

2008 Report from the ASPT representative to the Natural Science Collections Alliance

The Natural Science Collections Alliance (NSCA) met jointly with the Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections (SPNHC) from 13–17 May 2008 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The theme of the meeting this year was “Collection stewardship: Challenges in a changing world”. A number of sessions/presentations were of interest to herbaria and the plant systematic community, including several on the national collections funding environment. Robert Gropp (Director of Public Policy, NSCA) presented on “The National Political and Policy Environment”. Representing the National Science Foundation (NSF) were Rick McCourt and Carl Taylor. Questions were taken after their presentation “Collections support from the National Science Foundation” (a brief overview of collections programs at NSF), but both left the conference prior to the luncheon special interest group on funding they were scheduled to lead. Debra Trock (CAS) spoke on integrating herbarium pest management efforts with collection moves, an issue that many herbaria are facing. An important session focused on “Electronic Stewardship: Challenges and Solutions in Digitizing Collections”. As part of this sessions, Mary Barkworth (UTC) spoke on behalf of the WDC012 committee on developing a single portal to information in US herbaria [This committee will also be meeting as part of the Bot2008 conference in Vancouver]. Sula Vanderplank (RSA) presented on the successes of the Consortium of California Herbaria (CCH) in organizing and linking their collections. Further talks on the CCH, including their funding, will be held as part of the ASPT Collections Committee organized workshop at Bot2008 entitled “Virtual Herbaria: Regional progress in organizing, fundraising, and delivering content.” Tiffany Adrain presented on “Protecting endangered collections: A threatened collections toolkit”. Many societies and regional groups (e.g., SERNEC, the Society of Herbarium Curators, and others) have been organizing committees specifically to help deal with threatened collections. This toolkit will be of interest to all. Of interest as well was the “NPS Biological Collections Forum: To the O-word and Beyond (Rabeler [MICH] et al.)”, as NPS policies on collections remain a significant concern to herbaria. The ASPT Collections Committee has forwarded a pertinent resolution for the ASPT Council to consider. Another discussion session on NPS policies (organized by Rabeler and Solomon [MO]) will be held at Bot2008. A curators meeting organized by Wayne Elisens (OKL) and TORCH members followed the general sessions.

Highlights from the NSCA president’s report to the NSCA board of directors follow in Appendix A. The organization continues to be active in Washington, though it is difficult to assess its effectiveness and impact particularly on behalf of plant systematics collections due to its broader mission. The NSCA lobbying leadership appears optimistic that a change in the federal administration may lead to a more favorable climate for collections in general. However, based on comments by the NSF representatives at the NSCA meeting, growths in systematics related programs are unlikely to be sufficient to meet demand and collections must find additional avenues of funding. This is consistent with findings by the ASPT Collections Committee. The ASPT Council is urged to seriously consider this problem and potential solutions.

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APPENDIX A: Highlights from the “Natural Science Collections Alliance Report to the Board of Directors” by Michael A. Mares, NSCA President (May 2008)

“The following provides a brief update on the various NSC Alliance activities and accomplishments for 2008.

Communications to NSC Alliance Members: Washington Report

Since August 2005, the NSCA Public Policy Office (Robert Gropp) prepared and disseminated a public policy report (Washington Report) via e-mail to the NSC Alliance board and membership. Washington Report covers matters related to federal policy developments that impact or may be of interest to a cross-section of the NSC Alliance membership. Periodically, as policy developments dictate, “Action Alerts” are distributed.

[...]

Policy Issues, Meetings and Activities
NSF Funding

In February 2008, NSCA was represented at the National Science Foundation’s FY 2009 budget release. Following the official release, a small group of representatives of scientific organizations met with James Collins, assistant director for BIO (Biological Sciences Directorate) to learn about and discuss the FY 09 request. Although the President’s proposed FY 09 budget for NSF includes a 10.2 percent increase for BIO, this funding increase represents an inflation adjustment for the past two years. Of note, for FY 08, BIO received a 1.2 percent cut in the final omnibus appropriations legislation signed by President Bush in December 2007. The proposed 10.2 percent increase in the current request remains 9-10 percent below the proposed increases for physical science and engineering programs. Also lagging behind are the Geosciences Directorate (GEO) and the Social, Behavioral and Economic Sciences Directorate (SBE). The request for GEO is slightly better than BIO, SBE is slightly below BIO.

In the FY 09 request, NEON (National Ecological Observatory Network) and two GEO projects have been removed from the current year’s budget line for the Major Research Equipment and Facilities Construction (MREFC) account. NEON continues to be funded from BIO and the Ocean Observatory and Arctic research vessel projects continue to be funded by GEO. When the requested funds for NEON are removed from the BIO budget request, no new funds have been included for BIO. Gropp and policy colleagues in Washington, DC, continue to express concern about funding arbitrarily being directed to specific disciplines. The core message is that all of science is important to advancing knowledge and resolving our grand 21st century challenges (e.g. climate change).

