**VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

**MINUTES OF THE RESEARCH AND COLLECTIONS COMMITTEE**

**Feb. 10, 2024**

Present at the meeting were Dr. Art Evans, Mark Buss, Dr. Carole Nash, Dr. Tom Benzing, Melany Stowe, Lisa Carter, Abby Gump, Dr. Joe Keiper, Dr. Hayden Bassett, Dr. Kal Ivanov, Ryan Barber, Jonathan Martin, Dr. Adam Pritchard, Dr. Arianna Kuhn, and Ben Williams

Committee Chairman Dr. Art Evans called the meeting to order. The minutes of the Nov. 18, 2023 meeting were unanimously approved. The recent acquisitions were also unanimously approved.

Dr. Art Evans asked the curators if they would like to discuss their work over the previous quarter. Associate Curator of Recent Invertebrates Dr. Kal Ivanov said that he has been heavily focused on writing and publishing papers and has several both published and in process. He also said that his lab would soon be receiving 6,000-plus insect specimens from Virginia Commonwealth University's Rice Rivers Center and an additional 20,000 bee specimens from the Virginia DCR, the latter of which represents most bee taxa in Virginia. He also pointed out that the museum has recently published a volume on the freshwater isopods of Virginia, adding that the authors of the publication will be at the museum for a promotional reception on April 26th.

Dr. Carole Nash said that she has been contacted at James Madison University by multiple institutions wishing to donate their collections, which begs the question of where these orphaned collections will ultimately be deposited. Dr. Art Evans said that many institutions consider natural history collections to be “old school” biology, while nothing could be further from the truth.

Dr. Hayden Bassett said that he was on military leave at Fort Gregg-Adams for four months, but the Cultural Heritage Monitoring Lab team had been very active while he was out of the office. Their work has been focused on the conflict in Sudan, continued work in Ukraine, and new publications, along with new methods of automating their work to expand their geographical scope. He also said that the archaeology department has been incorporating the new changes to NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) which gives more voice to indigenous tribes regarding where and how their artifacts are displayed and stored. To this end, he has worked with Dr. Joe Keiper and the exhibits team to remove column case material that could potentially be associated with graves and move this material to secure storage until the modern-day descendants of the original owners of this material can determine how it should be handled. He said that there is a five year timeline under these new NAGPRA provisions and that he expects within the next five years, some of this material will be repatriated.

Dr. Arianna Kuhn said that she has been pushing to secure large funding opportunities over the last quarter and her first National Science Foundation grant is in review. This grant features collaborators from across the country, while the next grant she is applying for will be submitted by collaborators at Radford University and focus on salamanders in southwest Virginia as model organisms for understanding the processes of speciation. She said that has also been heavily involved with the Virginia Herpetological Society and is now Vice-President of the organization, which met at the museum in November for the first time. She also submitted a grant to the Department of Wildlife Resources for funding for education for school groups and clubs and increasing retention in STEM sciences.

Dr. Adam Pritchard said that he has submitted as junior author on two papers. His main project he’s spearheading involves skeletons from the early age of reptiles found in Utah, which is a collaboration with a team from Brigham Young University. He is also working with a team from Howard University for a project involving horse evolution, a collaboration with Ray Bernor. This will hopefully result in a National Science Foundation grant for a special museum exhibit. He is also working with Dr. Alex Hastings for a grant from the Cave Conservancy of the Virginians to determine the age and species of Petra, the fossil cave cat currently being prepped in the VMNH paleontology department. Pritchard said that he has taken a few field teams to a site in the Richmond area that features an enormous diversity of teeth from many species of early reptiles. Additionally, he said that the Virginia Department of Transportation recently delivered to the museum a box of mastodon bones recovered during the excavation of a tunnel project, which he hopes to develop into a mini exhibit.

Dr. Carole Nash said that there has been a push to reach out to HBCUs (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) for collaborations and asked about how Pritchard’s collaboration with Howard University came to be. Pritchard said that everyone knows everyone in vertebrate paleontology and Ray Bernor has a long history with VMNH.

Ryan Barber said that Dr. Arianna Kuhn and Jackson Means are spearheading a summer internship program through the Smithsonian that will have a heavy focus on diversity. Kuhn said the internship is called “Leadership for Change” and has multiple different subcategories. The VMNH subcategory will focus on climate change and how to disseminate its threat to the public.

Dr. Art Evans thanked the curators for taking part in Saturday committee meetings. He said that one concern he continues to hear from Research and Collections is the need for storage space, and that he cannot emphasize enough the importance for moving ahead with the Douglas Avenue restoration as quickly as possible. VMNH is the perfect choice to take on significant orphan collections, which are more important now than they have ever been, and this additional space will be crucial to preserving our natural heritage.

Dr. Tom Benzing recommended that museum staff put together a display case of items that could be put in front of our Virginia legislators to keep VMNH fresh in their minds.

Dr. Art Evans said that he will be traveling in May and is not planning to hold a Research and Collections Committee meeting. Lisa Carter said that there is a good chance that the May meeting will be virtual.

Dr. Art Evans adjourned the meeting.