

Smithsonian Institution Acting Secretary

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(text as prepared for delivery)

Good afternoon. Thank you, Jerry, for the introduction, and thanks to all the members of the National Press Club for inviting me here today.

As you may have gathered from the introduction, I have an unusual background. My mother is from a small town in upstate New York, my father from Colombia; they met at Cornell 65 years ago. As a teenage boy growing up in Latin America, I was fascinated with the diversity of the tropics and ended up studying biology. Seven years ago I was working for the Smithsonian Institution studying the tropical jungles in Panama, now I find myself studying the jungles of Washington. At times I wonder which one is easier to understand.

For the last six months, I have had the honor to serve as the Acting Secretary of the Smithsonian, an extraordinary Institution that is in the hearts and minds of all Americans. I have the privilege of working with an outstanding team of colleagues to advance our mission, “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.”

I think I have the best job in the nation’s capital. After all, where else can you visit the giant panda Tai Shan at the Smithsonian’s National Zoo one morning, and the same afternoon visit the Smithsonian’s Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center near Dulles airport to discover nearly 200 planes suspended in air—as if they are actually flying.

Most people don’t realize the scope, depth and breadth of all the Smithsonian has to offer. So, that’s why today I will talk about fact, fiction and the future of the Smithsonian Institution.

The fact is the American people trust the Smithsonian, and we are determined to honor and keep that trust.

We are often referred to as the “Nation’s Attic,” but I think historian David McCullough has described it better as a “storehouse of ideas.” It is indeed that, and much more.

We are stewards of more than 137 million objects and specimens, documenting our history and heritage, and the natural diversity of this planet. We have meteorites, the Hope Diamond, the Burgess shale fossils, giant squid, the Star-Spangled Banner, the hat Lincoln wore the night he was assassinated, Gilbert Stuart’s Lansdowne portrait of George Washington, the Wright Flyer, Kermit the Frog, everything including the kitchen sink—and I mean that literally, we have Julia Child’s kitchen.

But the fact is that’s only half the story. The Smithsonian also conducts groundbreaking scientific research around the globe, helping us understand the origins of the universe, the

During the last decade, Smithsonian astronomers and their collaborators have discovered that there are more than 200 planets in other solar systems, most of them larger than Earth. They are developing new instruments that will enable them to capture photons and study the chemical composition of those planets, providing insights that may help us find life on other planets in years to come.

The Smithsonian leads a consortium of international institutions working on DNA barcoding, a unique genetic fingerprint that can be used to identify species. Last week we announced that we have completed the DNA barcodes for more than 30,000 different species. This information is being used to enhance food safety, as well as identifying species of mosquitoes that are carriers of diseases like malaria, which claim millions of lives across the world.

At the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama, you can ascend to the top of the rain forest in a construction crane to study biodiversity in the canopy and scientists have established large-scale, permanent plots to study tropical trees. We are working with collaborating institutions in Africa, Asia and Latin America to establish a Global Earth Observatory system that is monitoring more than 6 million trees and will help us understand the impacts of climate change on tropical forests.

We've opened large museums. Last year, we reopened the historic Patent Office Building, just blocks from here, which now houses the Donald W. Reynolds Center, home to the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum. There you can see one of the largest and finest collections of art in the world. You will also find the Lunder Conservation Center, the first art conservation facility that allows the public to actually see art conservation work taking place, through the floor-to-ceiling glass walls.

We've also created wonderfully innovative exhibitions. Hundreds of thousands of visitors came to see "Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th Centuries" when it was at the Sackler Gallery and the National Museum of African Art. Many global partners helped put more than 260 extraordinary objects on display in this beautiful exhibition on art, history, economics and politics.

We use these collections, exhibitions and ideas to tell inspiring stories to millions of people. Generations of visitors, children, parents and grandparents come to see our 19 museums, numerous research centers and the National Zoo—more than 25 million over the past year alone. The Smithsonian's digital outreach has been equally impressive. Last year we had more than 153 million visits to our various award-winning Web sites.

And this summer we had more than 1 million visitors to our 41st annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival on the National Mall of the United States. While there are hundreds of cultural festivals across the country, none can top the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in

Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. “Northern Ireland at the Smithsonian,” which highlighted living cultural heritage of a region close to the hearts of many Americans. The Festival also featured the “Roots of Virginia Culture,” which included Native peoples, those from Kent County, England, and from West Africa. The Smithsonian is, and always has been, an international institution.

Today is the third anniversary of the opening of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian on the National Mall. More than 35,000 Native Americans gathered there in September 2004, possibly the largest modern-day gathering of indigenous people ever. More than 100,000 people joined this procession on the National Mall. It was a moment to celebrate diversity and the vital contributions of Native Americans, also a moment to reflect on their past, present and future. I am sure those of us that were fortunate to be there will remember that day for the rest of our lives.

