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Museum Services Act (1984): Article 02

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Collections Management, Maintenance and Conservation

A Summary of the Study

Introduction

Purpose of the Study

“**C**ollections Management, Maintenance and Conservation,” a study of the state of the nation’s collections that are entrusted to museums, was undertaken by the American Association of Museums in February 1984, and was concluded in June 1985. The AAM, under contract to the Institute of Museum Services, coordinated the study and worked with the National Institute for Conservation as subcontractor. The American Institute for Conservation also cooperated in the project. These organizations, with direction from an advisory panel, consulted representatives of the American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta and the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums on the development of surveys and other methods of gathering information that investigate collections care policies and practices within museums. The cumulative findings of the study highlight current conditions of collections and provide an overview of the resources that are available to museums as they care for their collections.

The study was conducted in response to a mandate from the U.S. Congress for the participating organizations to research and report on the nation’s ability to care for its collections. Congress, responding to a need for statistical information on collections care, requested the study so that agencies that support conservation might be presented with factual information. During the period of the study, new data regarding collections care have been gathered and sources of information have been identified. It is hoped that the results of the study will contribute concretely to the growing body of knowledge of conservation needs in this country, providing a basis on which to formulate constructive policy.

Methodologies

The study is composed of six projects that are discrete initiatives that examine collections care issues. Two of the six projects are national surveys of museums and of conservation professionals and facilities. The four additional projects examine conservation training and information programs, methods of inventory control of collections, private sector support of collections care and federal support for collections care activities of museums.

The Surveys

The Survey of Museums

The “Museum Collections Survey” was a questionnaire distributed to 716 museums, a sample of institutions that statistically represents the nation’s museums with regard to budget and discipline. Standard sampling methods were employed to achieve a statistical analysis of collections care within the museum universe. The universe was identified through studies conducted previously, and included museums representing all disciplines and budget sizes of \$50,000 or more. Responses from 364 museums were tabulated.

The survey examined all major collections care activities within museums — activities known as the management, maintenance and conservation of the collections. “Collections management” involves the control of the collections and includes the management of collections records. “Collections maintenance” includes basic activities that insure the security and maintenance of the physical environment. Museum administrators, curators, registrars, security and maintenance staff are personnel with responsibilities in these areas. “Conservation” includes ac-

tivities that examine, preserve and restore the objects or populations. Personnel associated with these responsibilities are varied and may range from conservators who restore paintings to veterinarians who research species survival methods. The questionnaire investigated these many facets of collections care, and requested information about the financial resources supporting these activities.

The Surveys of Conservation Resources

Two surveys were distributed to examine conservation resources. The "Conservation Facilities Questionnaire" was distributed to 298 conservation facilities; 120 responses were tabulated. The "Conservation Professionals Questionnaire" was distributed to 1,879 individual professionals; 589 responses were tabulated. Previous studies of conservation have been few, and none have been comprehensive attempts to identify these resources on a national level. Consequently, a universe of laboratories and professionals was identified for the first time. The universe included all known conservation resources that serve non-living collections. Because conservation is interpreted broadly within the context of living collections, only a sample of these resources was identified for use in the surveys. Advisors to the study agreed that information obtained from the surveys of conservation resources serving living collections will assist in the development of definitions within these disciplines (e.g., botanical gardens, zoos and aquariums).

These surveys examined resources that operate within and outside museums. The "Conservation Facilities Questionnaire" was distributed to laboratories that are departments within museums, as well as laboratories that are incorporated regionally on a cooperative basis or operated as private businesses. The "Conservation Professionals Questionnaire" was distributed to individuals employed by museums and individuals employed by cooperative laboratories or private businesses that serve museums.

