

BEYOND THE EXHIBIT: OUTREACH ACTIVITIES OF THE SMITHSONIAN'S METEORITE COLLECTION

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Introduction: The National Museum of Natural history sees over seven million people pass through its doors each year, making it not only the most visited museum in the United States, but making it the second most visited museum in the world. Built in 1910, the museum has limited space to display its 124 million collection objects. Of the 17,000 meteorites in our collections, only 157 are on permanent exhibit, but include the largest collection of touchable iron meteorites in the world. The astronomical cost for improving and updating exhibits means that it will remain static for up to 30 years. Without the benefit of a dynamic public exhibit interface, and to accommodate remote access to our collections, other avenues of outreach such as the World Wide Web, play a more significant role in connecting with our constituency.

Electronic Outreach: There is increased pressure from Congress and the Directorate of the Smithsonian to justify the continued growth and storage of collections not on public display. Relevance is the primary focus for justification, and is achieved through use of the collections by visitors, both for science and education. One of our primary visitor activities are tours. Tours are the oldest and yet newest method of providing access to our collections and exhibits, from live tours with curatorial and collections staff, to a 360° virtual tour [1] of the meteorite exhibit in our Geology, Gems and Minerals Hall. Web visitors can also access exhibit content through The Dynamic Earth [2] web utility. Meteorites staff also participate in live webcasts hosted by local media dealing with current events. The Mineral Sciences website provides information about new samples and availability of meteorite materials for scientific investigation, including access to collections inventory through the National Museum of Natural History web interface with KE Emu [3]. KE Emu also handles multimedia and image files, which will facilitate greater use of our ancillary collection materials for books and publications.

Physical Outreach: Groups of meteorites, available to institutions for exhibit and for graduate level planetary science education can be provided upon request. Some of our popular selections include Antarctic meteorites for exhibition and polished thin sections of the primary meteorite classes. Other outreach activities include meteorite identification. Accessibility to digital photography has streamlined this activity, allowing us to process more requests in a shorter time-span. Inquiries and instructions for submissions are found on our website [5]. Finally, we collaborate with other government agencies, such as NASA, combining our collections with space mission outreach and local education program activities, such as the recent White House Star Party [4].

References:

- [1] <http://www.mnh.si.edu/panoramas/htmlVersion/39S.html>
[2] http://www.mnh.si.edu/earth/main_frames.html
[3] <http://collections.nmnh.si.edu/emuwebmsweb/pages/nmnh/ms/Query.php> [4] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/White-House-to-Host-Star-Party/> [5] <http://mineralsciences.si.edu/collections/meteorites.htm>