



Smithsonian
National Museum of Natural History

June 14, 2006

Board of Regents
Smithsonian Institution
1000 Jefferson Drive SW
Washington, DC 20013-7012

Dear Members of the Board:

Enclosed is an open letter to you from the Senate of Scientists of the National Museum of Natural History. The letter was drafted through a process of consensus-building among the museum's scholars and was approved unanimously by the Senate's elected Council.

The Senate, with 165 active members, has long served as a forum for discussion and advocacy on issues that affect the Museum and Institution.

We are grateful for your attention and appreciate your assistance to the Smithsonian.

Sincerely yours,

Helen F. James
Chair, Senate of Scientists
National Museum of Natural History

Division of Birds, MRC-116
Smithsonian Institution
P.O. Box 37012
Washington, DC 20013-7012

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An Open Letter of Concern to the Smithsonian Regents

The Senate of Scientists at the National Museum of Natural History shares the dismay of the media and members of the U. S. Congress regarding the Institution's contract with CBS/Showtime to form "Smithsonian On Demand." Reporting of this deal by the Smithsonian Business Ventures in the Washington Post was accompanied by concerns about salaries of the Smithsonian Business Ventures executives and the Smithsonian's senior managers.

The Smithsonian on Demand deal will apparently place some restrictions on outside access to Smithsonian scholars and collections. An unknown amount of staff time has evidently been committed to this commercial venture, and the degree of intellectual control over products about Smithsonian objects and activities is uncertain.

In recent years, there has been a sharp decline in Smithsonian trust funds for collections, education and research programs. At the same time, many new trust-fund-supported executives have been hired. As recently reported, the top executive salaries paid from the Smithsonian Trust are much higher than the federal pay scale. The Smithsonian's culture of public service is not shared by those who receive private-sector-scaled salaries paid out from a legacy to the American people dedicated to the "increase and diffusion of knowledge."

Our organization speaks for the scholars at the National Museum of Natural History, and this community is deeply concerned about the Institution's present and future well-being. We concur with the outgoing Inspector General and respectfully request that the Smithsonian Regents convene independent, external panels to examine these issues:

1. Are the mission and practices of Smithsonian Business Ventures aligned with those of the rest of the Institution, which is a taxpayer-funded, non-profit trust instrumentality of the U.S. Government?
2. The income and expenditures of the Smithsonian Trust (for the past 10 years) and Smithsonian Business Ventures (since its incorporation) should be examined to determine whether funds that formerly supported scholarship, outreach and education have been reprogrammed into excessive management costs.

The Smithsonian is and has been staffed almost entirely by employees of the U.S. Government and by Trust employees who are paid on a federal pay scale. Generations of civil servants and like-minded Trust employees have built, preserved, and enriched National Collections in the arts, humanities, and sciences for the purposes of exhibition and scholarly research. They dedicated their efforts to the public good, as we do today. In working toward the laudable goal of reaching broader audiences through electronic outreach, every part of the Smithsonian enterprise must carefully guard the Institution's core values.