

**Senate Committee on Rules and Administration**  
**Testimony**  
**Smithsonian Institution Acting Secretary**  
**Cristián Samper**  
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Thank you for this opportunity to testify before the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration. I much appreciate it, particularly at this critical juncture in the history of the Smithsonian Institution.

The Smithsonian was established in 1846, thanks to a generous bequest from British scientist James Smithson, with the mission: “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.” Over the decades, the Smithsonian has become the world’s largest museum and research complex, providing inspiring experiences for millions of visitors from across the country and around the globe. Historian David McCullough recently described the Smithsonian as a “storehouse of ideas.” It is indeed that and much more. With 19 museums, nine research centers and the National Zoo, the Smithsonian stands out as a unique entity, a leader in science, history, art, and culture. As an international institution it offers the world a picture of America and America a picture of the world.

I joined the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama in 2001 and was deputy director and staff scientist there until 2003 when I became director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History. It has the largest natural history collection in the world (126 million specimens and artifacts), a scientific staff that produces more than 300 research publications each year, and it hosts nearly 6 million visitors annually.

And, I am honored to come before you as the acting secretary of the Smithsonian. I am thankful to the Smithsonian Board of Regents for the confidence they have placed in me and I am committed to doing all that I can to ensure the Smithsonian emerges from this challenging time as a strengthened, improved Institution. Working together with the Congress, and with the help of internal and external review committees, I believe we can do just that.

It was James Smithson’s bequest that launched the Smithsonian, but the debate and counsel of the Congress helped to shape it from day one—and does so to this day. Without the generous support of the Administration and the Congress the Smithsonian simply would not be able to function.

We appreciate the support and oversight of the Congress. And the first thing I want to tell you as acting secretary is that I am committed to improving relations with the Congress. That starts with communication; we will make a special effort to answer all your questions as thoroughly and as quickly as possible.

I view the Smithsonian as a public trust; it belongs to every American, young and old, learners of all ages. Tens of millions of adolescents have come to the nation’s capital and have experienced the Smithsonian. Through our expansive education and outreach programs, millions more have experienced the Smithsonian in their own hometowns. I

am particularly interested in this younger audience because they are America's future. We inspire the next generation of astronauts, scientists, artists, explorers, and historians. Once they experience the Smithsonian, this great Institution is in their hearts and minds for life.

The mission of the Smithsonian is the increase and diffusion of knowledge, and we achieve it through our collections, research, and education. We are the custodians of the largest museum collection in the world, with more than 136 million objects and specimens, documenting our history and heritage, the natural and cultural diversity of this planet. Researchers from the Smithsonian and from around the world use these collections to pose new questions and advance our knowledge. Through our exhibitions at our many museums and programs, the collections and research galvanize our education efforts. Those efforts are expanded across America through traveling exhibitions, affiliate museums, curriculum guides, Web outreach, and much more.

The Smithsonian is fortunate to have a talented workforce of more than 6,000 employees, roughly two-thirds of whom are federal employees, while the rest are paid from private, or trust funds. We are also greatly aided by more than 5,000 dedicated volunteers. Our workforce includes scientists, historians, artists, curators, custodians, security officers, and many more. All do a great job caring for our collections, expanding our research, and presenting the story of what it means to be an American.

I am very grateful to our experienced and dedicated staff, volunteers and donors who deeply care about the Smithsonian and what it stands for. In recent weeks, I have met with many of them individually and in town hall meetings and all are united in their commitment to continue the great work of the Institution.

There is much to build upon. In the last few years, among other things, the Smithsonian has opened two new museums: the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center of the National Air and Space Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian on the Mall; revitalized the historic Patent Office Building, which now houses the Donald W. Reynolds Center, home to the National Portrait Gallery and the Smithsonian American Art Museum; and launched the National Museum of African American History and Culture, as well as opened many new exhibitions and exhibition halls, served students, teachers and learners of all ages, partnered with new affiliate museums around the nation, and sent traveling exhibitions across the country.

Visitors come to major Smithsonian attractions such as the annual Folklife Festival on the National Mall; the National Museum of Natural History's *Hall of Mammals*; and the National Air and Space Museum's exhibition, *The Wright Brothers and the Invention of the Aerial Age*. Although the National Museum of American History is closed for an extensive revitalization, its work continues. Traveling exhibitions, and public programs throughout the country are planned, and a special exhibition of more than 150 iconic objects, *Treasures of American History*, is open at the National Air and Space Museum. Research continues, including, for example, a study of the history of western expansion through coins and paper

money, and a project to examine the construction of Stradivarius instruments with the help of MRI scans.

The Smithsonian's National Zoo is home to the giant pandas, Mei Xiang and Tian Tian, and their cub, Tai Shan. More than 12 million visitors have seen the pandas. More are coming to see the new Asia Trail—the most significant improvement at the Zoo in animal care, visitor experience, and habitat development in 40 years. The Smithsonian was founded as a scientific institution and the Zoo represents one part of the ongoing revitalization of science at the Institution.

