A Milestone Achievement

By Jon Erlandson, Executive Director

We’ve received wonderful news, and I’m delighted to share it with you: in the spring of 2016, the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) unconditionally accredited the Museum of Natural and Cultural History. The most prestigious national distinction available to US museums, AAM accreditation recognizes the MNCH as a top-tier institution dedicated to best practices in education, research, and preservation. Nationwide, only 16 percent of university-based museums—and eight percent of natural history and anthropology museums—carry this distinction. We join rare company at the state level as well: only six other Oregon museums are currently accredited.

The official March 1 announcement was the culmination of a nearly four-year effort, beginning with our participation in the AAM’s Organizational Museum Assessment Program (OMAP). The OMAP phase involved a detailed self-study examining all aspects of the museum, followed by an independent evaluation and report completed by Peter Tirrell of the University of Oklahoma’s Sam Noble Museum. Tirrell made detailed recommendations, but declared us ready to proceed with the accreditation process.

With the self-study under our belts—and Tirrell’s enthusiastic thumbs-up—we moved forward with our bid for accreditation. Gathering input from the entire museum staff, the Museum Advisory Council (MAC), the UO Office of the Provost, and many others, we developed core documents articulating our vision, policies, and strategic plan for 2015–24. This comprehensive and highly rewarding project was coordinated by Patty Krier, special assistant to the MNCH director, and David Piercy, MAC member, with significant help from former MNCH director Alice Parman.

In the fall of 2015, following AAM approval of our core documents, we were visited by two museum directors—Sarah George of the Natural History Museum of Utah and Jane Pickering of the Harvard Museums—who conducted an independent peer review of the MNCH. In their report, George and Pickering recommended to the AAM that we be admitted to the ranks of accredited museums. The AAM Accreditation Commission concurred, commending the MNCH for demonstrating “the highest professional standards for education, public service, and collections stewardship, and its commitment to continued institutional improvement.”

By achieving this honor, the MNCH becomes a leader in the field, exemplifying the very best that museums have to offer our communities. This issue of Fieldnotes celebrates our accreditation, the people who helped us achieve it, and the exciting opportunities accreditation offers to the museum and its constituents. I hope you’ll join us in the celebration!

A Special Thanks to a Distinguished Colleague

In February, executive director Jon Erlandson proudly presented the Director’s Lifetime Achievement Award to Patty Krier, recognizing her three decades of service to the museum and her unwavering commitment to education and outreach. After retiring in 2014 from her post as MNCH director of development and public programs, Patty devoted more than a year to coordinating our accreditation effort and was instrumental in its success.

We also honored Patty’s service by creating the Patricia Krier Education Endowment, which supports the museum’s education and outreach programs and ensures their availability to students and families across Oregon—endeavors that Patty championed throughout her career. Our deepest thanks to Patty for her dedication to the museum and its mission!
Accreditation—A Long Time Coming

By Patricia Krier, Special Assistant to the Executive Director (Retired)

National accreditation has been on the museum’s horizon for a long time. As Jon Erlandson notes in his introduction, our newly won status is the result of an effort that officially began in 2012. But it was more than 20 years ago that we first considered a bid for accreditation. We completed our first Organizational Museum Assessment Program in 1994—and we were found by our external reviewer to be “a hidden jewel at the university.” But back then, we weren’t ready to tackle the whole accreditation process. From funding to facilities to staffing, we lacked the resources necessary to pursue it, much less sustain it over the long term.

Fortunately, things changed. Building on the groundwork laid by directors emeriti Alice Parman and Don Dumond, director Mel Aikens pushed the museum’s boundaries, adding a new administrative wing as well as our signature cultural history exhibit, Oregon—Where Past Is Present. When Jon Erlandson came to the museum, he continued the forward momentum by significantly expanding our endowments, staff, exhibition space, and collections facilities. These developments, bolstered by our members and donors, constituted a major growth spurt in the museum’s history—preparing us to join the ranks of the nation’s accredited museums.

