SVP
SOCIETY OF VERTEBRATE PALEONTOLOGY
www.vertpaleo.org

Society of Vertebrate Paleontology
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July 29, 2019

Board of Regents
University of Alaska
c/o John Davies, Chair
PO Box 81781
Fairbanks, AK 99708
jndavies@alaska.edu

Dear Regent Davies,

On behalf of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology, we are writing to express concern about drastic cuts to the research budget of the University of Alaska Museum of the North. We understand that the governor of Alaska has proposed that all state funding for research be cut, including all funds to the Museum except for admissions and research overhead. We understand that you must make unprecedented decisions about what to keep, so **we are bringing to your attention legal, scientific, and ethical issues associated with the research collections at the Museum about which you may be unaware.**

The Society of Vertebrate Paleontology (SVP) is a non-profit international scientific organization with more than 2,200 members, including researchers, educators, students, and artists. Our mission is to advance the science and education of vertebrate paleontology and to encourage the protection of vertebrate fossils and fossil sites.

The Museum of the North cares for a priceless fossil collection that is utilized not only by researchers at the University, but by scientists from around the world. The boundaries of paleontological research do not follow state or national lines. Our understanding of the history of life on Earth is built on specimens housed at thousands of research repositories like those at University of Alaska. Each institution holds a unique set of pieces of the puzzle that scientists seek to unravel. Paleontologists therefore regularly visit the Museum's research collections for new data to address questions that reach far beyond Alaska. The Museum has especially important holdings of Ice Age mammals from Beringia that provide the context for the colonization of the Americas by its first inhabitants. It also holds the largest collection of high-latitude dinosaurs in the world, which provide unparalleled insights into the physiology and behavior of these ancient animals because the lived on what is today the North Slope inside the Arctic circle at a time when it was not cold but when it was nevertheless dark for months out of each year. It is critical to science that this material remain accessible to researchers.

Much of the fossil material housed at the Museum belongs to the US Federal Government. By accepting the federal permits under which that material was collected, the University accepted an obligation to conserve and make available federal fossils to researchers and other interested parties. These specimens are regulated under federal laws such as the Paleontological Resources Preservation Act (2009) and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (1976) (https://www.nps.gov/subjects/fossils/fossil-protection.htm). We do not know what proportion of the Museum's holdings are federal, but, given that 60% of Alaska is federal land, it is likely to be large. Federal material must remain accessible to researchers or transferred to another repository with permission of the federal agencies that manage the land from which it was collected.

The Museum of the North's research collections also contain special fossils known as "nomenclatorial types". Type specimens are designated as the name holders newly described species based on rules established in the International Code of Zoological Nomenclature (https://www.iczn.org). Scientists routinely refer to types when they evaluate the status of newly discovered fossils and, if they are unavailable, the scientific process of paleontology grinds to a halt.

Finally, research at Museum of the North has international stature. As vertebrate specialists, we are especially familiar with the work in the Earth Sciences, Mammalogy, and Herbarium sections. While small, the institute is known for its Arctic research and for work in paleontology, phylogeography, and phylogenetics. The current research team includes scientists of international stature, such as Patrick Druckenmiller, Link Olsen, and Campbell Webb.

To the uninitiated, Museum research may seem like one of the least painful places to cut. But its research collections represent decades of past investment, no small part of it from federal funds supported by taxpayers across the US, and have a nexus of regulatory obligations that may take decades to disentangle. **Cuts to research museums may be more costly in both dollars and institutional reputation than they appear on an accounting sheet, as discussed by the American Alliance of Museums** (https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/professional-practice-retrenchment-or-downsizing/). We urge you to consider cutting other areas that will have less impact outside the University and which can be more easily rebuilt when political winds change.

Sincerely yours,

Emily J. Rayfield, Ph.D.
President

Jessica M. Theodor, Ph.D.
Vice President

P. David Polly, Ph.D.
Immediate Past President

cc: Brandi Berg, Executive Officer, University of Alaska Board of Regents (ua-bor@alaska.edu)
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