

Proposed cutbacks at the Smithsonian research center in Virginia provoke protests by scientists

By Walter Gilberti
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The announced plan to close the Smithsonian Institution's Conservation and Research Center (CRC) in Front Royal, Virginia has elicited the wide condemnation of scientists, from both inside and outside the institution. On April 16, 70 members of the Senate of Scientists, composed of researchers employed by the Smithsonian, issued a formal protest. This has been followed by letters from 37 representatives of scientific organizations, as well as calls for the resignation of Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence M. Small.

In addition to the CRC facility, Small announced in early April plans to close the Smithsonian Center for Materials Research (SCRME) and an art conservation laboratory, both located in Suitland, Maryland. As many as 200 jobs would be eliminated by the closures, with some scientists possibly being transferred to the National Zoo, under which the CRC has functioned.

Scientists are particularly disturbed by the abruptness of the closure announcement, as well as the stated priorities of those running the Smithsonian. The Conservation and Research Center specializes in research into the preservation of endangered species, and maintains nearly three dozen species of mammals and birds, some of which are extinct in the wild. The facility has also earned a worldwide reputation for its contribution to marine mammal biology, field ecology, animal behavior and artificial insemination.

A memo addressed to Small from Smithsonian scientists read: "The current lack of open dialogue in the planning process for science realignment, the decision to eliminate the CRC and SCRME programs, and the manner in which the latter decision was carried out have seriously damaged morale and will undermine

the objectives desired, including ... our ability to retain and attract the highly regarded scientists on which the Smithsonian has built its international reputation" (*The Washington Post*, April 17).

In an initial memo Lucy Spelman, director of the National Zoo, explained, "The resources are simply not available to maintain the CRC as a world-class facility and as a center for scientific excellence." Director Small maintains that the closures are not cutbacks, but a "redirection" of funds, and that the Smithsonian is not cutting spending on scientific research.

However, scientists are alarmed that decisions concerning what types of scientific research will be continued at the Smithsonian are being made based on pragmatic considerations as to which research will attract the most funding. Brian T. Huber, chairman of the Senate of Scientists at the Museum of Natural History, remarked that "natural history is complex and Small wants it to be understood on an organizational chart." It should be noted that Director Small, an investment banker, has no background in science and is only the second nonscientist to head the institution in its 150-year history.

The scientists' concerns seem to be well founded. According to Dennis O'Connor, the Smithsonian's undersecretary for science and a supporter of Small's proposal, the reorganization will be centered around "centers of excellence," meaning that all biological research would be organized together. O'Connor, who happens to be a biologist, further indicated a shift in emphasis toward astrophysics and x-ray astronomy. "We want to be there," O'Connor intoned, "You really have to position yourself, and that is what the reorganization is trying to do."

That there appears to be a growing bias against scientists engaged in the study of natural history is itself significant, in that it dovetails—coincidentally or not—with the Bush administration's abandonment of the Kyoto accords and its drive to open up Alaska's wildlife refuges to oil exploration. The Bush administration has offered to hold preliminary discussions about possibly placing custodianship of the CRC under the Interior Department's Fish and Wildlife Service—in effect, placing the Smithsonian's natural history research under direct government control.

While final approval for the closures rests with Congress, on Sunday the Smithsonian Board of Regents, headed by US Supreme Court Chief Justice William Rehnquist, came to Small's aid by approving the establishment of a commission to assist in the refocusing of scientific research at the institution.

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