



# Unlearning Racism in a Federal Setting

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## Overview

**Opportunities and challenges of a federal setting:**  
The Smithsonian - the world's largest research, education, and museum complex - was established by the U.S. government as a public trust 175 years ago. Many of the geoscientists working for the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) are federal employees.

The federal setting offers both challenges and opportunities to actively combat structural racism, diversify our workplace, and to increase the inclusion, representation, and celebration of BIPOC in the geosciences. Drawing on [our pod's URGE deliverables](#) and work we have done since completing the formal URGE curriculum, we showcase these challenges and opportunities and explore future directions in which our pod plans to engage.

## Ethical Collections Stewardship

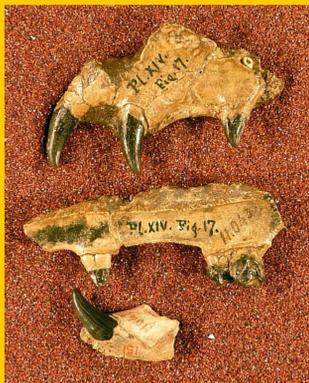
**Collections stewardship questions we are asking ourselves and those we serve:**

- Who is benefiting from our work and **who is being excluded** or harmed?
- Where do we need to shift our policies and practices to align with our ethics?
- Who do we need to engage with and build or repair relationships?
- Where do we perpetuate privileged, inequitable access to collections and specimen data?
- Where do we exclude stories and contributions of **Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) as collectors, researchers, or hidden figures** in our records?
- How can we broaden our understanding of our collections and how collections connect us with each other by seeking out multiple ways of knowing beyond our western scientific narratives?

**Critical review of both legacy and future acquisitions**  
Our collections are part of the material legacy of U.S. settler colonialism. Federal surveys were mandated to map and explore the west, enable settlement on Indigenous land, develop railroads, locate geological resources, and select military posts. Collectors took the cultural heritage of sovereign nations, including fossils and commodities. They took the objects and all the knowledge, power, and wealth that came with them from Indigenous populations. **We strive to reconnect our legacy collections to their source communities in a way that is meaningful and supports indigenous sovereignty.**



The Hayden Survey crew in camp at Red Buttes, Wyoming, 1870.



USNM V 151 Homocamelus caninus, collected during the Hayden Survey in 1857 from Indigenous land. Several hundred of the museum's first cataloged fossils were collected on early U.S. surveys.

## Museum Communications

As one of America's most trusted brands, Smithsonian has enormous potential to convene, educate, and inspire the world.

NMNH employs a professional communications staff with whom our URGE pod can partner to amplify BIPOC voices in the geosciences.

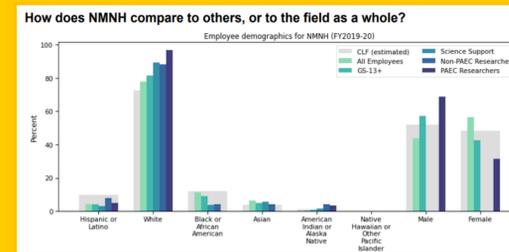
This fall, our URGE pod worked with NMNH leadership to amplify the #BlackInNaturalHistory campaign.



CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY  
**Smithsonian Secretary Promotes New Shared Stewardship Collections Policy at Senate Hearing**

## Hiring

**At NMNH, 96% of our PAEC researchers/curators (the equivalent of tenure track faculty at a university) are white.**



Graph from our Pod's Deliverable #3: Demographics. The gray background bars in this figure show the Civilian Labor Force (available workforce) in the metro DC area. NMNH staff demographics become more white and more male relative to the CLF as jobs pay more and focus more on scientific research.

While NMNH employs Black staff in proportion to DC's population, the museum does not have a single Black PAEC curator on staff. American Indians/Alaska Natives, however, are very well represented when compared to the Civilian Labor Force in the metro DC area.

