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Museum Services Act (1984): Correspondence 19

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Missouri
Botanical
Garden

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JUN 29 1979

June 25, 1979

The Honorable Claiborne Pell
U.S. Senate Office Building
Washington, D. C. 20510

Dear Senator Pell:

As a member of the National Museum Services Board and one who has for many years been interested in the national posture of the Smithsonian Institution, I was particularly interested in your remarks to our Board at lunch on last Friday, June 22. Approaching the problem from a completely different standpoint, I have always felt that the Smithsonian has defaulted seriously on a potential role of national leadership. In the field of natural history, with which I am most acquainted, there are however severe difficulties; the other institutions tend to feel threatened by the Smithsonian which acts as a competitor instead of as a national leader in almost every field. Considering that the museum professionals in the field of natural history in the Smithsonian at every level are paid at least 50% more and often double the salaries of their counterparts in other museums around the country, there is a general feeling of uneasiness and mistrust which might be difficult to overcome. Coupled with this is the fact that historically programs that have been initiated within the National Museum of Natural History (again, the branch with which I am most familiar) have generally floundered because they have not really received the support of the curators and the administration. The problem is that the curation of the objects stored in the Smithsonian and the research undertaken by the curators tends always to end up achieving first priority, and the broader programmatic needs that might relate to national problems or interest tend not to be funded. This reflects no conscious policy but is characteristic of the system.

As an example, we were engaged for nearly a ten year period from 1965 on in attempting to get the Smithsonian to take the leadership in a Flora North America program that would have involved a computerized inventory of the plants of the United States and Canada -- something that we lack at present even though there is a modern flora of Europe, a modern flora of the USSR, and a modern flora of Japan, and Mexico is hard at work on its own computerized modern flora. We base so many decisions on the distribution and occurrence of plants

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in the United States that it is remarkable that we have never been able to organize ourselves for such an effort, but such is the case. At any rate, after a very prolonged period of negotiation the National Science Foundation and the Smithsonian Institution agreed with the supervision of OMB to start a Flora North America program with the understanding that NSF funding would decrease while SI funding increased. The problem was that to which I have alluded above, however; the Smithsonian never saw this national project involving many institutions as being high enough on its priority list to receive priority funding and therefore NSF withdrew its support and the project died. I think this merely indicates some of the kinds of difficulties that national projects can get into in the Smithsonian Institution, and with good will on all sides.

With respect to IMS, I myself see no reason why this could not operate as a loosely affiliated agency in the Smithsonian group as you have suggested. On the other hand, I stress the words "loosely affiliated" because if priorities with respect to IMS had to be sorted out in relation to other SI priorities, I think there would be real difficulties on both sides. Is there enough congressional and public trust of the Smithsonian Institution for that agency to be a good one in which IMS might grow? The major priority at present as I perceive it would be the attainment of significant additional funding for the nation's museums which are literally being swallowed up by inflation, and therefore the major consideration for me is where IMS can achieve the most rapid budgetary growth.

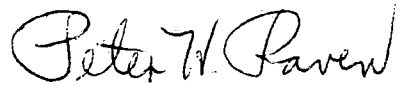
I know you feel as I do that Dillon Ripley has done an absolutely extraordinary job in promoting the growth of the Smithsonian Institution and making it a real treasurehouse for the entire nation. Although he has broadened the scope of the institution away from Washington as notably in the formation of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, the center for the study of short-lived phenomena, etc., most of the growth has been concentrated in Washington. If the Smithsonian is to become a focal point or coordinating agency for other museums around the country -- and I see no reason why that would not work -- substantial changes in attitudes both internally and externally would be required. Perhaps as you remarked such evolution will be characteristic of the next stage of development at the Smithsonian. It would certainly be an exciting development and one well worth pursuing.

If I were not well aware of how busy your schedule is, I would suggest meeting with you to discuss some of these matters which are of extreme interest to me on some future visit to Washington. Under the circumstances, however, I would still like to offer to discuss them with some member of your staff as might be useful, or if I can help in any way

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by elaborating on these comments I would be happy to do so. We are certainly all most appreciative of your leadership in support of the nation's museums.

Yours sincerely,



Peter H. Raven
Director

PHR:mv