

## U.S. Department of the Interior Collections and Outreach to Non-Federal Partners

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The U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) manages an estimated 194 million objects and archives in trust for the American public and seeks to make them available for research, exhibition and education nationwide. For more than 100 years, research and compliance activities on federal and Indian lands have generated diverse collections of artifacts, specimens and archives, such as prehistoric pottery, vertebrate fossils and biological specimens. Ten DOI bureaus and offices manage scientific, historic, cultural and art collections in 1,998 bureau facilities. DOI also depends on the curatorial skills and the facilities of at least 837 non-federal partner repositories, many of which are AAM member museums.

One of the reasons the collection is so large is that five DOI bureaus (Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Fish and Wildlife Service and National Park Service) manage hundreds of millions of acres of federal and Indian lands. These lands have served as outdoor laboratories for many research projects—in particular, archaeological and paleontological expeditions—resulting in substantial collections. Complying with federal laws for activities such as dam construction, energy exploration, development and road construction also results in a constant influx of DOI museum collections. Moreover, the collections are growing exponentially, as DOI bureaus and offices work with non-federal museums to identify DOI holdings.

DOI bureaus and offices maintain responsibility and accountability for their collections housed in federal and non-federal museums in accordance with federal historic

and paleontological preservation laws. What many may not know is that DOI's museum collections are also subject to federal personal property laws, regulations and policies. These mandates, which require DOI bureaus and offices to maintain responsibility and accountability for collections as federal property, serve a similar purpose to AAM ethics and standards for collections care—maintaining the collections in trust for the public.

Additionally, DOI's museum collection responsibilities are subject to review by federal oversight offices, including the DOI Office of the Inspector General (OIG). In 1990 and 2009, the OIG conducted audits of DOI collections and issued a number of recommendations to improve accountability and care. (The report can be downloaded at [doi.gov/museum](http://doi.gov/museum).) The OIG findings included deficiencies in the inventory of DOI museum collections, as well as a lack of knowledge about all of the non-federal museums that house DOI collections and the number of objects therein. The OIG recommended that DOI correct these deficiencies in order to meet statutory requirements. DOI has accomplished 10 of the 13 OIG recommendations from 2009, but additional work remains.

In an effort to address the remaining OIG recommendations, DOI obtained approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to collect information from non-federal museums. A critical component of the request to OMB was a voluntary survey to determine where DOI collections are housed and how many objects exist in those collections. DOI plans to conduct the survey this year. The primary long-term goal is to develop effective and

1. Non-land managing bureaus include the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, Indian Arts and Crafts Board, Interior Museum, Office of the Special Trustee for American Indians and the U.S. Geological Survey.

mutually beneficial partnerships with all of the museums that work hard to house and care for DOI collections, making them available for research and exhibition and preserving them for future generations.

DOI managers and their curators, archaeologists, paleontologists and other experts across the United States want to engage with our partner museums. Please reach out to your bureau contact or the Interior Museum Program if you have any questions or concerns, or if you believe your museum houses DOI collections. If you need a starting point, please contact us.

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**Shari Rosenstein Werb**

*Director, Education and Outreach,  
National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution*

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