

RCN: BUILDING A NATIONAL COMMUNITY OF NATURAL HISTORY COLLECTIONS

There are thousands of institutions with natural history collections (NHC) in the U.S. and the number of specimens is estimated to be 820,000,000 (Heritage Preservation 2005). These specimens document the diversity of life on Earth and provide a continuous record of biotic changes over the last few hundred years. An RCN is proposed to build a community that will overcome fragmentation caused in part by geographic, taxonomic, historical, and institutional diversity. A stronger community will facilitate research by providing better lines of communication between collections managers and researchers and establishing improved mechanisms for access to specimens and specimen data. The initial core participants, who will also serve as steering committee members, are Henry L. Bart (Tulane University, vertebrate systematics), Meredith Blackwell (Louisiana State University, fungal systematics), L. Alan Prather (Michigan State University, plant systematics) and James B. Woolley (Texas A & M University, invertebrate systematics). These individuals represent a broad array of institutions, taxonomic specialties and methodologies and bring together a diverse set of skills to help facilitate this RCN. Additional participants will be added within the first few months of the RCN funding period. Three professional organizations, the American Institute of Biological Sciences, the Natural Science Collections Alliance, and the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections will provide strong support as partners in the RCN. Participation will be broadened throughout the term of the RCN by increasing number of people on the steering committee and the number of core participants. Most of these colleagues will be added through external mechanisms to reduce chances of insularity.

Intellectual merit: The RCN has the following objectives: 1) Identify the institutions and people that will define our community and facilitate dialogue among them about how to better serve the needs of researchers, 2) Identify major opportunities and challenges in the current environment and foreseeable future and develop a strategic plan for the future of collections research, 3) Determine how to strengthen and modernize the role of collections in education and outreach, and 4) Identify the primary needs of collections regarding care, curation, storage and accessibility.

Activities: The objectives will be met with a series of workshops, symposia, internships, and a website, CollectionsWeb, which will provide a forum for interaction, host workshop reports, provide information on ways to become involved in the RCN and provide links to resources for NHC. Several major community resources will be developed, including a catalogue of NHC, a survey of the status of NHC, a register of curatorial expertise, and an inventory of innovative and successful educational programs.

Broader Impacts: The RCN will have a proactive mechanism to increase diversity among the collections community, including an effort targeting inclusion of NHC at minority institutions. Workshops will help increase exposure to collections and opportunities for research at smaller institutions, develop strategies for integrating collections into the education of future biologists, and enhancing access to collections for consumers of collections data in governmental and non-governmental positions who work with resource management and other applied areas. The databases of collections and collections expertise will not only better connect collections to researchers but will also be designed so that stakeholders, educators, and the general public can access information about collections and expertise.