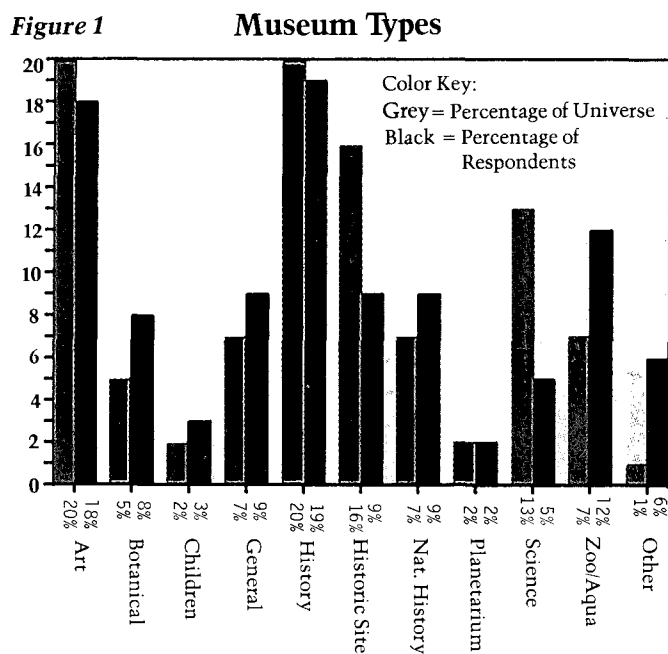
Identifying appropriate conservation resources is a major concern of museums as collections care is planned. Conservation by nature is a highly specialized activity. Professionals who conserve paintings may not be qualified to conserve textiles or archeological materials. The conservation of living collections requires professional expertise in the propagation of species or populations. The question-

naire requested information on conservation specializations, as well as information regarding the geographic location of resources. Other areas of investigation were education and training, sources of funding, equipment and staff profiles, research activities and institutional policies that affect conservation. Participants were also asked to address the needs of the collections and of the people and facilities who conserve them.

Highlights from the Survey Findings

Museum Disciplines

The nation's museums are diverse, ranging from art museums to zoological parks. Based on previous studies a universe of museums was defined for use in this study. Figure 1 shows, by museum discipline, this universe and the universe of respondents in the "Museum Collections

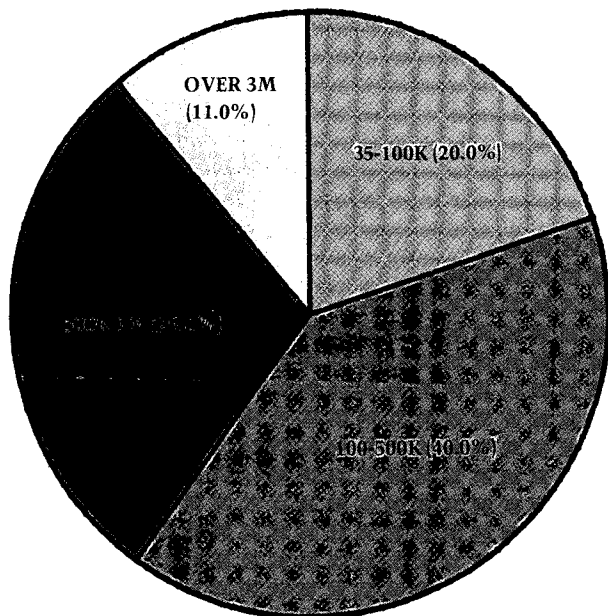


Survey." For example, the first pair of bars shows that 20 percent of museums in the universe were projected to be art museums, and that 18 percent of the respondents to the survey are art museums. Responses indicated that some museums have difficulty in selecting a single category of discipline. Consequently, the number of respondents in the "other" category was larger than anticipated.

Financial Information

The "Museum Collections Survey" requested information on the annual operating budgets of museums. A survey of institutions representing a wide range of budgets was considered crucial in examining collections care within museums. Even though questionnaires were distributed to museums with estimated budgets of at least \$50,000, participating museums reported operating budgets ranging from \$35,000 to \$53 million. Reported budgets are presented in Figure 2, indicating that 60 percent of museums reported budgets from \$35,000 to \$500,000.

Figure 2 Museum Operating Budgets



Museums were asked to report on funding patterns that affect collections care activities. Considering inflationary factors, 44 percent of museums reported an increase in their funding for conservation over the last five years. Thirty-six percent reported a stabilization and 19 percent reported a decline in funding for conservation during the same period.

The "Conservation Facilities Questionnaire" requested information on conservation budgets. Reported budgets ranged from \$1,000 to \$5.757 million. The larger budgets (greater than \$1.55 million) were reported by facilities that conserve living collections. In fact, some of these facilities reported their entire institutional operating budgets as their budgets for conservation. Interpretations of this issue varied greatly and demonstrated the lack of consensus within the field regarding conservation within the context of living collections.

Conservation budgets may be most meaningful when examined within the context of institutional budgets. Fifty-six percent of conservation laboratories serving non-living collections reported budgets that are less than 5 percent of the parent institution's operating budget. Eighty percent reported budgets that are less than 25 percent of the institution's operating budget. Conservation laboratories serving living collections reported budgets that are more often than not (64 percent of respondents) 25 percent or less of the institution's operating budget.

