

Mass Job Extinctions at L.A. Museum

Los Angeles is known for movie stars and celebrity glitz, but for the more scholarly minded, one of the city's main attractions is the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History. Home to an important collection of fossil vertebrates, many from the famous Rancho La Brea tar pits, the museum also boasts collections and research on living marine invertebrates, fish, and reptiles.

But now Los Angeles County, battered by social crises and budget shortfalls, is slashing the museum's funding, and the 80-year-old institution faces what some call the worst financial situation in its history. In January, 42 positions were lost, including 18 in research and collections, eight of them belonging to Ph.D.s. Another round of even more severe job cuts is imminent this month, and curators fear that the museum's traditional scientific strengths, especially in paleontology, will be gutted.

The museum operates under an unusual public-private partnership, and director Craig Black reports both to the county and a private, nonprofit museum foundation. In the past few years the foundation has taken on a larger role as public funding has dwindled. But the county is still the museum's primary support: Last year, it provided the museum with \$12.2 million of its total \$17.5 million budget; the foundation gave the rest.

Halfway through the last fiscal year, the county cut the budget and the foundation was unable to make up the shortfall; that created the January crunch. In addition to the layoffs, the botany department was eliminated completely and its specimens are to be transferred elsewhere, says Black. These maneuvers saved the museum about \$2 million, but that wasn't enough. More county budget woes this spring mandated more cuts, and in the next few weeks Black may have to carve out another \$2.4 million—about 16%—from the budget. If these cuts go through, 29 additional people will be sliced from the county payroll, and 15 of those will be in collections and research. The move, says Black, will crop the museum to “the very, very basics for an institution of this size.”

Amid the crisis, museum officials are scrambling to find creative sources of revenue. They've turned to a mall—hardly a novel idea in L.A.—and in May opened an exhibit gallery in a Burbank shopping complex to attract paying customers. Another proposed project will enshrine Angelenos' favorite form



On the brink. Workers at L.A.'s George C. Page Museum prepare fossils, but paleontology research at the museum is in danger of extinction.

of transportation: a new museum of cars.

But some curators resent the money being spent to launch these projects, and grumble that cars are anything but rare in L.A., while paleontologists are becoming an endangered species. They charge that paleontology, one of the museum's historic strengths, has taken more than its fair share of cuts. The invertebrate paleontology staff, for example, has already been slashed from four to two. Invertebrate paleontologist Ed Wilson and one as-

sistant are “rattling around in 12,000 square feet” and managing 3.5 million specimens, says Wilson. “If there's an additional cut in this section—if I'm laid off—then invertebrate paleontology here is out the window.” Wilson's job, as well as his assistant's position, are among those up for elimination.

In addition, the George C. Page Museum, a museum branch located at the tar pits and housing 3 million fossil specimens, lost two of its four curatorial and collections staff in January; at the museum's central facility, one Ph.D. vertebrate paleontologist and a technician were let go. In the next round of cuts, another Ph.D. vertebrate paleontologist and two technicians may be laid off. Meanwhile, in invertebrate zoology—a department in which several recent hires have been funded by the foundation—all four Ph.D. curators are still on staff; only one assistant took early retirement.

Black, himself a vertebrate paleontologist, insists that his discipline was not singled out for cuts, and that the museum still has active research in paleontology. But he acknowledges that his strategy is to maintain a few top-performing research areas such as marine invertebrates, which has garnered plenty of outside grant money. He also admits that the looming budget ax has created a tense atmosphere that he, as well as his staff, feels. He has officially announced plans to retire next year. But unlike other museum paleontologists, Black will be replaced.

—Elizabeth Culotta

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

Panel Finds Gaps in Violence Studies

At a jail for young offenders in Atlanta last month, Berkeley sociologist Troy Duster interviewed a 14-year-old boy who was serving time for attempted murder. Why, Duster asked the boy, had he tried to kill someone? The boy replied, simply, “He dissed me.”

In a Bethesda, Maryland, hotel conference room last week, Duster and other experts on human behavior tried to figure out just where, as a motive for murder, “being shown disrespect” fits in the portfolio of 300 research projects on violence and aggression sponsored by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The panel, convened by NIH Director Bernadine Healy, is the first body ever to evaluate NIH's total package of violence research. Its intent is to determine if the institutes are ignoring lines of investigation that would serve scientific needs and the public interest. It is also supposed to decide whether NIH is pursuing projects that, for social or ethical reasons, it should avoid. By the week's end, the panel had made some headway on the first task, suggesting more studies into social causes of aggression, but sidestepped—temporarily—the second.

Violence has proven to be a dangerous subject for NIH. During the past year, the agency has been assailed by members of the black community over its support for a proposed University of Maryland conference on genetics and crime. The attack was spearheaded by a persistent NIH nemesis, Bethesda-based psychiatrist Peter Breggin, who views much violence research as potentially tainted with racial bias. NIH later rescinded its support for the conference, forcing Maryland to cancel it. NIH also came under fire for its role in the Department of Health and Human Services's (HHS) violence initiative, a plan conceived by former HHS secretary Louis Sullivan to assess and fill gaps in violence research at a number of HHS agencies. The thrust of the objections was that such research, some of which involved drug treatments, would justify the wide-scale use of drugs “to pacify” blacks (*Science*, 9 October 1992, p. 212). According to an HHS official, the violence initiative is “dead.”

But violence research at NIH, as the panel heard, is very much alive. Nine institutes and two centers have funded about 300 re-