care. The OP&A study team saw evidence of decisions to defer routine collections care (and postpone investments in access) in favor of activities with greater public

visibility, based on the assumption that these deferred tasks could always be carried out at a later date. It is not surprising that units would postpone routine inventories or condition assessments, store collections more densely, put off documentation efforts, and generally cut corners on collections management. Typically doing so has no immediate and visible negative effect and does not provoke an outcry. But experience indicates that the opportunity to return to deferred tasks rarely arises, and ultimately the scope of the deferred work grows to overwhelming proportions that defy easy resolution. Thus, as part of the planning process, units should explicitly and realistically assess what their collections management priorities are; identify the resources required to carry out these priorities at an acceptable standard; and shift the necessary resources to those priority tasks — even if doing so means putting other activities on hold.

Second, **a lack of the information essential for sound decision making has been commonplace.** Most critically, some units have not developed full inventories of their holdings, or conducted condition assessments to inform them about the conservation needs of their collections.

Third, **stove-piped decision making has tended to further the interests of individual curatorial/scientific departments and staff,** rather than the collecting unit or Smithsonian as a whole. Such an approach to decision making fails to account for the relative needs of different departments and programs even within a single unit.

Fourth, **a focus on immediate needs and issues without due consideration for the long-term implications has contributed to the imbalance between collections management responsibilities and resources.** An example is the leasing of storage space as a solution to pressing storage needs, a solution that typically results in lower quality, higher cost space. Collections management involves long-term obligations that require a long-term perspective.

Fifth and relatedly, there has been **insufficient analysis of the consequences of alternative courses of action in both the short and long term**, as well as insufficient attention to the steps that would need to be taken to deal with those consequences.

Overall, optimal decision making requires more attention to resource limitations, actual and potential. It requires a foundation of up-to-date, accurate information on collections, their condition, and their uses. It needs to fit individual collections decisions at different levels and in different departments into a larger picture based on a unit's mission and program mix, and into the long-term strategic guidance from senior management. And it should reflect an understanding, informed by careful and objective analysis, of the implications of alternative courses of actions.

A final point on decision making may be the most important. Competing interests are inherent in collections management decision making. Not only do collections compete with other programs for scarce resources, but competing interests exist within the collections area itself — such as the tension between protecting collections and making them accessible to users, and the conflicting cultures of curators and scientists on one side, and managers on the other. Moving forward often requires reconciling conflicting interests or, failing that, simply resolving a dispute in favor of one side or the other. This is an area where decision making at the Smithsonian appears conspicuously weak: **the difficult decisions needed to effect such reconciliation or settlement have often not been made, resulting in drift**. Instead, decision making has often involved lengthy discussions; protracted (and often unsuccessful) efforts to reach consensus; deferral to the sensitivities of influential groups or individuals; and, ultimately, failure to act in a timely manner or at all. It is crucial that senior managers make timely, difficult decisions despite the possible unpopularity of the decisions with some groups and stakeholders.

organizational structure

The OP&A study team does not believe most collections management problems are the result of the existing organizational structure, so much as how that structure is managed. The decentralization of collections management responsibilities is not inherently problematic, but insularity has resulted in missed opportunities to leverage resources through joint activities — both among Smithsonian units and with external organizations — in areas such as sharing stewardship resources and joint acquisitions. The major exception is the Smithsonian’s science museums and research centers, whose internal and external collaboration offers a model for units in other fields. The weak ties between collections and other programs within units are likewise less a result of organizational structure than of inadequate attention to coordination of the various entities that make up the structure.

Although collections management should continue to be a predominantly unit responsibility, there are pan-Institutional support functions that might best be approached at the central level. For example, the Smithsonian currently has no central repository of information on the Smithsonian’s collections management-related resources, such as staff, technology, informal networking groups, and results of pilot projects. A central repository of information that bears on collections management would help Smithsonian staff stay up-to-date on best practices, new technologies, and the like.

Further, the OP&A study team believes the structure of pan-Institutional collections management support can be strengthened in certain ways, because issues do arise that merit deliberation at both the central and unit levels. One example is shared storage space, particularly with regard to specialized facilities such as cold storage. Presently, OFEO is responsible for planning storage facilities across the Smithsonian, but it tends to work with individual units that are, in effect, in competition with one another for resources. An alternative might be to bring

representatives from the units together to identify and collaborate on shared needs. Likewise, development of Institution-wide performance standards and measurement methodologies is best handled collectively.

The SD 600 Implementation Manual calls for the establishment of a pan-Institutional Collections Advisory Committee to formalize coordination and communication among the units and to address pan-Institutional issues, an idea that the OP&A study team also favors. Optimally, such a committee would be composed of senior unit representatives, such as associate directors for collections, and would be chaired and administered by the NCP coordinator. The committee would meet on an as-needed basis to handle specific tasks.