Although our original objects are priceless, it is our people—more than 6,000 employees and 5,000 volunteers—who are indispensable in bringing our collections to life and creating new knowledge through their research and discoveries.

Scholars, curators, carpenters, educators, art historians, veterinarians, librarians, accountants, security officers, scientists, engineers—every one of them feels privileged to have the opportunity to work for the Smithsonian and contribute to its mission. They are curious, they care—and they are passionate about what they do. They want to share their compelling stories with the public. Pick a topic—presidents, blue crabs, genetic laboratories, diamonds, dinosaurs, the big bang, global warming, impressionism, cubism—we have experts excited to discuss all these topics.

Experts such as...

Camille Akeju, the director of the Anacostia Community Museum, which celebrated its 40th anniversary of service to the community last week. On Saturday, I was there for the opening of the new exhibition, “East of the River: Continuity and Change,” which focuses on the history and development of Washington’s southeastern communities

And, experts such as...

Cynthia Smith, a curator at the Smithsonian’s Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York. Cynthia led the effort to open a powerful exhibition, “Design for the Other 90%.” It focuses on design for the 90% of the world’s population that doesn’t have access to the products and services that many of us take for granted. It explores the many ways that people are working to eliminate poverty around the globe. It highlights items as simple as the *LifeStraw*, a personal, portable straw, which purifies drinking water. Half of the world’s poor suffer from water-borne diseases, and more than 6,000 people, mainly children, die each day from unsafe drinking water.

established back in 1846, thanks to his generous bequest to found in Washington an institution bearing his name, dedicated to “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.” Over the decades, thanks to the support of the Administration, the Congress, and the American people, the Smithsonian has become the world’s largest museum and research complex. And we continue to grow.

The National Museum of American History will reopen next year after a two year renovation. This completely redesigned museum will include a new home for the Star-Spangled Banner. The flag weighs 40 to 45 pounds and measures 30 feet by 34 feet. In the next few weeks, American History will open three traveling exhibitions: “The Life and Music of Celia Cruz,” in San Antonio; “First Ladies,” in Philadelphia; and “Richard Avedon’s Kennedy Family Photos,” also in Philadelphia.

The largest multi-disciplinary project ever undertaken by the Smithsonian is under way—the Ocean Science Initiative at the National Museum of Natural History, in collaboration with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The project includes a fascinating new exhibition space, “Ocean Hall,” which opens next year and features a live coral reef ecosystem and a 50-foot-long model of a North Atlantic Right Whale. Oceans cover two-thirds of the earth’s surface and 97 percent of the biosphere of the earth.

Further into the future, the doors of the Smithsonian’s 19th museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture, will open on the National Mall. In the meantime, that museum is active right now, with a brand new Web site just launched last week.

The fact is that the core work of the Smithsonian—the research, collection and education programs—is strong and vital—thanks to its talented, loyal staff.

They are dedicated to using American treasures, the nation’s “crown jewels” as some call them, to help teach new generations what it means to be an American. These treasures and the stories they tell provide a window of America to the rest of the world. They tell the stories of America’s struggles, sacrifices, failures and triumphs. These authentic, iconic objects possess an almost magical power to educate and inspire.

Now, if these are our facts, what are the fictions?

Let me start with the first fiction, and that is: What you see is all there is.

The fact is that less than 2 percent of our 137 million objects are on display at any one point in time. Many of them are used for research purposes behind the scenes, by visiting scholars from across America and the globe. Our challenge is to make all this information available. Fortunately, we have started an aggressive plan for the digitization of our collections, including high-resolution images of some of our most important specimens and objects. We are bringing Smithsonian collections to your desktop with the click of a mouse, in your homes and in your classrooms.

capital. Although we host 25 million visitors a year to our museums on the Mall, the fact is that we also reach out to all Americans regardless of where they live. We realize that not everyone can come to Washington, so we can bring the Smithsonian to you. We run the largest traveling exhibition service in the world—more than 50 exhibitions reaching roughly 5 million people across the country every year. We go to museums, schools, libraries, community centers, veterans' halls, municipal buildings, transportation terminals, and the village green. On July 3rd, at a park near Wheaton, Illinois, we opened an exhibition, "Becoming American: Teenagers and Immigration," at a citizenship swearing-in ceremony for 130 children and young adults from 28 countries. We also work closely with 156 affiliate museums in 30 states, Puerto Rico, Washington D.C., and Panama.

Our outreach influence is vast, varied and vital—particularly with regard to education. We are in classrooms all across America working with students, teachers, principals, and state school officers to enrich classroom instruction for all students. We have added an enhanced search feature to our education Web site to allow teachers to see how Smithsonian educational materials address the standards of learning in their home states. We are helping to improve science education in more than 800 school districts that enroll 25 percent of our country's K-12 student population—that is more than 11 million students.