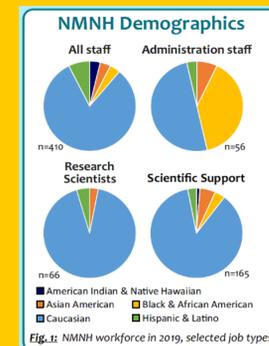


Fig. 11 NMNH workforce in 2019, selected job types  
Pie charts of NMNH demographics illustrating how <5% of research scientists hail from historically underrepresented groups.

**Federal status presents challenges:**

- Equity checks are tracked at the institutional level, but do not inform individual hiring decisions;
- There is no legal scope for targeted hires;
- Actions that might increase the "yield" on offers of employment (partner hire, housing, child-care, salary boost) are restricted by federal regulation.

**Our URGE pod's management plan created these recommendations to make hiring at NMNH anti-racist:**

- Foster connections with minoritized groups through methods such as invited talks to diversify the applicant pool.
- Increase transparency in the multi-step hiring process for research/curatorial hires.
- Institute regular reviews of hiring rules/rubrics/guidelines to ensure an equitable process that facilitates the success of diverse candidates.
- Diversify the composition of hiring committees.
- Ensure hiring committees are aware of and have access to IDEA Council's Hiring Toolkit.

**Shared Stewardship is a best practice and should become standard practice.**

Our current professional best practices strive to treat others how *they* want to be treated. This includes the treatment of cultures, communities, belief systems, heritage, objects, and boundaries. Shared stewardship of our collections sets an expectation where the museum shares authority, expertise, and responsibility for the respectful attribution, documentation, interpretation, and care of a collection item in accordance with the advice of the source community. Doing this well requires engagement and collaboration between museums and Indigenous communities, and trusting relationships could take years to develop.

## Public Programs

The lack of diversity in the U.S. STEM labor force and restrictive messaging about who belongs in STEM likely contributes to students' perceptions of what science is and who does it, while also negatively influencing minority students' aspirations for pursuing science, which are apparent before high school [1, 2].

The Smithsonian *Science How* education programming positively influenced majority-minority elementary-students' perceptions of scientists and interest in science careers [3, 4]. The pedagogical design and representation of counter-stereotypical scientists were contributing factors to this positive shift [3].



Dr. Advait Jukar, a former Deep Time postdoctoral fellow at NMNH, teaches students about fossil elephants and elephant evolution in a Smithsonian Science How webinar program with Maggy Benson, Distance Learning Manager at NMNH, designed to positively impact students' perceptions of science and who does science.

**Working towards science education equity**

A systemic barrier to diversifying science is the historical exploitation, exclusion, and misrepresentation of indigenous and minority communities from natural history science and the weaponization of science to justify racial inequity [5, 6]. From an education perspective, informal science education centers must do more than shift students' perceptions of science and who does science. Many experts suggest that natural history museums can't engage diverse communities until they acknowledge their colonial pasts, origins of collections, and redress biased science communication and education practices [7-9].

## Future Foci of NMNH Pod

URGE will pursue strategies that **create a culture of antiracism in geosciences**. By working with senior leadership at NMNH, our pod has chosen to focus on making change in the following areas for 2022:

**Hiring and Retention**

- Foster connections with minoritized groups through methods such as invited talks and targeted advertising to diversify the applicant pool
- Encouraging regular reviews of hiring rubrics and increased transparency in hiring processes to ensure equity for minoritized candidates
- Diversifying the composition of search committees and implementing EEO and bias training for members
- Ensuring all interns receive equitable compensation and that we advertise internships to underrepresented communities
- Ensuring onboarding documents are kept up to date

**Conduct**

- Creating codes of conduct for the spaces in which geoscientists work at NMNH
- Developing opt-in ethics codes for interactions with local communities, in addition to safety while conducting fieldwork

**Fostering connections with Communities of Color**

- Advocating for a permanent, full-time position focused on fostering connections with minoritized groups
- Include DEI elements in annual performance plans

The NMNH URGE pod is particularly energized to work with pods at other federal agencies, such as the USGS, to share information and strategies to make ourselves, our departments, our institution, and the geosciences anti-racist.

**Acknowledgments**

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