So we took the plunge. We reflected deeply on the museum’s strengths and its opportunities for improvement. We gained insights from a broad range of stakeholders—staff, students, Tribal communities, university administrators, and museum volunteers, to name just a few. We refined our vision, articulated our priorities, and welcomed industry peers to assess the results.

Every step of the way, we were guided by our American Alliance of Museums (AAM) liaison, Travis Kirspel. From Washington, DC, he answered our numerous questions and provided his valuable expertise. Volunteers extraordinaire David Piercy and Alice Parman contributed their time, know-how, and enthusiasm to helping craft our core documents—documents so impressive that the AAM plans to offer them to other museums as policymaking templates. And the entire museum staff turned its attention toward our accreditation bid, delivering an extraordinary and concerted effort to secure this important distinction. I am honored to have been a part of the process.

It’s been a long time coming, but earning this badge of honor is just the beginning; it ushers in a new era of growth and improvement as we continue to execute our strategic plan. While basking in the great news of our accreditation, I’m also looking forward to celebrating the museum’s progress in the years to come.

Oregon—Where Past Is Present

Construction Update

Work is underway in our cultural history wing, and we’re looking forward to bringing you an updated Oregon—Where Past Is Present exhibit this fall! Get ready for expanded artifact displays, enhanced interpretive features, and an all-new section devoted to the Paisley Caves and Oregon’s earliest human communities. The wing will close for the final construction phase on September 5, 2016. Stay tuned to our website and social media for details on the grand reopening!
EXHIBITIONS AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS

What Does Accreditation Mean for You?

By Ann Craig, Director of Exhibitions and Public Programs

Accreditation distinguishes the museum as among the nation’s best. A truly empowering experience, the accreditation process has infused the Public Programs division with new energy and excitement, bolstering our commitment to serve Oregon’s communities with innovative programming and exhibitions.

One of the outcomes of the accreditation process has been a revised mission statement: The Museum of Natural and Cultural History enhances knowledge of Earth’s environments and cultures, inspiring stewardship of our collective past, present, and future. Guiding the development of every MNCH exhibit and program, the mission steers our efforts to ignite passion and inspire action around our natural and cultural resources.

So, what does this all mean for you, our members and supporters?

For starters, you can expect more opportunities to be involved in the development and evaluation of our exhibits and programs. Meeting the American Alliance of Museums’ high standards means involving our diverse communities from the earliest planning stages through the evaluation stages of our various projects. We’ll be holding more focus groups to help guide us in creating exhibits—and we’ll be checking in with you regularly to find out what you like, what you don’t like, and what you’d like to see in the exhibit halls. We’ll also be collecting your input about how to improve signature programs such as our fall archaeology lecture series, the Ideas on Tap pub conversations, family days, Little Wonders, and more.

Do you have ideas about how the museum can better serve you or the groups you represent? I encourage you to share them with me directly. Drop me an e-mail at acraig@uoregon.edu. I look forward to beginning a conversation with you.

We are delighted to be working with all of you as we continue to evolve and improve. The future is bright and we are grateful for your support!

A Big Thanks to Pacific Continental Bank!

Pacific Continental Bank continues to be a vital partner in advancing our educational mission, providing scholarships to more than 700 K–12 students and teachers during the 2015–16 school year. These scholarships, along with Pacific Continental Bank’s generous transportation funding, helped ensure children’s access to inspiring museum programs on Oregon’s archaeology, geology, and natural history.
The Road to Accreditation and Beyond

By Tom Connolly,
Director of Archaeological Research

The road toward national accreditation involved the assessment of all aspects of the museum’s operations—including collections policies and facilities, exhibits and public programs, and the productivity of our research program. Our peer reviewers from the American Alliance of Museums found us to be excelling in each of these areas.

Regarding research in particular, the reviewers reported that the MNCH “continues to undertake a first-rate research program, which is a major contribution to the university’s intellectual life, and has fully embraced and expanded its public role to serve the wider community.”