The third and final fiction I want to dispel is that the Smithsonian as a whole is in trouble given recent events. Nothing could be further from the truth.

As you are aware, a number of reports and reviews during the last year have identified important weaknesses in our governance, leadership and controls. Many of these revelations were shocking to the Smithsonian employees, including myself. But these reports also indicated that these problems were isolated and that the Institution as a whole, including its museums and research institutions, remains strong. Unfortunately, this is the other story that is not told.

I have always believed where there is a crisis, there is an opportunity. We have turned the page and are looking ahead. We are moving forward with a vigorous, thoughtful and thorough reform agenda, with changes underway in leadership, governance and administrative controls. We have taken steps to improve transparency and accountability. We have worked hard to strengthen trust with our constituents.

I have no doubt we will have a stronger Smithsonian in the future as a result. At this time, we have a chance to look anew at what the Smithsonian should do in the decades ahead to continue to serve the American public.

This brings me to the third and final part of this talk: the Smithsonian's future.

and opportunities. We need to stop and ask, what are the contributions that we all expect from the Smithsonian during the next few generations? I do not pretend to have the answer, but I am committed to engaging our staff, volunteers, collaborators and supporters and the general public in a process that will help us envision that collective future.

In order to do this, I feel we need to start with some fundamental questions: what are the trends and challenges in society over the next several generations? What is unique about the Smithsonian? What can the Smithsonian offer in the future? What will we need to achieve this vision for the future?

What are the major trends in our society and the major challenges facing our country?

Population growth and immigration means that we will need to serve an increasingly diverse population; globalization and trade mean that we will need to reach across the globe to understand the forces that are shaping our society; environmental degradation means that many of the species we are studying may go extinct and we need to help preserve them; economic growth and development mean that there will be opportunities to mobilize additional resources to support our mission in innovative ways; growing inequalities in income distribution mean that we will need to make sure that we devise ways to reach all people; and new technologies like information technology and biotechnology mean that we can ask new questions and find new ways to fulfill our mission. These are some of the issues—there certainly others: conflict between cultures; education, income and technology gaps; and I am sure you can name many more.

What makes the Smithsonian unique? First and foremost, it is the breadth, depth and quality of our program activities, which share knowledge in the sciences, history, art and culture with millions of people each year. These program activities form the basis for our reputation and the core of our mission and they can help chart the future of the Smithsonian. Our primary location on the National Mall, among the country's most important memorials, monuments and seats of government, gives the Smithsonian symbolic meaning and unique visibility as a must-see destination for visitors from across the country and around the globe. The Smithsonian is a unique public-private partnership.

What can the Smithsonian offer? It can document and present our nation's diversity and heritage through its vast and growing collections. It can generate new knowledge based on those collections and new groundbreaking research. It can share that knowledge with visitors, scholars, teachers, parents and learners of all ages around the world.

Let me give you one example...

The National Museum of Natural History this spring announced a partnership to launch an online "Encyclopedia of Life," a Web page for each of the 1.8 million known living species on Earth, available for free to every student across America and the world. In a

Two forward-looking institutions, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, have generously given \$12.5 million for the first two years of the five-year “Encyclopedia of Life” project and pledged a like amount when it meets expectations. The “Encyclopedia of Life’s” headquarters, or secretariat, will be based at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, but the “Encyclopedia of Life” is a global enterprise, involving scores of institutions and thousands of scientists, including Harvard’s Museum of Comparative Zoology; the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts; the Field Museum in Chicago; and the Biodiversity Heritage Library, a consortium of natural history libraries here and in Great Britain.

The “Encyclopedia of Life” will give users access to the Smithsonian’s unsurpassed collections, strengthen the Institution’s collaborations with other organizations, and contribute to new scientific analysis and synthesis. Imagine a network of citizen scientists helping monitor the spread of invasive species.

We need to ask one last question. How can we continue our success? We need to attract and retain the best people to carry out our mission. We need to improve our facilities and infrastructure—that includes returning our Arts and Industries Building to its past glory. We need to both expand and strengthen collaboration inside and outside the Smithsonian. We need to embrace new technologies and harness them to further our mission. We need to secure adequate funding from the public and private sectors.

For 161 years, the Smithsonian Institution has built its collections, disseminated its research and welcomed millions of visitors to its museums, creating a reputation so strong that the Smithsonian is known as a symbol of America throughout the world. I want to assure you, the Smithsonian remains strong.

At a time when globalization is bringing countries and peoples closer together, at a time when there are growing tensions among some cultures, at a time when the image of America abroad may be questioned by some, the Smithsonian has an important role to play, to show another face of America, an institution driven by the desire to increase and disseminate knowledge among humankind.

The Smithsonian is the repository of our nation’s values, icons, memories and aspirations. It is a symbol of America around the world.

It is America’s museum—your museum.

Please come and visit us again soon. And look for us in your hometown.

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