

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION:
Director of Natural History Museum Quits

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The director of the world's most visited museum has resigned to protest a planned reorganization that would separate the museum's scientific and educational roles. Robert Fri, who heads the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., said in a memo to his staff on 28 May that he cannot commit to the proposed changes. He plans to step down by October.

About three-quarters of the Smithsonian's 425-member scientific staff are based at the Natural History Museum, including geologists, anthropologists, paleontologists, and systematic biologists, as well as technicians who manage the museum's extensive collections of rocks, plants, animals, and artifacts. Many of these researchers have been up in arms in the 2 months since the new Smithsonian secretary, Lawrence Small, proposed closing some research units and reorganizing scientific activities into several centers of excellence (Science, 13 April, p. 183; 11 May, p. 1034).

Under the new plan, the role staff scientists would play in the museum's exhibits and other educational activities is unclear. Researchers are now actively involved in the design and content of museum exhibits and public programs, and the public has always "recognized exhibits as the veneer with the research and collections behind them," says David Dilcher, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Florida, Gainesville, who is on the museum's advisory board. "If you cut the threads that pull these three things together, then what will become of natural history at the Smithsonian?"

Leaving.

Robert Fri says he can't commit to the Smithsonian's reorganization plan.

Fri, who led the museum for 5 years, said he could not implement Small's proposed plan: "I do not feel that I can make that commitment enthusiastically," he wrote in his memo. In a prepared statement, Small paid tribute to Fri's contributions but had no comment about his reasons for resigning. Fri's replacement has not been named.

Museum staff members were disappointed by Fri's decision. "He has been a good manager. He has brought stability that we had not had at the museum," says Smithsonian paleontologist Brian Huber. But they weren't surprised. Both Dilcher and advisory board member Emilio F. Moran, an anthropologist at Indiana University, Bloomington, said Small had excluded Fri from the planning process

for some time. "Many of us are very concerned about the very top-down, nonconsultative approach of the secretary," says Moran.

Small's proposal to shift the museum's research into a separate administrative center, says Dilcher, will leave the museum a "skeleton devoid of the energy of the scientists." He says he understands why Fri apparently does not want to become the caretaker of these bones.