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## Smithsonian Museum Head Resigns Over Science Plans

### Natural History's Robert Fri Cites Reorganization

By *Jacqueline Trescott*  
 Washington Post Staff Writer  
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Robert W. Fri, the director of the National Museum of Natural History, announced yesterday that he would leave his post later this year because he isn't comfortable with the ongoing reorganization of scientific research at the Smithsonian Institution.

"The upcoming reorganization of the science units of the Smithsonian will substantially affect the National Museum of Natural History," Fri said in a statement released by his office. "This process will require the leadership of a management team committed to pursuing its success over the long haul. I do not feel that I can make that commitment enthusiastically."

Fri has run the Natural History Museum for five years, overseeing significant renovations of the gem and mammal exhibits and the construction of an Imax movie theater. Attendance increased 50 percent during his tenure to 9 million visitors last year, the largest of any museum in the world.

The reorganization of scientific research at Natural History and other Smithsonian facilities is being driven by Smithsonian Secretary Lawrence M. Small. He argues that the Smithsonian's traditionally independent museums need to drop 19th-century models of research and focus on a few priorities in science.

At the same time, Small announced that budget restraints prompted him to eliminate several departments. On his list was the Conservation and Research Center, a facility in Front Royal, Va., that studies endangered species and is part of the National Zoo. The move was roundly criticized on Capitol Hill and by a number of scientists. Small later reversed that decision.

The budget cuts and the plan to reorganize research have created an uproar

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within the Smithsonian's scientific ranks -- and have reached far beyond the Mall. Natural History has been the center of much of the debate because it is the largest scientific entity at the Smithsonian, houses huge collections of birds, butterflies, minerals and Indian artifacts, and has the largest staff of research scientists of any museum in the world.

Critics complain that Small is not a scientist himself and object to the closed process in proposing cuts. They also worry about the influence of large donors on exhibits in the museums. Small spoke with a group of employees at the National Museum of American History for an hour yesterday and told them that large donors don't control the content of exhibitions. Having the involvement of the donors, Small said, "is a fairly time-proven element." The debates that swirl around the Smithsonian, he said, are expected: The "difference in views, well, that is America."

In the past year, the directors of three Smithsonian art museums -- the National Portrait Gallery, the Sackler Gallery and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden -- have left or said they are planning to leave for various reasons. Fri is the first science director to resign under Small.

Fri's statement indicates that he found some of the proposed changes unacceptable. One model under discussion would place the individual research and collections in all the museums under several administrative centers and have the chiefs of those centers report directly to the Smithsonian's undersecretary of science -- bypassing the museum director. "This separation would leave the museum to concentrate on exhibit and education functions," Fri said.

"I understand that Bob is not as enthusiastic about the models that have been presented as I am," Science Undersecretary J. Dennis O'Connor said yesterday. He said his discussions with Fri centered on the time it would take to carry out a reorganization, not only on his reservations.

In a blueprint called "Science for the 21st Century" that he presented to the Smithsonian's Board of Regents earlier this month, O'Connor cites some distinguished scientific areas at the Natural History Museum, including paleobiology, mineral science and anthropology. But he added that the museum "has been criticized by eminent scientists during the course of several external reviews as not having taken up the national and international leadership roles that its facilities, collections and personnel should provide."

Fri, 65, an expert on energy and the environment, has a degree in physics from Rice University and an MBA from Harvard. He was president of Resources for the Future, an environmental think tank, for nine years, and was the first deputy administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.

In May 1996 he came to Natural History, which had been discussing a comprehensive updating for years. The museum was founded in 1911.

In his five years, funding from both the public and private sectors has given the museum a fresh look in several areas. The refurbished Hall of Geology, Gems and Minerals -- complete with a new display for the Hope Diamond, still one of the museum's biggest draws -- opened in 1997. The largest privately funded renovation in Smithsonian history, it was underwritten by a gift of \$13 million from Janet Annenberg Hooker.

The museum's historic Rotunda lobby was cleaned and repainted, financed with part of a \$20 million gift from Kenneth E. Behring. That gift came with its own controversies, since it also underwrote the overhaul of the mammal hall and Behring offered part of his big-game collection to the museum. With the sprucing up of the Rotunda, the elephant that marked the center was moved slightly and given a new platform that explained its natural environment.

Built right off the center of the building is a multi-level \$40 million complex called the Discovery Center with a restaurant, Imax theater and a soon-to-open, computer-based Immersion Theater. One hall that had been closed for several years, devoted to African cultures, was totally retooled.

Fri said yesterday that his tenure had been "an extraordinary and rewarding time" and he would work on a transition. He said he didn't want to stay past Oct. 1.

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