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Nordic Directors Forum of Natural History Museums – sharing strengths, challenges and opportunities

The directors of the five main Natural History Museums of the Nordic countries convened in Stockholm in October 2024. Hosted by Director General Lisa Månsson at the Swedish Museum of Natural History, the directors addressed common challenges, future opportunities and how the Nordic countries can join hands on their home turf.

The Nordic Directors Forum for the National Natural History Museums, consists of Brit Lisa Skjelkvale (Natural History Museum in Oslo), Paula Kankaanpaa (Finnish Museum of Natural History), Nina Rønsted (Natural History Museum Denmark), Hilmar J. Malmquist (Icelandic Museum of Natural History), and Lisa Månsson (Swedish Museum of Natural History). The meeting was held on October 23 and 24 and was organized in conjunction with Sweden holding the presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers and right in advance of the 76th Nordic Council Session.

An increased interest in natural history museums has been noted over the past few years, as visitor numbers have increased. Studies in Sweden, Iceland, and the US also indicate that museums are regarded as some of the most trustworthy institutions in society. This position endows museums a significant role and responsibility as pillars of education, sources of knowledge, and resources for research.

At the pinnacle of global challenges, the biodiversity and climate crises are areas that deserve large and equal attention. It is both logical and fruitful that natural history museums are tasked with monitoring, understanding, and disseminating knowledge regarding the crises, and there is a long tradition of data gathering and analyses at the Nordic institutions. The Nordic countries share ecological and geographic similarities, including the vastness of the lands and oceans, the extensive nature reserves, the rich but sensitive environments and, above all, the uniqueness of Nordic biodiversity with high levels of endemism. Collaborative efforts across the Nordic countries show great promise in providing more comprehensive data for science-based decision making.

The Nordic Natural History museums date back over 400 years, with collections of plants, fungi, animals, rocks, minerals and fossils that remain highly relevant today. Long time series combined with unique species diversity highlight these collections as reservoirs of information. The knowledge contained within these collections allows us to understand historical biological events, make sense of today's environment, and enable us to develop strategies to mitigate impacts of future changes to biodiversity and climate. As such, the myriad roles of natural history museums in addressing global biodiversity challenges cannot be overstated.

However, alongside the great strengths of the Nordic collections, there are also fundamental challenges and concerns. Inadequate collection storage facilities, strained budgets and limited recruitment all impact the potential for society and policy to take advantage of these collections and the associated expertise. Digitalization of the specimens and of the data attached to the specimens holds great promise for museum collections, globalized digital access and realization of the full potential for science and society. The development of advanced and AI-enhanced digitization of specimens and their metadata will reduce the need for physical access and will enable more secure long-term storage at a lower cost if necessary investments are made. In this regard the government of the United Kingdom has made an inspiring push forward, by providing £155 million towards digitalization of the country's large natural history collections.

Once addressed, these challenges will no longer hamper the distribution of knowledge, based on the rich collections harbored and safeguarded by Nordic natural history museums. The Nordic Directors Forum for the Natural History Museums strongly advocates for and strives towards strengthening of these invaluable facilities in order for society to benefit of its full potential in addressing global biodiversity needs.

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