In sum, they wrote, “The museum’s research program is outstanding—of the highest quality and generating significant output.”

I particularly want to acknowledge the reviewers’ point that MNCH scientists are “clearly committed to, engaged in, and successful at delivering strong communication of their research results to the public, and they are in great demand. Though this contrasts with their funding sources (grants [and] contracts, which do not support this outreach), they are willing to make the effort.” Indeed, several times each month, someone on the research staff is providing a lecture, technical training, or other public service somewhere in the state. These are things we do with enthusiasm for the work that means so much to us, and with pride for the wonderful museum we represent.

It is most satisfying to read the words of our AAM reviewers. At the same time, we recognize that their accolades—and indeed, the larger achievement of AAM accreditation—are not in themselves a destination, but a landmark along the road to an even brighter future.

Though central to the museum’s mission and success, the archaeological research division operates almost entirely on revenue from sources outside the university. We’ve been very successful with writing grants; securing consulting contracts with government agencies, public utilities, and private engineering firms; and with supporting our field schools through student tuition and federal agency subsidies. However, the long-term security of our research program will depend on more stable and predictable funding.

Because it demonstrates the MNCH’s excellence to governments, philanthropists, and other funders, AAM accreditation provides us with important leverage in our efforts to achieve this stability. We look forward to building on the honor that accreditation signifies and developing the resources we need to support our globally recognized research—now and well into the future.

MNCH research continues at Oregon’s Fort Rock Cave, where Luther Cressman’s 1930s fieldwork uncovered the world’s oldest shoes.
In his introduction, Jon Erlandson touches on the core documents we generated as part of our bid for AAM accreditation. The documents include a mission statement, a code of ethics, a strategic institutional plan, a disaster preparedness plan, and a collections management policy. Together, they codify the museum’s values and practices, providing an important framework for our continued stability and growth.

To develop the documents, our accreditation leadership team gathered input from across the museum’s divisions and from numerous constituencies. After much discussion among staff members, volunteers, the Museum Advisory Council, and focus groups, we articulated a new and improved mission statement that powerfully conveys our institutional priorities.

Our next task was to create a code of ethics. This document, in the AAM’s words, is designed to communicate our “ethical, public trust responsibilities as a museum and nonprofit educational entity . . . ”. While there were models to work from, the AAM specified that the code of ethics be tailored exclusively to our museum, so we undertook the highly rewarding process of examining and distilling our particular values, and developing a code that guides the staff, volunteers, and members of our governing authority, the University of Oregon.

The Strategic Institutional Plan “articulates a big-picture vision as well as operational tactics to achieve the vision,” across all of the museum’s divisions. It lays out goals and priorities, action steps, responsible parties, timelines, and measures of success. From short-term tasks like reviewing our software needs to longer-term projects like expanding the museum’s facilities, the plan will guide our growth through the year 2024.

The last two documents involved the museum’s collections staff most intensively, and I’d especially like to acknowledge anthropological collections manager Elizabeth Kallenbach for her efforts in bringing these documents into being. Our new Collections Management Policy standardizes the management of our diverse holdings—from the primate collection housed in Condon Hall to our zooarchaeology collections to our ever-growing ethnographic collections—covering the acquisition, access, and loans of all items in our care. Finally, the Disaster Preparedness–Emergency Response Plan sets out museum-wide procedures that will ensure the safety of our staff, students, visitors, and volunteers—and protect our invaluable collections—in the event of an emergency.

Creating these documents has been a wholly worthwhile experience. The process has represented an important opportunity for self-reflection and a chance to collectively chart a course for the museum’s future.

Exhibit Features MNCH Bead Collections

Have you explored Strung Together—Beads, People, and History? The new exhibit showcases more than 50 items from the museum’s collections, including historic beadwork from the Columbia Plateau and Great Plains regions and shell beads traded from the Pacific Coast to Oregon’s Fort Rock Basin as long as 8,000 years ago. Come and check it out, and delve into the many layers of meaning behind the beauty of beads.

