

Statement of Lonnie G. Bunch III, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution
United States Senate
Committee on Rules and Administration
Tuesday, June 18, 2024

Good afternoon. Chairwoman Klobuchar, Ranking Member Fischer, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

It has been a couple of years since I last met with you. In that time, the Smithsonian has seen approximately 34 million in-person visits to our museums, education centers, and research facilities. We have become an increasingly digital institution, seeking out partners to implement technology smartly and safely so we can bring the vast resources of the Smithsonian to people everywhere. And with the help of Congress, some of our renowned buildings like the Castle and the National Air and Space Museum have been undergoing substantial and needed renovations.

This enduring institution has meant so much to the American people and the citizens of the world for nearly 178 years. It is nearly impossible to adequately describe all we do—from protecting cultural heritage in war-torn nations to helping people explore their genealogy to examining the surface of Mars. We engage with and educate people on important topics like the essence of the American experience, the diversity of the world’s cultures, the sustainability of the planet, and the nature of the universe. We are at the center of the civic, educational, scientific, and artistic life of the nation, and our international reach to more than 100 countries includes robust research, programs, partnerships, and knowledge exchanges. Finally, we are responsible for the safety and security of more than 6,500 employees, more than 3,800 on-site volunteers, and millions of annual visitors to our free museums.

My vision for the Smithsonian’s future is to be a reservoir of knowledge anyone can dip into at any time and any place. It is embodied in the way we have expanded our educational reach, with a presence in every state in the nation and dozens of countries worldwide. In fiscal year 2023, more than 620,000 educators and students used resources on our Smithsonian Learning Lab portal, and nearly 3 million students used our Smithsonian Science for the Classroom curriculum.

We also see a glimpse of the Smithsonian’s future in our two new Congressionally authorized museums, the Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum and the National Museum of the American Latino. Not only will they help us tell a more robust, expansive, and inclusive version of the American story that truly reflects our institutional values, but they will also be built as digital-first museums. Their programming has already begun reaching audiences well before the first concrete is poured for either foundation.

Building new museums requires a massive outlay of money, as do all other needs inherent in such a vast institution, from addressing deferred maintenance to meeting increased salary requirements. We increase our reach and impact by collaborating with other organizations,

agencies, non-profits, and governments whose goals and values align with ours. We rely heavily on the generosity of donors and the public who value what we do and support our work, and we are grateful for the past three years of record-breaking philanthropy. And of course, the U.S. Congress remains our most valuable partner. We take our fiscal responsibility seriously and look to spend taxpayer dollars conscientiously and in a way that maximizes our reach and impact.

Our strategic plan lays out bold goals for the Smithsonian's future. Our actions over the past few years reflect those goals: to be more digital in the way we reach the American people, to be nimbler and more effective in our operations, to elevate our scientific endeavors, to expand our educational efforts, and to be a more trusted source than ever. This will be foundational to my goal of reaching every home and being in every classroom across our nation.

The nation's 250th anniversary in 2026 will be a pivotal moment for us to unveil just how much progress we have made. It will serve as a celebration of what we have been, but also give a glimpse into all we can be. We plan to activate the National Mall with a vibrant cultural festival, and the renovated National Air and Space Museum should be fully open to the public in time for the commemoration. I have asked my colleagues to work toward temporarily opening the Castle to the public for the celebration as well.

To coincide with that milestone, we will have programming that both celebrates and contemplates who we are as a nation and the Smithsonian's place in it. We will invite Americans to explore all corners of our complex histories and find ways to have honest conversations that transcend our differences and connect our shared humanity. It will be an opportunity for us to showcase the myriad ways in which the Smithsonian is becoming nimbler, more relevant, and more effective.

Our venerable institution is undergoing a transformation. Like any such moment, it is filled with challenges. But I would argue that, more than anything, it is a moment of opportunity to truly exemplify the vision of our founder, James Smithson. Decades before it was built, he foresaw an institution that would be a gift to the American people.

Recently, a couple of announcements highlighted the Smithsonian's global reach and impact. The first, of course, is that we were able to secure the return of the Giant Pandas to the National Zoo by the end of the year. It is the result of a lot of hard work behind the scenes. I am excited our visitors will be able to enjoy them again and that our researchers will help them thrive in the years to come.

The other is less cute and cuddly, but just as important. A team led by the Smithsonian and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration created the National Ocean Biodiversity Strategy released by the National Science and Technology Council, a vital plan for ocean conservation. It is the first nationwide strategy to improve scientists' ability to gather and share knowledge so we can protect the critical biodiversity on which we all rely for our food supply and economic vitality.

Both speak to our ability to work collaboratively, to think creatively, and to act decisively to help find solutions to some of the world's biggest challenges. I am more confident than ever that the Smithsonian is uniquely positioned to do so.

Thank you for holding this hearing, for your ongoing support, and for your commitment to working with us. I am happy to answer any questions you have.

###