

Scientific Collections in Jeopardy at Geological Survey

By **Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility** - January 11, 2018, 08:35:16 AM

Washington, DC January 11, 2018 – Vast stores of irreplaceable biological specimens collected over decades are at risk of illegal destruction by the federal agency charged with their safekeeping, according to a complaint filed today by Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER). The complaint seeks to force the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to finally adopt and implement legally mandated rules for preserving collections of fossils, plants, and animals now facing potential loss from storage in shoddy conditions, disbursement, or disposal as trash.

In June 2015, PEER asked the Interior Department's Office of Inspector General (IG) to evaluate the propriety of USGS treatment of biological specimens as expendable, carrying no obligation to manage or preserve. In a September 2017 report, the IG validated these concerns and found that USGS has no policies governing archival of biological collections and still lacks an inventory of them. As a result, few of these research archives are accessible to other researchers, let alone the public.

In its August 20, 2017 response to the IG, USGS dismissed these conclusions and inaccurately asserted that it was following Interior Department requirements. USGS further falsely claimed that an 1879 statute, called the Sundry Civil Act, tied its hands. In a complaint filed today, PEER contends that USGS' answer is flat wrong in every material respect. It contains a legal demand that Interior officials both correct the record and direct USGS to comply with the law.

"This complaint says that the Geological Survey should not get away with lying to the Inspector General," stated PEER Executive Director Jeff Ruch, pointing out that USGS is the only Interior agency that does not recognize specimens of fossils, plants, and animals as museum property, which, by law, must be archived. "USGS is placing fiscal convenience above its scientific and stewardship responsibilities."

PEER filed its complaint under the Data Quality Act that requires federal agencies ensure the "quality," "integrity," and "objectivity" of all official statements related to public policy. PEER is demanding that USGS formally rescind its response to the IG and then compose and resubmit a new response that is truthful. Under the Act's guidelines, USGS has 90 calendar days to accede to the demand or refuse it. If it refused, PEER may file an appeal, which would then

force USGS to convene an independent panel of internal and external experts to decide the matter.

“The scientific value of the collection is supposed to determine its disposition but that is not even a consideration at USGS, which calls itself one of our premier science agencies,” added Ruch, whose organization is acting on behalf of agency researchers. “The biological heritage of America deserves better than a bureaucratic brushoff.”

[Read the PEER complaint](#)

[Look at IG report](#)

[View USGS Response](#)

[Examine Peril to Vast Biological Collections](#)