

Commentary

Museum post should be kept as vital staffing

Ms. Shirley Holloway,
Commissioner of Education
Juneau, Alaska.

Commissioner Holloway:

Twenty-one years ago, I was called in by the State of Alaska to act as temporary Curator of Collections at the Alaska State Museum following a disastrous fiasco in which extremely valuable Native objects (some of which did not even belong to the Museum) were traded for paintings. The underlying problem was that there was little or no control over the collections. After setting up administrative policies, and getting things in order, I returned in the fall to my teaching position at the University. Fortunately, the new Curator of Collections, Bette Hulbert, was both a trained anthropologist and good administrator and set a fine precedent for the succeeding professional Curators, Dr. Lynn Wallen and now Steve Henrickson. When I first learned that the position of Curator of Collections was going to be eliminated, I was dumbfounded. In my thirty years of working with reputable museums around the world, I can't think of one good museum that would even consider operating without a full time Curator of Collections. Then I was told that

Peter Corey from Sitka could assume all the responsibilities. Take my word for it, it will never work: you can't have a long distance Curator of Collections.

There are two key positions in any museum – Curator of Collections and Conservator. If one or both of these positions are left unfilled, the Alaska State Museum and our priceless collection is in serious danger. The Curator of Collections is one person responsible for the security of the collection and is expected to have a comprehensive knowledge of the collection and its condition. The Curator is also the one responsible for the exchange of artifacts for exhibit, access to the collections room for research and education, and is expected to be the expert on what objects should be acquired by the Museum or what objects can be deaccessioned.

Even though I have worked with collections at the Alaska State Museum for more than twenty years, I still have to rely on Steve Henrickson for information and advice on objects. It takes someone with day-by-day contact with the collection, carrying on continuous research on the objects to be a competent and qualified Curator of Collections. The job cannot be done by temporary contracts, or part-time personnel, or occasional visits by someone outside of Juneau.

The position of Conservator requires a highly-trained professional. It is not something that most anthropologists or even archaeologists could begin to do. It demands a completely different set of skills than needed by a Curator of Collections. It demands an extensive knowledge of artifacts and all the potential dangers ranging from insects, fungus, temperature, etc. Without a full time Conservator, the entire collection is in danger. I recall that twenty years ago, a portion of the collection was in long term quarantine because of an infestation that could have ruined many other objects. It was only through a trained conservator that this problem was solved. In an extreme case, if the Museum cannot have a full time Conservator, unlike the duties of the Curator of Collections, the conservation work can be contracted out to specialists.

So, the Curator of Collections and Conservator require two different people with entirely different skills. In a very few, rare instances, you may find someone who is qualified in both areas, but they are extremely few and far between. Hence, we need both positions filled.

According to the media reports, Karen Crane is reported to

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have said that she had no other choice. I find it hard to believe that within the Department of Education, and in the whole budget of the Libraries and Museums, that this was the only possible choice. I would like to see the budget to see what is considered more important than the gutting of the staff of the Alaska State Museum. Although the budget is set by the

Legislature, the decision regarding what positions will be kept or cut, remains a responsibility of the Knowles administration and I think that the cuts remain a Q.E.D. - something to be proven to the public and those of us interested in the common good of our State.

Finally, as you know, a major portion of the collections which would be endangered at the Alaska State Museum are materi-

als form our Native heritage. The cutting of the Curator of Collections is not too subtle indication that the present administration doesn't really care about the preservation of our Native heritage. The Native people that I have talked to already realize that what this means is that just like twenty-one years ago, their heritage is again in jeopardy if the Curator of Collections position is cut.

And so, I am convinced that the decision to eliminate the position of Curator of Collections, and leaving the position of Conservator unfilled is imprudent, ill-advised, and reflects badly on the present administration.

Sincerely,
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Fellow of the
American Anthropological
Association