

## **"Let's save the MNHN collections"**

*This is an open letter objecting to the proposal to relocate the Paris Museum collections of marine invertebrates and vertebrates*

For over two centuries, the National Museum of Natural History (MNHN) of Paris, has been inseparable from its collections. These collections are considered an important component of scientific research dedicated to understanding Nature. These archives of Nature are enriched by past and continuing exploration of Earth. We are aware that this inventory is far from complete but an inventory of the Earth's species is fundamental to all biological research. The collections are central to the comparative method that scientists use for proposing taxonomic hypotheses and testing them with new material and new analytical tools. The rate of species extinction is faster than the time needed by scientists to describe them: enriching, preserving these collections and enhancing their value are major challenges for science and society.

These scientific collections are the true heart of the Paris Museum. Their management, growth and improvement rely on multiple activities performed by MNHN staff. The MNHN teams use the collections through research, dissemination, and teaching to specialist and lay audiences. The MNHN collections are unique in the world due to their history, diversity, quality, and status as a reference for the broader scientific community, but also due to their growth generated by the scientific expeditions led by MNHN research teams that continue to explore the biodiversity of the world.

This dynamism and recognition are illustrated by many metrics: about 1100 scientific publications/year relying on these collections; 2752 requests in 2022 for access to the collections; the scientific importance of the reference material hosted in MNHN collections (especially type material); or even the fact that over the last 10 years 23% of all new marine species discovered in the world have been based on MNHN material. Despite this international recognition, scientific visitors who have had the chance to visit these collections at the Jardin des Plantes are struck by the shabby rooms, the poor working conditions of the management and research teams, and by the lack of financial and human resources allocated to maintaining and documenting the collections. Yes, there is an urgent need for more space, for renovation and improvement of the working conditions, which are far from the hygiene and safety standards that should prevail in the 21st century.

Originating from the protocols of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the questions of data accessibility of the growing collections, as well as the sharing of scientific knowledge, are major issues for the teams that sample, manage and maintain the value of these collections. For more than fifteen years, the funds raised by these teams, as part of the funding dedicated to Research, have partially compensated the resources lacking to the collections. Our teams have developed ambitious research programmes in taxonomy, based on the growth and enhancement of collections, but also on the data traceability from the field to the scientific publications. These projects, funded by the French Research Agency (ANR), and the European Research Council (ERC), French conservation authorities but also private foundations and sponsors, allowed MNHN to hire technical staff for achieving the challenges of collection data accessibility and open science and dissemination of knowledge on biodiversity.

The proposal to relocate the MNHN collections to Dijon is a project led by an outgoing MNHN governance without first considering the concern of research teams. At the end of 2021, the MNHN administration received an expectation from the city of Paris, which seemed to no longer want large quantities of ethanol stored in the heart of Paris. They initiated a process to relocate part of the collections by opening a call for a new storage place outside Paris. This project concerns all collections in ethanol, as well as dry collections and associated documentary holdings. This would

include all marine invertebrate and vertebrate collections. This call targeted local and regional authorities that might be able to offer space and resources to set up a new collections building. A major requirement was that the distance from the historical Museum be ideally less than 2 hours from the Jardin des Plantes. We have just learned from the newspapers (Le Parisien, April 17th) that the MNHN administration has chosen the city of Dijon (300 km from Paris) over the city of Ris-Orangis (a suburb of Paris), after an evaluation of the 39 cities that submitted proposals.

**These two decisions - to move the collections outside Paris and the choice of the city of Dijon to host them - were taken without prior consultation with museum staff. We expect that the MNHN administration will validate this decision soon.**

At the halfway point of the process, we, the technical and scientific teams who work daily on these collections, have been now been consulted. However, “consulting” does not mean “listening”. To our questions about the impossibility of finding a solution to keep the collections closer to Paris (suburbs), the answer was simply “not possible”. Our main concerns are about the disconnect that will eventuate by separating collection managers and research staff, and the time and cost of travels to Dijon. The answer was that we have to adjust and organise our schedule accordingly, without specifying who would pay for the costs, or how these travel times would be considered. Yet the decarbonisation of research is one of the major projects put forward by MNHN and French instances: in this context, how can we explain the choice of a remote place that involves numerous trips for people and collections?

Another response by the MNHN administration is that digitisation will allow remote consultation. But the specimens of collections are not books whose digital version provides remote access to its content. This misunderstanding of the physical nature of taxonomy is astounding because working on collections requires direct access to specimens for observation, comparison and new data acquisition. It takes time to describe specimens, to clip tissues and analyse them with modern scientific tools for generating new knowledge. We are disappointed by this backward-looking understanding of collections, as archives of past research which could be stored in warehouses, without consultation: collections are the raw material of actual research, and an open window on the future of biodiversity.

Every day, we, the staff of the research and technical teams of the collections, are working on the collections, whether to verify information on a label, to study specimens to clarify an identification, to take a sample, to take a photograph, to answer requests from our colleagues, etc. What about the hundreds of scientific visitors who request access to these collections each year? Will they work in Dijon or Paris or both? How will we maintain this activity at 300 km distance? Our collaborative link between the technical teams (relocated to Dijon) and the research teams (on the Jardin des Plantes) will be definitely broken! How will the staff and students be trained if the researchers are in Paris and the collections in Dijon? How can we justify the funding of research projects on the collections if they are not accessible every day to teams in two places? Thinking that the current activities and dynamics will be maintained 300 km away is illusory.

We are the first generation of scientists to be simultaneously aware that we only know a quarter of the planet's species, and that half of them could disappear by the end of the century. In this context, can breaking the collections-research link be seen as a reasonable response to this global problem? The world's major museums work in a network, with the common objective of inventorying biodiversity, making it accessible in order to better understand it and better preserve it: what message will the Museum send to the international community with this project? We all recognise the need for more space, the need to improve the conditions of work for the technical and research

teams. But at the same time we oppose the proposal to relocate the collections to Dijon: the solution would be much worse than the problem.

We therefore call for the resignation of this project led by outgoing governance and the opening of a new discussion process involving the staff. A process based on a mutual reflection with the concerned teams is the only way to elicit a new workable proposal that can be validated by a democratic vote of the authorities.

- Our first action: an online petition <https://chng.it/sKR4pLZSdJ>

- An email address to share your feelings and ideas for action: [sauvonslescollections@gmail.com](mailto:sauvonslescollections@gmail.com)