The "Conservation Facilities Questionnaire" also requested information about funding sources. Conservation laboratories are supported traditionally by a combination of internal and external sources. Figure 3 presents sources of funding reported by conservation laboratories serving nonliving collections. Figure 4 presents funding sources of laboratories conserving living collections. Laboratories that are private businesses reported that almost all of their income (89 percent) is derived from fees for services. Private businesses are not reflected in the following charts.

The Collections

Museums were asked to provide information on the numbers and conditions of the objects in their collections. The questionnaire listed 37 categories of objects within museums, for which 133,572,140 objects were reported.

Figure 3

**Labs Serving
Non Living
Collections
Sources of
Income**

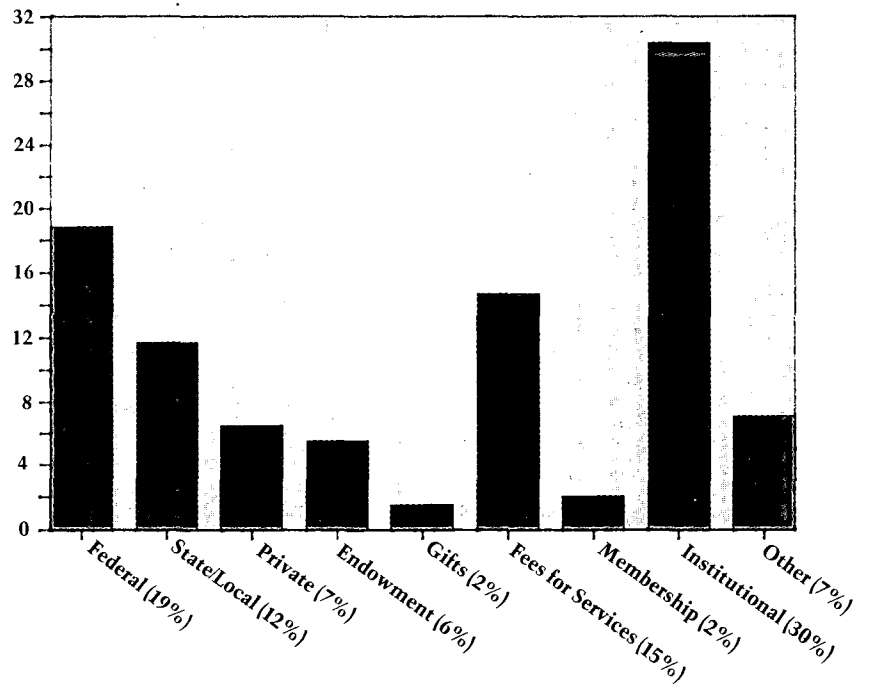
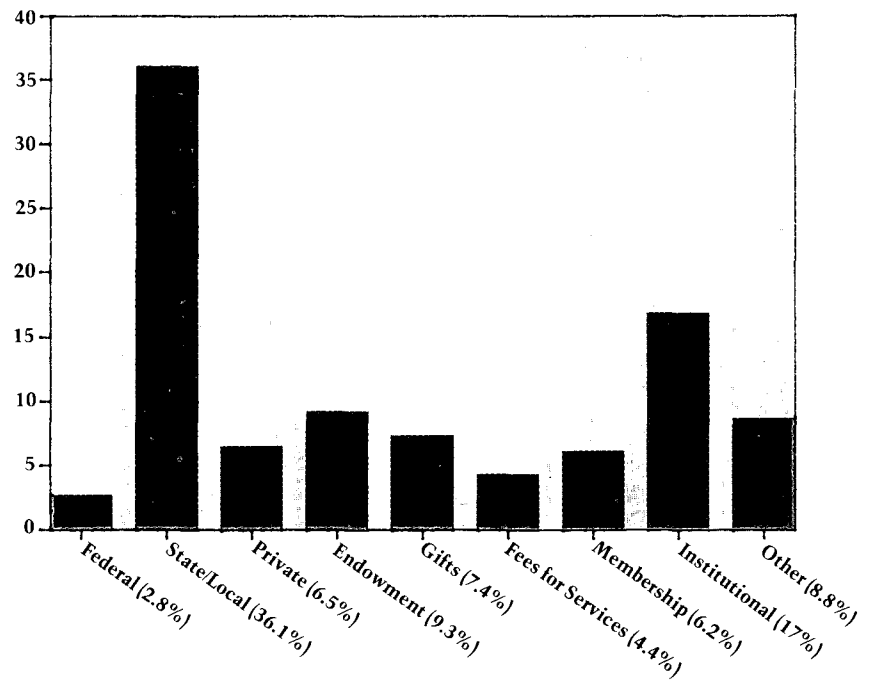


Figure 4

**Labs Serving
Living
Collections
Sources of
Income**



Cumulatively, more than one million objects were reported in each of the following types of collections: anthropology, archeology, books, documents, geology, philatelic, preserved animals, photographic negatives, photographic prints, plants (live and preserved) and works of art on paper. Over half of the responding museums reported collections that included the following types of objects: books, ceramics and glass, furniture, paintings, photographic prints, textiles and works of art on paper.