This Is What an Accredited Facility Looks Like

By Edward Davis, Collections Manager, Condon Fossil Collection

Throughout the museum field, AAM accreditation is regarded as a mark of excellence. It confirms that a museum is meeting the highest standards when it comes to education, research, and collections care. Now that the MNCH is accredited, the Condon Fossil Collection is no longer subject to the periodic inspections our federal agency partners once required. By meeting AAM standards, we automatically surpass federal benchmarks—and that’s just one illustration of the weight our newfound status carries.

But what does an accredited museum look like in practice? What does it mean to meet the highest national standards?

For one thing, an accredited museum demonstrates best practices surrounding collections stewardship, ensuring the physical security, systematic organization, and broad accessibility of the items held in its care.

Here at the Condon Fossil Collection, we recently undertook a six-year effort to rehouse our collection into new steel storage cabinets. As we did so, we reorganized the fossils into stratigraphic sequence, so that visiting scientists can now browse through time—much like one can browse the books in a library. The reorganization, made possible through a combination of public funding and private philanthropy, has greatly increased our efficiency and accessibility, allowing us to quickly and easily locate specimens for research or education purposes.

As part of the museum-wide effort to qualify for accreditation, we articulated a specific set of procedures related to fossil collections management. We created a complete facilities report that documents the whereabouts and organization of all fossil collections on campus, and an emergency management plan that covers everything from exit routes to specimen conservation in the event of a disaster. While writing procedures and documenting facilities might not seem like glamorous work, it has been a critical step toward making our museum resilient in emergencies and other times of change, and increasing our capacity to protect our fossil resources for Oregon’s future generations.

We are also continually broadening access to our collections by public and academic audiences alike. Funded by an award from the National Science Foundation, work is now underway to digitally photograph specimens and make the images available on our online database at paleo.uoregon.edu. By the time you read this, the database will already include hundreds of images, with thousands more to come. You can learn more about this collaborative project at epicc.berkeley.edu.

We take great pride in these accomplishments. They’re part of the museum’s overall commitment to continuous improvement—a commitment that has helped make accreditation a reality for us, and one that will guide us in future endeavors.

And what does the future hold for the Condon Fossil Collection? Our biggest priority will be to secure a new, larger space to house the collections. Having reached maximum capacity at our current location, we look forward to expanding the museum to accommodate our ever-growing paleontological and geological collections, ensuring their long-term preservation and availability to researchers, educators, and museum visitors.

Digging Up New Dirt on Wine

In May 2016, the Geological Society of America’s GSA Today featured an article coauthored by Greg Retallack, director of the Condon Collection of Fossils. Titled “The Effects of Soil on the Taste of Wine,” the article explores the ways one may be able to “taste” the Willamette Valley’s geology in its renowned Pinot Noir wines.
Volunteer of the Year: David Piercy

Coordinating a bid for national accreditation is no small feat. From interviewing stakeholders to analyzing operations to finalizing a strategic plan, the process is both exhaustive and rigorous.

Fortunately for us, we had David Piercy’s help. The former deputy superintendent of Eugene Public Schools, David’s expertise in organizational policy and strategic planning was invaluable as we navigated our way toward accreditation. Contributing nearly 700 volunteer hours to the endeavor, David gathered input from across our constituent groups, helped draft our core documents, and assisted with the museum-wide self-study required by the AAM accreditation commission.

“I learned a lot about the museum,” David said. “Helping with the accreditation process gave me a real understanding of why the museum is here and the scope of its activities. Scholarship, interpretation, collections management—it’s all going on at the same time, and it’s just an amazing thing.”

The entire MNCH staff and the Museum Advisory Council extend the deepest thanks to David for his efforts and unflagging support throughout the process. In recognition of all his extraordinary work, we are delighted to name him MNCH Volunteer of the Year.

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