The NSC Alliance endorsed a letter to Representative Mollohan (D-WV), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, and Science Appropriations, that encourages the House to once again include language in the FY 09 appropriations that recognizes the importance of funding all NSF programs. An effort to secure inclusion of this language in the FY 08 House Report on CJS Appropriations was successful.

[...]

In addition to the effort described above, the NSC Alliance also provided testimony to the House and Senate Appropriations Committee in support of increased FY 09 funding for the NSF.

[...]

Potential action:

NSCA members might consider asking their university president and/or institutional government relations officers to share the need for increased funding for all of NSF – including biology, environmental and social sciences. Additional information about the declining funding trends for biological and environmental sciences research may be found at:

http://www.aibs.org/public-policy/budget_source.html

http://www.aibs.org/public-policy/resources/Bio_funding_March_2008.pdf

<http://www.aibs.org/public-policy/resources/leavebehindforRG.pdf>

<http://www.aaas.org/spp/rd/09pch17.pdf>

USGS Funding

In addition to work with the USGS Coalition, NSC Alliance provided congressional testimony in support of increased FY 09 funding for the USGS.

[...]

Specimen “ownership” / control:

In April, the National Park Service convened a special “discussion session” with representatives of natural science collections organizations and various taxonomic research communities. The purpose of the one-day discussion was for all parties to gain a better understanding of the needs and constraints faced by the National Park Service and the biological research community with respect to control of biological specimens collected on National Park Service land. NSC Alliance vice president Hans Sues represented NSC Alliance at the meeting. Gropp participated on behalf of AIBS.

Various other individuals representing a range of collections and research communities participated in the meeting, which included the participation of the Deputy Secretary of Interior, NPS Director, and other senior NPS officials. The discussion was productive and creative pathways forward were identified for further discussion. The meeting was prompted by long-standing concerns and miscommunication about from various communities about “ownership” of specimens collected on federal lands. In addition to the discussions, it was clear that NPS officials at the meeting have an interest in engaging the scientific community on various other aspects of research in National Parks.

Interagency Working Group on Scientific Collections

In April, Gropp spoke with Scott Miller of the Smithsonian Institution about the status of the IWGSC report on federal scientific collections. Miller, is now co-chair of the IWGSC. Phyllis Johnson who visited with the NSC Alliance Board in December is no longer with the USDA. Johnson had been a co-chair of IWGSC since its inception. According to Miller, she has been granted an adjunct/affiliate status with Smithsonian so that she may remain involved with the final efforts of the IWGSC. Recent information suggests that the IWGSC final report is still undergoing official government clearance. The hope remains that it will be released to the public in spring 2008.

NSF Survey (RCN grant)

Early in 2008, the NSC Alliance attempted to build support for and participation in an NSF-sponsored survey of collections. Unfortunately, federal rules prohibit NSF from conducting a far-reaching and open survey. Nonetheless, the NSF has begun to survey a sub-set of university-based collections that have previously received NSF grant support. It is anticipated that this data will eventually contribute to an NSF report. NSC Alliance, through Hans Sues, continues to work with NSF-funded Research Coordination Network in an effort to develop and conduct a survey of collections. Gropp, who is the AIBS representative to the RCN is also working with Hank Bart, a PI on the RCN grant and a working group to

develop a survey of collections. The RCN team has been provided hardcopies of prior surveys and reports conducted by NSC Alliance precursor, the Association of Systematics Collections.

Coalitions

The NSC Alliance has been active in the Coalition for National Science Funding (CNSF), Biological and Ecological Sciences Coalition (BESC), and the USGS Coalition. Gropp was a founding member and serves as a co-chair of the USGS Coalition for the past three years. Gropp also serves as a co-chair of BESC, along with Nadine Lymn, director of public affairs for the Ecological Society of America. Gropp also represents NSC Alliance at meetings of the Museum Working Group, an informal alliance of Washington, DC-based organizations working on museum-related policy activities, particularly funding for the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The Museum Working Group is organized by the American Association of Museums.

USGS Coalition

The NSC Alliance continues to be an active participant in the USGS Coalition. Gropp co-chairs the USGS Coalition with Craig Schiffries of the Geological Society of America. The USGS Coalition is an alliance of nearly 80 scientific, educational, and government organizations working to increase funding for the United States Geological Survey. The USGS Coalition members advocate for the USGS on Capitol Hill, the White House, and the Department of the Interior. The Coalition hosts a Capitol Hill reception each fall, and routinely provides congress with a ‘stakeholders’ perspective on funding and research trends at the USGS.

CNSF Capitol Hill Reception

On June 26, the NSC Alliance will participate in the 14th Annual CNSF Capitol Hill reception and science exposition. CNSF, the Coalition for National Science Funding, is an informal alliance of nearly 100 scientific and academic organizations committed to increasing and sustaining the federal investment in the National Science Foundation. In June the NSC Alliance will co-host an exhibit with the American Institute of Biological Sciences (AIBS). John Sullivan and Mark Henry Sabaj Perez with the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia will present a poster on the All Catfish Inventory, an NSF funded project utilizing field, molecular and collection specimens to facilitate the discovery, description and dissemination of knowledge of all catfish species by a global consortium of taxonomists and systematists.”