To determine the conditions of objects, collections are surveyed by collections care personnel. Thirty percent of the participating museums reported that they have surveyed none of their collections for conservation purposes. Thirty-six percent have surveyed half or less of their collections; 34 percent have surveyed more than half of their holdings.

Museums were asked to provide information regarding the conditions of the collections. Figure 5 illustrates the overall responses to conditions defined in the questionnaires. "Serious need" was defined as the threat of partial or complete loss of the object unless it is treated soon. "Need" was defined as the need of routine treatment. "No need" was defined as the lack of need for treatment. Respondents reported that the condition of 40 percent of the collections is unknown.

Collections Management

The "Museum Collections Survey" addressed collections management issues. Museums reported that they exhibit 44 percent of their collections on a regular basis. This means that 56 percent of the collections must be stored away from exhibition areas that are open to public view. Collections are managed with various record-keeping systems. Museums reported that they have inventoried 77 percent, have cataloged 68 percent, and have photographed 30 percent of their collections. Fifty-three percent of the inventories and 23 percent of the catalogs were reported to be current. When asked to acknowledge activities that are "undertaken to satisfaction," 71 percent of museums reported the "registration of collections" and 64 percent reported the "cataloging of collections." Twenty percent expressed satisfaction with their "computerization of inventory and catalog records."

Long-Range Plans for Conservation

The surveys requested information about institutional policies of museums that affect the care of collections. Unlike some collections care efforts that are on-going activities within museums, conservation often has the

