

What's in the Pipeline for Natural History Collecting and Collections?

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A sea change is occurring in National Park Service (NPS) natural history collecting and collections management. The recent advent of the Natural Resource Challenge initiative has already stimulated changes in the permitting process. Several new developments are in the pipeline and more will come in the future.

The web-based Research Permit and Reporting System has revolutionized the scientific research and collecting permitting process. It standardized permitting across all parks and is helping park research coordinators, park curators, researchers, and repositories to improve their coordination of permitting, collecting, and collections management activities. Drawing from experiences gained during the two years in which the system has been in operation, an advisory group of users has identified a number of desirable changes, such as automated messaging to notify a curator of a new permit application to collect and retain specimens, software prompts reminding applicants to get a signed agreement from a proposed repository, and expanding the software to allow applicants to propose multiple repositories for collections made under a single permit. The Natural Resource Information Division expects to issue these enhancements in 2003.

The wealth of existing and anticipated future collections, the dispersed distribution of those collections throughout the world, the need to improve our knowledge of the information represented by those collections, and the importance of improving the retrievability and conservation of those collections call for creating partnerships and cooperative funding arrangements, for no one entity can do it all. New tools to facilitate coordination with non-NPS repositories managing park collections are, or soon will be, available. A model generic agreement will be issued for parks, networks, and the Washington office to consider using when coordinating the management of

multiple park collections at non-NPS partner repositories. NPS use of this generic agreement could facilitate efforts to compensate and assist cooperating repositories when they provide collections management services. Consolidation of park collections into regionally focused repositories can facilitate scientific research, collections management, access for resource management purposes, and administrative coordination. Streamlined and automated inventory procedures, such as those available to NPS centers that manage multiple park collections, are now also available to non-NPS repositories with similar functions.

Researchers must enter plant and animal species data for the inventory and monitoring initiative in the NPSpecies database. To streamline the cataloguing of inventory and monitoring specimens and avoid duplicate data entry, the NPSpecies developers are designing a function to readily export data from NPSpecies to the Automated National Catalog System (ANCS+) database. This new function will complement existing ANCS+ capabilities to export data to NPSpecies and to import data from Microsoft Access or Excel files into ANCS+ when the Access or Excel files are arranged according to simple protocols, such as making the catalogue number field the first field in the database and ensuring the researcher's field names exactly match the import/export format that the park curator uses.

Using the NPS Web Catalog, introduced in 2002, the parks can make recently collected and catalogued specimen data and images

immediately available for public use. Researchers in a network can use the Web Catalog to inform colleagues of specimens collected. The data then are available for other web-based union catalogues to access and use. For an example, see the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument collections on the Web Catalog at www.museum.nps.gov/joda/page.htm. Although over 50 parks have committed to post data on the Web Catalog, only 13 have made their data available thus far. As more parks take advantage of this opportunity, the electronic accessibility and benefit of NPS collections to science and the public will increase.

Needed revisions to the NPS Museum Handbook, Part II, Appendix H, Natural History, including the taxonomic classification system and the hierarchical classification outline, will follow once the partnership of the museum management program and the inventory and monitoring program fulfills its goal to

hire a natural history curator in 2003.

These new developments, in the pipeline for 2003 and beyond, are some of the steps being taken to meet the needs of scientific, museum, and park communities in managing and accessing NPS specimens and their associated data for research and education. The National Park Service and partner organization experiences reported in the case studies and contributed papers offer a number of different models for park collections management. The NPS workshop report highlights the kinds of changes that park research coordinators and curators think could improve the collecting, use, and management of park scientific specimens. Our goal is to use the information from these case studies and papers and the workshop discussion to encourage all partners to adopt best practices that are effective in managing park collections while optimizing their benefit to science and society.

