

Current Topics in Natural History Collecting and Collections

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Though natural history specimens represent only 6% of the objects and specimens in National Park Service (NPS) collections, their number is increasing rapidly. The recent advent of the natural resource inventory and monitoring (I&M) initiative has stimulated acquisition of specimens. Accompanying this growth are calls for revisions to policies and procedures and innovative solutions to arising issues. Several speakers addressed these topics at the George Wright Society/Cultural Resources 2003 Joint Conference and have made their papers available. The assembled invited or contributed papers in this section of the proceedings are complementary and shed light on current trends in NPS natural history collecting and collections management.

Papers associated with three case studies at Acadia, Death Valley, and Channel Islands national parks illustrate current practices at parks and non-NPS repositories in managing park collections. Several of these papers review the procedures for obtaining a permit to collect and the responsibilities of the permit applicant to consult with the park curator about management strategies for specimens that are permanently retained. They consider the collector's responsibilities in preparing and documenting the specimens and associated records and in recommending a repository for the specimens. One paper reviews the options that the parks have in choosing a NPS or non-NPS repository for collected specimens and data and the need for parks to have a well-conceived strategy to guide that choice. Taken together, the case study papers emphasize the need to ensure that park permit coordinators, park curators, permitted researchers, and designated repositories work together to document, preserve, and facilitate access to the specimens to further science and park resource management. They touch on problems with the process from the viewpoint of the park, researcher, and repository; adjustments that can be made to accommodate legitimate needs; and steps that are taken when abuse occurs.

One contributed paper describes a rich legacy of park-related specimens that are in non-NPS museums and the difficulty in

accessing the specimens and their associated data. With a view to expanding knowledge of biodiversity, the authors surveyed nearly 300 museums and other entities seeking information on collections related to 14 northeastern U.S. parks and presented the results. They point out the problems of finding park-related specimens, since many non-NPS repositories lack automated records, and offer advice on structuring manual searches.

Another author describes concerns with handling contaminated collections from the past and emphasizes the importance of using current preservation methods that do not contaminate the collections.

Additional presentations open windows on the issues of ownership and the reluctance, or refusal, of some non-NPS repositories to accept park collections on loan; on the importance of having collections and being able to retrieve them in the future for the purpose of confirming or reassessing findings from the past; and on why metadata and quality assurance efforts are important parts of collections.

The compilation of topics discussed at an NPS workshop on managing park natural history collections indicates that park curators and research coordinators are focused on such issues as improvement to communication and information access among park, permittee, and repository personnel through software changes to existing systems and development of software-based training; the need for net-

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work, region, and Washington offices to increase technical support for natural history collections management and facilitate coordination with partners and multi-park research efforts; the need for new or revised guidance on specimen and associated records acquisition and management; and the ability to ensure that projects and initiatives that generate collections support the required collections management functions. The discussion elicited suggestions for actions that NPS might consider to enhance automated permitting, inventory, and collections management systems; address NPS staffing needs; improve partnership arrangements; clarify NPS col-

lecting and collections management requirements for parks and partners; and accommodate recent taxonomic changes and new collecting technology in NPS natural history collections management systems.

These papers highlight the kinds of concerns that park collections managers address no matter where and how they choose to manage park collections. They also reveal circumstances that users of collections and associated data (whether park scientists, resource managers, or non-park researchers) experience in trying to bring together information collected over many years and from many sources.

