

Increasing Access to Biological Collections

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A Forum for Integrating the Life Sciences

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Increasing Access to Biological Collections

For years, many scientists and scientific organizations have argued—often in the pages of *BioScience*—that the nation's natural science collections are critically important pillars of our scientific research and education infrastructure. Moreover, these resources, whether they are held in a university biology department, a natural history museum, a botanic garden, or a government laboratory, contain irreplaceable specimens and associated data that explain the history and diversity of life on Earth. Because of this, these scientific collections provide the basis for answering many of the most complex twenty-first century problems confronting science and society. Unfortunately, it is often the case that scientists and collection managers are unaware of what is contained in the thousands of natural science collections across the country. Part of the solution, argue many scientists, is a national campaign to digitize natural science collections.

In recent years, a number of workshops have explored the scientific and technical barriers to and opportunities in digitizing the nation's natural science collections. These discussions led to the development of *A Strategic Plan for a Network Integrated Biocollections Alliance* (<http://digbiocol.wordpress.com/brochure>).

As was reported in the Feature article in the September 2011 issue of *BioScience* (61: 657–662), the National Science Foundation (NSF) appears to have heard the communities' call. Through the Advancing Digitization of Biological Collections program, the NSF has launched an effort that would spend \$100 million over 10 years to make the images and data from all US biological collections available in an integrated, shared form on the Web; to develop and launch new Web-based tools that improve data mining, image analysis, and georeferencing processes; and to digitize the existing backlog of collections and keep that process up to date.

About 130 institutions are already participating in this digitization initiative through one of several thematic collection networks—groups organized around specific research or geographic questions.

Although the current and planned support from the NSF is critically important to the ultimate success of this effort, there are other aspects of the *Strategic Plan* that must also be considered. Therefore, with support from the NSF, AIBS will convene a workshop next month to develop an implementation plan for the Network Integrated Biocollections Alliance. This workshop, coorganized by James Hanken and Lucinda McDade, will bring together a cross-section of experts in digitization to identify milestones, targets, and other issues that must be addressed in the next 10 years in order to realize the potential of the Alliance. In the coming months, the workshop organizers will seek community comment on the draft report that results from the September workshop. The opportunity to provide comments will be broadly announced. This is an important opportunity for members of the natural sciences collections and biodiversity science communities to help inform a national initiative.

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