Figure 5

Condition of Objects

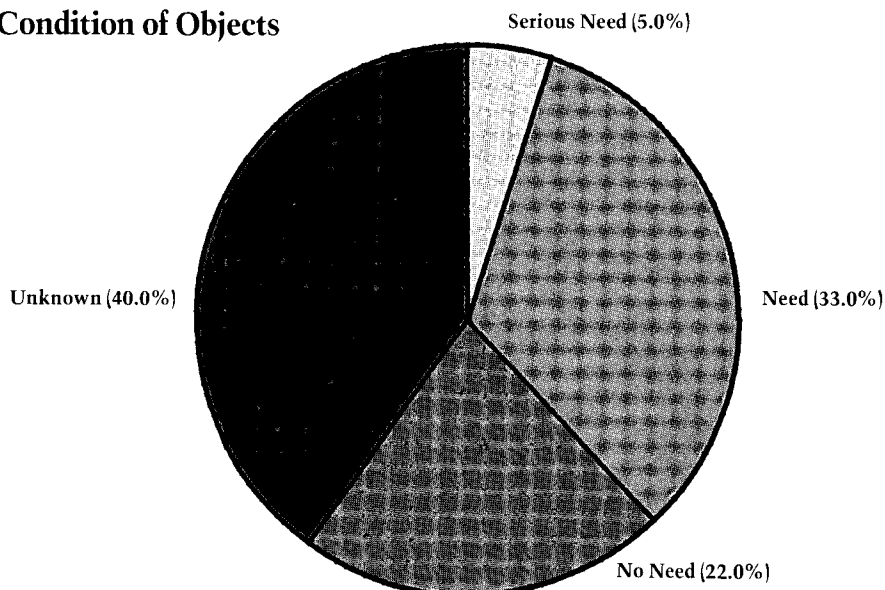


Figure 6 Long-Range Conservation Plans

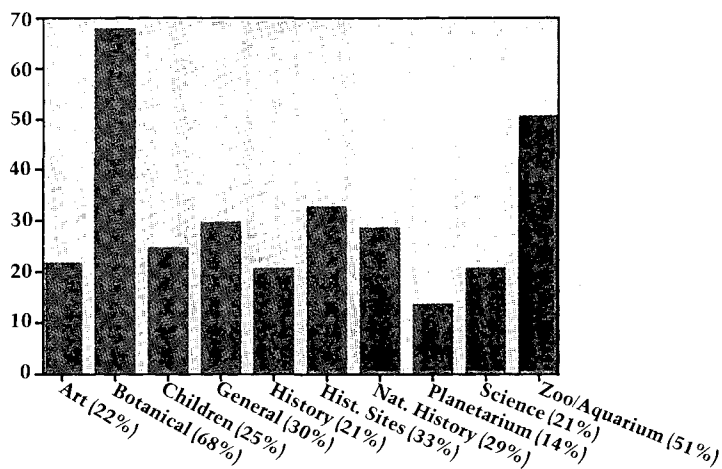


Figure 7 Full-Time Staff Positions

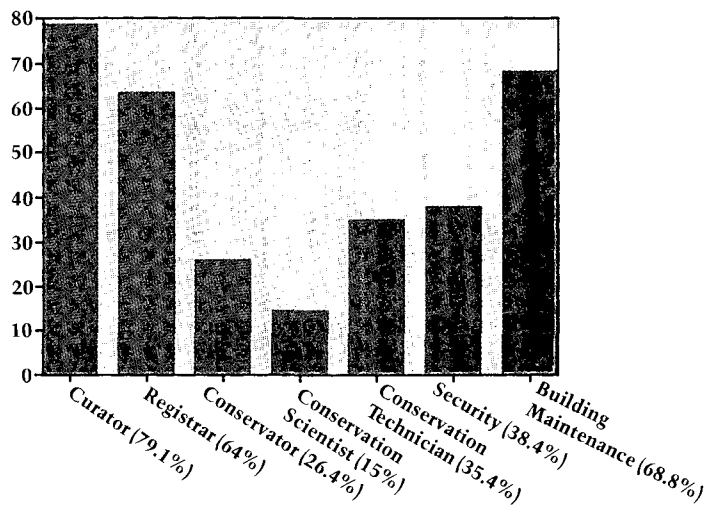
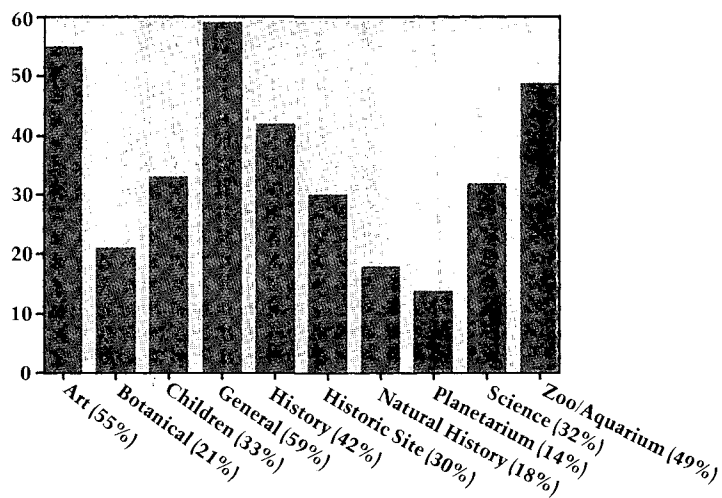


Figure 8 Museums Using Consultants



character of special projects for which outside resources are solicited. Conservation requires the acquisition of specialized expertise and equipment and may demand the support of special funds or gifts. Twenty-eight percent of museums reported that they have written long-range plans for conservation. Establishing an institutional policy may be a museum's first step in establishing a commitment to conservation. Figure 6 presents percentages of museums by type that reported having long-range plans for conservation.

Collections Care Personnel

Museums were asked to provide information on the size and character of their staffs. Figure 7 illustrates percentages of museums that reported full-time employees in the seven collections care positions listed.

Not all museums have all types of collections care staff in-house on a full-time basis. Collections care personnel, particularly conservation professionals, were reported in some instances to serve institutions on a contract basis as consultants. Figure 8 illustrates the percentages of each type of museum that reported using consultants to treat objects.

Recent Growth and Increased Demand for Services

The results of the surveys illustrate recent growth. Museums reported that their collections have grown by an average of 19 percent during the last five years. The percentage of growth was reported to be highest in science museums (42 percent) and lowest in historic sites (5 percent). The majority of museums reported having expanded (59 percent) or renovated (60 percent) their facilities. Sixty-nine percent of the reported expansions and 83 percent of the reported renovations have occurred within the past five years. Results of the "Conservation Professionals Questionnaire" show that 80 percent of conservators of nonliving collections and 83 percent of conservators of living collections reported that requests for their services have increased during the last five years.