The Smithsonian is also involved in work on the avian flu virus, H5N1. An exhaustive study by Smithsonian scientists and colleagues suggests that the disease will most likely get to the Americas not by migrating birds, but by a completely different route: the international poultry trade.

Astronomers at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory were one of the first to discover the existence of extra solar planets nearly 10 years ago and recently reported a new type of “puffy” planet that is the biggest planet ever found inside or outside the Earth's solar system.

Under the National Invasive Species Act of 1996, the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center (SERC) and the U.S. Coast Guard created the National Ballast Water Information Clearinghouse at SERC in 1997 to collect and analyze data on invasive species that may arrive in U.S. ports from ships around the world.

And the Smithsonian has now completed action, or is on schedule to complete action, on 96% of the 104 recommendations of the Smithsonian Institution Science Commission. The recommendations focused on issues of leadership, structure, performance evaluation, education, outreach, budget, and the process for implementing the recommendations.

All our exhibitions and activities attracted more than 23 million visitors last year, down slightly from 2005. Fundraising is up. The Smithsonian has successfully used past appropriations to leverage private funds and continue to serve the public. Last year the Institution raised \$132 million from the private sector. In the first quarter of fiscal year 2007, \$37 million has been raised, \$16 million more than in the corresponding first quarter of last year.

This is a record to be proud of and we have great plans for the future. How we move forward to execute those plans is very important. How we govern this great Institution is just as important.

It is my hope that we can work with the Congress to address the compensation, spending, and governance questions that you have raised, improve the process, and continue to expand the valuable service the Smithsonian provides the public.

As you know, the Smithsonian Board of Regents, to address the pending issues directly, has chosen a three-person Independent Review Committee to review the Inspector General's reports on compensation, expenses and donations, and the Regents' response and actions. The committee is composed of three distinguished citizens who are not members of the Board of Regents and is chaired by Charles A. Bowsher, a former Comptroller General of the United States. The committee's recommendations are due to the Regents in late May.

The Board of Regents has also created a new, permanent Committee on Governance. The committee will initially be charged with comparing the governance of the Smithsonian with best practices of comparable organizations and responding to governance-related issues. Regent Patty Stonesifer, head of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, will chair this new standing committee. It will also include a distinguished individual who is not a Regent, Diana Aviv, president and CEO of Independent Sector. This committee initially will meet weekly and will submit a plan for best practices for governance of the Institution to the Board of Regents. In the meantime, the work of the Smithsonian will continue.

One of the biggest obstacles we face in continuing this work is our facilities maintenance problem.

Both the National Academy of Public Administration and the Government Accountability Office have looked into this matter and underscored its seriousness with the GAO saying current funding levels are insufficient to provide the \$2.3 billion required to fix and maintain the Institution's facilities over the course of the coming years. With more than half its buildings—and their electrical and mechanical systems—well past their normal, useful life spans, this is an overwhelmingly problematical issue. As you know, we had to close the Arts and Industries Building (A&I) for fear the roof would collapse after many years of neglect. We are working as hard and as fast as we can to reopen A&I, but it could cost more than \$50 million alone to just fix the shell of the building. An External Review Committee just examined the Smithsonian's art museums and galleries and cited facilities maintenance problems and the funding to solve those problems as a major, ongoing issue. My own experience as director of the National Museum of Natural History, a building that opened in 1910, has given me first hand experience of the need to improve and maintain the facilities for our collections, research, and education.

Our museums, galleries, and research centers house some of America's greatest treasures, and historically the federal government has recognized its responsibility to ensure that those treasures are housed, preserved, and exhibited in facilities adequate to the task—and safe for employees and the public. It's clear that the scope of the facilities problem is enormous; we are very grateful for all the federal support to correct this massive problem. We use federal funds to fix our infrastructure and private funds for the exhibits and scholarship that goes into the facility or expands and improves upon what is there. The Smithsonian is working very hard to raise private funds to be used in partnership with federal funds to repair our facilities.

Should we spend more of the Smithsonian's Endowment to address this problem? We've looked at such an alternative. The Smithsonian has a pay-out policy consistent with other non-profit entities and approved by our Board of Regents that provides for an annual pay-out of 5% of the five-year average value of our Endowment. This widely-accepted pay-out policy is designed to sustain the principal of the endowment and not mortgage a non-profit entity's future. The Endowment was valued at \$843 million at the end of FY 2006. Of this amount, \$541 million, or more than two thirds, is restricted and can only be used for the purposes specified by the donor. This leaves only \$302 million that can be used at the Institution's discretion. This has provided \$13 million annually for the last four years, which has been used largely to cover a share of the Institution's outreach, administration, and management costs. These are costs that would otherwise be borne by the federal budget.

