programs at Chicago’s Field Museum,” V. Morell, News & Analysis, 4 January, p. 19). The locations of the Field Museum are an irreplaceable scientific resource, and the scientists who care for, augment, and make them available for study by others are also renowned contributors to science in their own right. Their loss would be a blow not just to the Museum, but to the scientific enterprise as a whole.

In making the bequest that endowed the Smithsonian, James Smithson epitomized what has become the mission of modern natural history museums: They are institutions for “the increase and diffusion of knowledge” (4). Many science museums can mount exhibits for the diffusion of knowledge, but only museums such as the Field, with its collections and scientists, can contribute so much to its increase. For the Field Museum to abandon this duty would be unconscionable. We urge the Museum’s authorities and supporters to find a way to prevent such a calamity.

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Museums’ Role: Pollen and Forensic Science

IN HER NEWS & ANALYSIS STORY, “BUDGET crunch to shrink science programs at Chicago’s Field Museum” (4 January, p. 19), V. Morell reports that Chicago’s Field Museum’s science program will be slashed by $3 million. Now more than ever, it is essential to convey the importance of natural history research collections to forensic science. For example, museum collections are crucial to the application of pollen evidence in criminal law.

Because each region on Earth has a specific plant population, and each plant produces a specific pollen or spore that is morphologically unique to the parent plant, pollen can be used as a geolocation tool (J). The association (diversity and relative abundance) of pollen and spore types found at a specific location, called the pollen print, links trace pollen evidence to its source location (2). Pollen can thus help track the provenance of illegally imported art, drugs, medicine, or food, as well as items obtained from crime scenes or terrorism investigations, including bodies, clothes, and weapons. Pollen can also provide clues to the timing of events, because pollination occurs at specific times each year.

Tying pollen prints from trace evidence to a location of origin depends on both highly trained palynologists and comprehensive collections and samples for reference. For instance, the geographic source of items such as illegal drugs brought into the United States can be identified if pollen grains from the geographic regions of interest are available for comparison. The Louisiana State University Museum of Natural History has 4598 samples collected from 564 unique localities spread across all 31 Mexican states and its Federal District (3). This collection represents more than 100 years of fieldwork by several generations of curators and graduate students. The specimens not under moratorium are available upon request; scientists or community members can come to the Museum or borrow samples for research. Government agencies such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (4) or the NSF-funded GeoMapApp at Columbia University (5) host pollen data, but for the most part do not curate the samples. Although using pollen as a forensic tool (forensic palynology) is common in Europe and Australia, the United States lags far behind (6). This does not need be the case, because U.S. palynological collections are among the world’s best. Yet, these collections can be lost in an instant with one major budget cut.

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References

CORRECTIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

New Focus: “Reversal of misfortunes” by J. Cohen (22 February, p. 898). The article mistakenly reversed the first and last name of Martin Tshipuk. The HTML and PDF versions online have been corrected.

Letters: “Give shark sanctuaries a chance” by D. D. Chapman et al. (15 February, p. 757). The second author is Michael G. Frisk, not Michael J. Frisk. The HTML and PDF versions online have been corrected.

Editors’ Choice: “Bombs below” by N. S. Wigginton (18 January, p. 253). The last sentence of the story didn’t accurately describe the conclusions of the paper. The corrected sentence should read “Based on their simulations, the Xe signal from the 26 March 1992 test would have met previous criteria for a nuclear weapon only if the test had taken place at certain locations within the Nevada Test Site.” The HTML and PDF versions online have been corrected.

Editors’ Choice: “A washable MOF” by M. S. Lavine (4 January, p. 12). The reaction between the potassium salt of PTC and the specific metal acetate could readily be done on microlgram scales, not milligram scales as stated in the summary. The HTML and PDF versions online have been corrected.

News Focus: “The year in news” (21 December 2012, p. 1534). The first June item incorrectly stated that Lonesome George was the last Galapagos giant tortoise. George was the last of the subspecies Chelonoidis nigra ssp. abingdoni, but other subspecies persist on the islands. The HTML version online has been corrected.