Priorities

Museums were asked to identify and rank their priorities regarding collections care for the next decade. Collectively, the reported priorities are:

- (1) conservation of the collections
- (2) computerization of inventories and catalogs
- (3) development of adequate storage space
- (4) upgrading of temperature and climate controls
- (5) education of museum personnel
- (6) examination of collections condition

When directors of conservation laboratories were asked to rank priority needs for their facilities, the need for additional staff and space were ranked first and second. These directors also addressed the role of conservation in the institutional policies of their museums. Responses reflected primary concerns about museum environments in which collections are housed. Directors of facilities conserving nonliving collections ranked "environmental control" as the area in which a greater voice for conservation is needed most. Directors of facilities conserving living collections pointed to "grounds supervision and maintenance."

Only a small portion of the information resulting from the surveys is presented here. The universe of museums is large, diverse and changing. Collections continue to grow, a fact that places increasing demands on collections care resources. As the first major study of the needs of the collections, the results of the surveys provide a basis for further investigation.

The increased computerization and sophistication of information systems within museums are now making it possible for museums to share information in new ways. The results of these surveys alone have unearthed a wealth of information about collections. As the universe of museums and of conservation resources continues to change, periodic studies must be undertaken if museums wish to continue examining the needs of the collections. The results of this study are offered in the hope that they will assist museums toward positive changes.

Professionals who need information on collections care are encouraged to consult the complete report of the study. Copies of the summary and of the complete report may be obtained from the Institute of Museum Services, 1100 Pennsylvania Ave., NW, Room 510, Washington, D.C. 20506.

Appendix: Assisting Professionals

Advisory Panel to the Study:

James Morton Smith, Panel Chairman
Director Emeritus
Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur
Museum

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Charles Ulrick and Josephine Bay
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Harvard Art Museums

Craig Black, Director
Natural History Museum of Los
Angeles County

Charles Bieler, Executive Director
San Diego Zoo

Elisabeth FitzHugh, Conservation
Scientist
Freer Gallery of Art

Russell Fridley, Director
Minnesota Historical Society

James Hester, President
New York Botanical Garden

Albert Klyberg, Director
Rhode Island Historical Society

Thomas Leavitt, Director
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art
Cornell University

Roger Nichols, Director
Boston Science Museum

Paul Perrot, Director
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Theodore Reed, Director Emeritus
National Zoological Park

Ann Russell, Director
Northeast Document Conservation
Center

Samuel Sachs, Director
The Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Joyce Hill Stoner, Director
Art Conservation Training Program
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Art Conservation Department, SUNY

Barbara Beardsley, Chief Conservator
Art Conservation Laboratory, Inc.

James Bernstein, Co-director of
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Judith Block, Registrar
National Zoological Park

Marigene Butler, Head of Conservation
Philadelphia Museum of Art

Elliott Carroll, Executive Assistant
The Architect of the Capitol

Nathan Flesness, Program Director
International Species Inventory
System, AAZPA

Thomas Foose, Conservation
Coordinator
Species Survival Plan, AAZPA

Mary Todd Glaser, Senior Conservator
Northeast Document Conservation
Center

Norvell Jones, Supervisory
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National Archives and Records Service

Susan Lathrop, Executive Director
American Association of Botanical
Gardens and Arboreta

Pieter Meyers, Senior Research
Chemist
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Roy Perkinson, Head of Paper
Conservation
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Shelley Sturman, Objects Conservator
National Gallery of Art

Gurdon Tarbox, Director
Brookgreen Gardens

Thomas Taylor, Architectural
Conservator
Colonial Williamsburg

Robert Wagner, Director
American Association of Zoological
Parks and Aquariums

Terry Weisser, Director
Conservation and Technical Research,
Walters Art Gallery

Mary Lou White, Conservator
Art Conservation Laboratory, Inc.

Project Staff:

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American Association of Museums

David Shute, Executive Director
National Institute for Conservation

Jane Slate, AAM/NIC Project Director
Program Coordinator, National
Institute for Conservation

Susan Bandes, Grants Officer
J. Paul Getty Trust
(formerly Project Director, AAM)

Maureen Robinson, Legislative
Coordinator
American Association of Museums

Amy Bower, Research Assistant
American Association of Museums

Joy Norman, Coordinator
On-Site Surveys

Technical Assistance:

Lee-Ann Hayek, Chief Mathematical
Statistician

Cindy Carman, Statistician
Smithsonian Institution

Harris Shettel, Research Scientist

Mark Czarnolewski, Research
Psychologist
American Institutes for Research