NCP occupies a key pan-Institutional position that bears enhancing in three areas. Its **information-sharing role** can usefully be reinforced to include a comprehensive central repository of information on collections management practices and resources, pulled from both Smithsonian and external sources. Its **internal advocacy role** for collections can be augmented to enable it to better identify Institution-wide concerns and coordinate initiatives to address them. It could work with the central Development Office on fundraising for collections care, including efforts to educate donors about the importance of collections stewardship. And its limited **monitoring role** can be expanded to include formal reviews of unit collections management policy and plans, verification of information from the units and collection of additional information, and oversight of the remediation of problems. Given the diversity of the units in terms of missions, collections, programs, and collections management needs, NCP would need to work closely in the above roles with the Under Secretaries and the units.

The OP&A study team explored whether organizational issues might be contributing to the lack of accountability for collections management (discussed below). Again, it concluded that the fault is not structural but managerial: the absence of a strong system for monitoring and assessing performance, for following up on deficiencies, and for holding units and individuals accountable for their performance. Bolstering

accountability does not require creating a new central unit, reassigning responsibilities among existing units, or other major organizational fixes. Rather, it is simply a matter of setting explicit goals and objectives, and then holding people accountable for their accomplishment.

professional culture

Many of the Smithsonian's collections management weaknesses stem from a professional culture ill-suited to present realities. Some important aspects of this culture include:

- ≈ **The dominance of departments' scholarship and research roles relative to their stewardship and access roles.** One result is that curators and scientists have more influence over collections management decision making than other collections management personnel do, a factor that contributes to the deferral of stewardship in favor of other activities.
- ≈ **An insistence upon departmental autonomy.** The attitude allows departments to operate with minimal attention to one another, the unit, or the Institution as a whole, or to the wider collecting community of which they are a part. It partially explains the norm of collections "ownership" by particular departments found at some units, which creates resistance to arrangements that are increasingly appropriate in a time of scarce resources, such as joint acquisitions or coordinated collecting.
- ≈ **The view of museums and archives as keepers of collections in perpetuity.** This view leads to resistance to the kind of collections refinement, including careful disposal of collections less relevant to a unit's mission, that is increasingly necessary for responsible collections

management in a world of scarce resources. (This norm is far less in evidence at art museums than at most other types of collecting units.)

Further, the professional culture at the Smithsonian embraces two prominent myths that strongly contribute to resistance to change. These might be called the **disposal myth** and the **fundraising myth**.

The disposal myth holds that the public will not tolerate disposals — or, relatedly, that donors will stop contributing to the Smithsonian if it disposes of any part of its collections. The OP&A study team considers these beliefs to be erroneous. As explained in Chapter 5, the evidence suggests that donors respect and encourage sound collections management, even if this includes responsible deaccessioning and disposal. In those cases where widespread concern about disposals has arisen, the reason has usually been a failure adequately to inform the public and other stakeholders about the reasons for these disposals, and about the steps being taken to ensure that the public interest is taken into account. Moreover, often the “public” whose response is feared is, in fact, a narrow interest group, whose loud objections are given precedence over the greater good of the unit and the broader public.

The fundraising myth centers on the conviction that no one will give money for collections management per se. Again, evidence of successful fundraising in this area belies the myth. The OP&A study team believes this myth is particularly off-base in the case of Smithsonian collections, and that many potential donors exist who appreciate the unique value of the Institution’s collections to the nation and the need for funds to adequately care for them. The current lack of donations for stewardship is more likely related to inadequate fundraising efforts in this area than to the absence of potential donors.

accountability

Accountability is critical to sound management of collections. In this context, “accountability” means acceptance of responsibility for achieving objectives such as

- Compliance with the requirements of SD 600 and external professional standards
- Development and implementation of long-term collections management plans, with related performance measures
- Assessment of the relative significance of collections within a unit (as the unit defines it)
- Maintenance of complete and up-to-date information on the content and condition of at least the core collections
- Alignment of resources with collections management responsibilities.

The OP&A study team sees the current problems with collections management discussed throughout this report as evidence of insufficient accountability in the past. One reason is that the central administration has typically allowed directors to defer addressing emerging collections problems because of an ongoing shift in emphasis toward noncollections programs and functions. When new requirements come without additional resources for implementation, it should not be surprising that units often divert resources from collections management, because it seems an easy target.

The OP&A study team also believes that accountability is weak because there is no single entity at the central level that oversees units in this area. As discussed, NCP is

currently limited mainly to informal advising and reporting, and its monitoring duties depend heavily on personal relationships. It can review units' collections policies and plans, but has no authority to compel compliance with SD 600 standards. The Under Secretaries do have this authority, but collections management does not seem to be a high priority at this level.

The central administration has taken the first step toward a more systematic approach by establishing Institution-wide goals, objectives, and performance indicators. However, as noted, in the case of one performance indicator — “Institutional standards for care and storage” —those standards had not been defined in a measurable way. In addition, adequate mechanisms for managing accountability were not in place. These include systems for reporting collections management activities; reviewing these reports; measuring performance; following up on plans to address deficiencies; and assessing, at the central administration level, whether unit plans will bring collections management into compliance with SD 600 and other requirements. Ideally, accountability would entail central review of unit collections-related plans, as well as the performance of senior management and of the units. Performance could also be bolstered by creating incentives for senior managers to meet or exceed targets.