

Documenting Environmental and Natural History: The Role of Archivists in Stewarding Archives, Specimens, and Data in Settler Institutions

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Archivists and scientists alike have long had a stake in the stewardship of environmental and natural history collections. These collections, which include a wide array of specimens/data and analog and digital records, often represent observational and longitudinal studies that have long-term value and use/reuse for scientists. The field notebooks, specimen logs, photographs, and other materials which comprise the documentation for these specimens and data similarly have enduring value and often remain active records for the life of the specimen. While scientific collections are found in a variety of institutions—including museums, federal repositories, scientific organizations, to name a few—they are often found, preserved in whole or in part, at land-grant universities which have a long history of collecting and studying the environment and the natural world. Depending on circumstances, research needs, and resources for storing what are often-organic specimens, collections may be become split up and decontextualized. Understanding the nature of these collections may be further complicated by the blurry and messy lines between what is data, what is a specimen, and what is a record, based on different disciplinary perspectives. These collections are also evidence of colonial and extractive histories in which white, Western scientists collected specimens from Native lands and with Indigenous knowledge but often without consent, acknowledgement, or attribution.

This paper presents case studies from two different land-grant institution archives—the University of Minnesota and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign—that reexamine the role of institutional archives and archivists in stewarding these collections and describing scientific contexts and histories. Using case studies from their institutions as a starting point, the presenters will discuss ways that archivists can begin rethinking how to describe these histories of collecting, extraction, decontextualization, and recordkeeping in university archives and provide more honest, accurate, and transparent access to these materials.

About the authors:

Bethany Anderson is the Natural and Applied Sciences Archivist and Assistant Professor in the University Archives at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In her research, she draws on anthropology, history of science, archival studies, and feminist theory to explore scientific archives, women and gender in STEM, computational archival science, and oral history. She holds a BA in Anthropology from the University of Michigan, an MA in Near Eastern Art and Archaeology from the University of Chicago, and an MS in Information Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. Bethany serves as joint Editor-in-Chief of *Comma*, the journal of the International Council on Archives, and as Co-Editor for the Archival Futures Series, which is co-published by the Society of American Archivists and the American Library Association. She previously served as Reviews Editor for *American Archivist*. Her published work has appeared in *Archivaria*, *American Archivist*, *Journal of Open Humanities Data*, *Isis: A Journal of the History of Science Society*, and *Collections: A Journal of Archives and Museum Professionals*.

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