

# Museum Issues and Trends

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**T**he turn of the century and the millennium inspire reflection on the past and contemplation of the future. This issue of *CRM* looks at current issues in museums as predictors of future trends. The cutting-edge issues of today will impact, if not determine, the mainstream of tomorrow. The focus of this *CRM* is on museum collections and their interpretation and use.

As we collect and preserve systematic collections we ask ourselves, How much is enough and how long is forever? Two authors addressing archeological collections (Thompson and Bustard) are struggling with this question, as archeologists and collections managers have for much of the last half century. Hannibal makes a plea for government agencies to have uniform permits and procedures to make it easier on those museums that partner with them. Some advocate greater selectivity in collecting as well as selective disposal of existing collections. Byrne adds a caution about deaccessioning, while acknowledging its role in refining holdings.

Providing evidence of the omnipresent power of the market to affect the success of museums in preserving heritage, Chure's article, to our knowledge, offers the first compiled record of the extensive theft of vertebrate fossils worldwide. Kouroupas's chronicling of implementation for the 1970 UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property inspires one to ask if a similar convention is far behind for fossils.

In tackling issues of environmental quality, conservation, and sustainable development, natural resource managers are turning to museums to shore up their baseline data in order to make responsible decisions about managing ecosystems. Williams describes a major inventory and monitoring program in the National Park Service that relies on researching existing voucher specimens in museums (collected from the time when parks were first established to the present) as well as filling gaps with new vouchers. Likewise, with dramatic examples Roosevelt points out that existing archeological collections in museums are

rich resources for new discoveries that can revolutionize our understanding of culture history. In both cases museums must maintain high documentation and preservation standards in order to ensure the reliability of the data to future science and researchers.

Science has not only advanced the knowledge of our heritage, but also its physical preservation. Yet, science has been both a blessing and a curse. The arsenic and other chemicals that museums applied to preserve specimens in the 20th century have become the bane of the 21st century's conservators and collections users. Hawks and Makos provide an overview of the inherent and acquired hazards in museum collections and offer insight to our responsibility in mitigating and managing these risks in the future. Similarly, Odegaard discusses legal issues regarding museum documentation of pesticide use, the repatriation of contaminated collections, and special approaches to preservation of indigenous collections, including adopting traditional preservation methods. The examination of these issues must and will result in different approaches to preservation in the future. Conservation methods, which are continually refined by new knowledge, both scientific and cultural, prompt one to ask, What are we unwittingly doing today, for which future curators, conservators, and users will curse us? Hawks, Makos and Odegaard call for changing ethical standards.

Current issues and trends in exhibits and interpretation similarly call for traditionally associated groups to be involved in determining the objects that go on exhibit and how they are interpreted and handled. Stewart and Joseph describe the enriched mutual understanding that has resulted from some of the many collaborative exhibits involving the First Nations on the Northwest Coast of Canada and museums throughout North America. Franco discusses how museums are changing to respond to more diverse populations, changing audiences, multiple perspectives, and new technology. In responding to diverse populations, such bastions of cultural heritage as the National Trust for Historic

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*Continued from p. 3*

Preservation are discovering the need to interpret not only the landowner, but all contributors. Schreiber points out the challenge that addressing slavery presents to the staff interpreting the collections and structures of the National Trust. Yet another trend in interpretation is that of integrating the museum store as part of the visitor's educational and recreational experience. Horst describes how park and museum bookstores can contribute to the interpretive mission as well as financially support collections and programs.

Of all issues, technology may be the most powerful trendsetter. To name only a few trends, it is redefining the museum audience; the collection and storage of data; and access to information—the very essence of museums. Perhaps it will redefine the museum itself. Sledge, Vogt-O'Connor, and Black and Edwards draw our

attention to the issues and opportunities in the information access and technology arena.

In spite of the controversy that museums sometime engender with their exhibits, for the most part, museums have been conservative institutions, documenting our natural and cultural heritage rather than changing it. The issues in this *CRM* are only a few among the many that museums face. Yet these issues trend toward museums playing a more pivotal role in determining not only how we document and interpret our cultural and natural heritage, but also how we use information (in the form of the rich resources of museums) to shape the natural and human environments of the future.

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