



February 16, 2024

Dr. Susan Alberts
Dean of Natural Sciences
Duke University
2080 Duke University Rd.
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Dear Dr. Alberts,

The Society of Herbarium Curators (SHC) has learned of the decision by officials at Duke University to divest the Duke University Herbarium (DUKE). As a society that represents the profession of herbarium care and practice, we are distressed to hear of Duke University's decision. While we applaud the efforts that have been made to ensure the collection is protected and continues to receive the care it deserves, SHC is concerned that the dispossession and potential dissolution of the DUKE herbarium will compromise access to critical specimens and biodiversity data necessary to address emerging issues of biodiversity loss, natural resource management, and climate change mitigation. DUKE's collection is part of a network of local, regional, national and international biodiversity specimens that constitute the principal resource on biodiversity knowledge. The loss of this resource has broad implications to the global science community. We ask you to consider this decision in light of your own mission statement, "contribute in diverse ways to the local community, the state, the nation and the world; and to attain and maintain a place of real leadership in all that we do."

Herbaria are critical research infrastructure not only for Duke University's biodiversity graduate programs, including the PhD Program in Ecology, and undergraduate concentration in Plant Biology, but also for disciplines as wide ranging as Agriculture, Anthropology, Ecological Restoration, Ethnobotany, Forestry, Paleontology, Pharmacy, Wildlife Management, and more. Loss of an herbarium greatly hinders the ability of local researchers, both on and off campus, to utilize key botanical resources and threatens the preservation of botanical data for present and future generations. The SHC asks Duke University to consider how damaging this divestment can be to the broader scientific community. As one of the nation's largest life sciences research universities¹, eliminating core infrastructure for these disciplines will have far reaching implications on the global biodiversity science community. In 2020, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine published a Consensus Study Report reminding us "that biological collections are part of the world's scientific infrastructure. Sustaining the priceless biological collections that are our heritage and our legacy is urgent if we are to continue to be able to address world-class scientific questions that depend on these kinds of collections, foster innovation, and support educational needs, now and in the future."²

¹ <https://today.duke.edu/2021/02/dukes-research-expenditures-exceed-12-billion-latest-federal-data>

² National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2020. *Biological Collections: Ensuring Critical Research and Education for the 21st Century*. Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US).



The DUKE herbarium is one of only 3,000 such collections worldwide and is the second-largest private university herbarium in the U.S. DUKE, and the professionals who care for the collections, are extremely important resources for understanding the flora of the southeastern United States, an area encompassing the coastal plains, one of 36 threatened global biodiversity hotspots. Historically, Duke University has been seen as one of the academic leaders in the field of plant biodiversity and evolution. We encourage you to build on that legacy of excellence and leadership and support the valuable DUKE herbarium and its critical biodiversity resources.

Given the size of the DUKE herbarium (top 2% in the U.S.), divestment will be costly and time consuming. There is no model for dissolution of a collection of this size. It is unrealistic that any single institution will have the capacity to absorb such an important and historic collection in its entirety. This means DUKE will likely have to be dissolved across several institutions over an extended time period. Critical specimens will be unavailable and vital research will be stalled by this process. Long term, locating critical voucher specimens and cited materials will be more difficult, undermining the science and the donors who deposited their work with the institution. As our planet reaches the cusp of a cataclysmic biodiversity crisis, academic powerhouses like Duke University should be investing in world class research assets like the DUKE herbarium.

We ask Duke University to reconsider this decision, and instead renew support of the DUKE Herbarium. This is a time of opportunity for natural history collections and biodiversity science. The investment from the National Science Foundation in natural history collections has been at an all-time high. Herbaria and Natural History Collections are uniquely poised to lead the data revolution. Concepts like the Extended Specimen are leveraging gains in digital data, artificial intelligence, and the reintegration of science to build knowledge and networks of scientists who can work globally to address critical science needs. Your students will have opportunities to engage in the full data pathway and gain critical data and information skills in the herbarium that translate to 21st century jobs. Herbaria are critical research and education infrastructure. Maintaining the DUKE Herbarium aligns with the University's mission and values and serves the broader function of Duke University's stated aim to "further the advancement of knowledge in service to society."

On behalf of the Society of Herbarium Curators,

Anna K. Monfils, PhD
President, Society of Herbarium Curators