Doubling the payout would provide only a small \$13 million boost for the facilities program against an estimated shortfall of \$100 million per year and would almost certainly eat into the Endowment's principal, reduce future payouts, and call for additional federal appropriations to cover administrative costs that could no longer be afforded in the Trust budget. So, spending more of the Smithsonian's endowment on facilities maintenance is an option fraught with complications. We're open to discussing other solutions to this issue so the Smithsonian can better continue with its ambitious plans for the future.

One of my top priorities as acting secretary is to ensure that those ambitious plans move forward. I am not here to keep the chair warm; there is too much at stake. The Smithsonian has so much to offer the public in terms of education, outreach, research, exploration, exhibitions, and much more. We've built up great momentum and it must continue. Consider just a few examples:

The Smithsonian Center for Education and Museum Studies is collaborating with the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) to create new ways for teachers and students to access Smithsonian collections and experts. The purpose of the collaboration is to enrich classroom instruction for all students. The National Sciences Resources Center, a partnership with the National Academies, is helping improve science education in school districts that enroll 22% of the United States' K-12 student population. Using the NSRC's reform model, Washington state, Delaware and other states are providing evidence of the effectiveness of that model in improving student achievement in science, mathematics, and reading.

The largest multi-disciplinary project ever undertaken by the Smithsonian Institution is under way—the \$75 million Ocean Science Initiative at the National Museum of Natural History, in collaboration with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The project includes a new exhibition space, the Ocean Hall (opening in 2008), a new endowed Chair for Marine Science research, educational outreach, a new Ocean Web Portal, plus funding for research.

The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Panama, recently received an \$8 million grant from HSBC (one of the world's largest banking and financial services organizations) to expand the world's largest field experiment (begun by STRI in 1982) on the long-term effects of global change on forest dynamics. The study includes 18 sites in 13 countries, monitoring more than 3 million trees in collaboration with research institutes and universities in the United States and throughout the world.

Much like the Smithsonian Science Commission of a few years ago, a panel of experts has reviewed the policies and procedures of the Smithsonian's art museums and galleries; this previously mentioned External Review Committee has presented their report to the Smithsonian's Regents. In addition to identifying facilities maintenance issues, the committee sees Smithsonian Arts as having tremendous assets and potential.

Some of the greatest works of art in this country—and the world—are at the Smithsonian, even more so now that the Disney-Tishman collection of African art is on display. It's one of the finest collections of African art in the world. The Smithsonian's art museums, the Freer, the Sackler, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the National Museum of African Art, the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York City, the Smithsonian American Art Museum and its Renwick Gallery, and the National Portrait Gallery, collectively, are the fourth most visited art complex in the United States. More visitors are expected in November of this year when the Robert and Arlene Kogod Courtyard at the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art and Portraiture will be completed. This 28,000-square-foot space covered by an undulating glass and steel canopy was designed by world-renowned architect Norman Foster.

The Archives of American Art, with more than 16 million items in its vast collections, is an invaluable international asset. It's the largest collection of original documents about the history of the visual arts—painting, sculpture, printmaking, crafts, and architecture—in the United States from the 18th century to today. The Archives recently replaced microfilm with digitization to foster the widest accessibility to its collections and oral history interviews. The Archives has launched the first phase of *Collections Online*. More is on the way.

Nine (international and national) fellows have been selected for the Smithsonian's Artist Research Fellowship program. The fellows are working at 12 art, science, and history units. Each will publicly present their projects after their residencies are complete.

*Smithsonian Networks*, the first offering of the partnership with *CBS/Showtime* debuts soon. *Smithsonian On Demand*, the Institution's new video-on-demand channel, is scheduled to launch late this spring or early summer with 35 to 40 hours of programming. There are currently 88 filming projects underway. The channel ultimately will have available for viewing about 100 hours of programming that will be continuously updated. Dozens of projects are in the works and millions of dollars are being invested by *CBS/Showtime* in this initiative.

The National Museum of American History will reopen in 2008. Implementing recommendations from its Blue Ribbon Commission, this museum will have a new home for the Star-Spangled Banner and a completely redesigned central core of the museum.

Further into the future, the Smithsonian's 19th museum, the National Museum of African American History and Culture will open on the National Mall. Part of that museum is up and running right now, with a Web site and special programs.

The reach of everything the Smithsonian does is expanded by educational activities, Web sites, and outreach programs. The Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service reaches nearly 5 million people throughout the nation every year. In 2007, the 55th anniversary of SITES, there will be 53 exhibits on tour traveling to 201 locations in 44 states and the District of Columbia. The Smithsonian's Affiliations Initiative now has 152 affiliates located in 39 states, Panama, Puerto Rico, and Washington, DC. And last year we had more than 150 million visits to our many Web sites.

The Smithsonian is keeper of our nation's historic, scientific, artistic, and cultural heritage. It tells the story of what it means to be an American. In cooperation with the Congress, the Smithsonian will move ahead with its ambitious plans and continue to provide the American people and visitors from around the world with an invaluable service.

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