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FY 2025

Advisory Commission Report



Welcome to the most visited museum in the state.

The mission of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences is to “illuminate the natural world and inspire its conservation.”

More than 1 million people visit the Museum’s five locations each year — on field trips, on dates, with parents and grandparents, to view rare specimens for a research project, or to check out their famous dinosaurs.



The Museum makes science accessible. Their exhibits and educational programs span a breadth of scientific areas — offering opportunities for visitors to see, touch, hear, ask and explore.

As the largest museum of its kind in the Southeast, the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences always has more to discover. People form lasting relationships with the Museum — attending classes and camps, returning for traveling exhibitions and annual festivals, signing on as interns and volunteers, and bringing visiting relatives to stop by to see a favorite turtle.

For nearly 150 years, support from the state and a generous community of donors has facilitated the care and growth of the Museum’s collections, created new educational opportunities, and helped people of all ages and backgrounds experience the wonders of nature.

Key Museum Accomplishments

STAT ROUNDUP

- The Museum welcomed more than 1 million guests to downtown Raleigh and regional museum locations, again making the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences the most-visited museum in the state.
- The Museum recorded direct engagement in all 100 North Carolina counties, including educational program delivery, biodiversity collections, and fieldwork.
- Except for RDU Airport and the Raleigh Convention Center, the Museum is the most visited Raleigh Point of Interest. Approximately half of the Museum's visitors come from more than 50 miles away, and their visits contribute \$212 million in economic impact to Wake County.
- Museum outreach and virtual programs served more than 5,000 pre-K-12 students in 31 NC counties.
- More than 100 high- and middle-school students and 97 college interns, including 10 interns from Historically Black Colleges and Universities, worked in the Museum.
- Museum scientists spent almost 700 days conducting research across 44 North Carolina counties.
- Museum staff produced 81 scholarly and popular press publications with local to international reach.
- Drivers will soon see hundreds of Museum license plates featuring the Acrocanthosaurus — aka Terror of the South — roaring down the road. Revenue generated from the sale of these plates supports Museum research, exhibits, educational programs and conservation efforts.
- The Friends of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences contributed \$5,573,975 to the Museum to support mission-related activities.



Presenting World-Class Exhibits

The Museum's flagship location in downtown Raleigh is filled with immersive exhibits that transport you — to diverse ecosystems across North Carolina, to active research laboratories, to a habitat for butterflies, to the state's prehistoric past.

- **“Amazing Pollinators”** (June 15 – Sept. 29, 2024). This special exhibition encouraged visitors to take on a pollinator persona (from bees to beetles to bats) and navigate a series of challenges that demonstrated the process and importance of pollination to the everyday lives of humans.
- **“Journey to Space”** (Nov 2, 2024 – April 27, 2025). This special exhibition explored the extraordinary environment of space, including the dangers that astronauts face during their missions above Earth and the adaptations that engineers have developed to help them survive in space.
- **Dueling Dinosaurs** — Expect updates to the Dueling Dinosaurs exhibit in early FY 2026 as groundbreaking new research from the Museum's Head of Paleontology Dr. Lindsay Zanno will change what we think we know about tyrannosaurs.



Enriching Science Education

More than 90,000 schoolchildren from more than 80 of North Carolina's 100 counties visit the Museum every year. They tour our exhibits, conduct experiments in our labs, and get up-close visits with frogs.

- **Shad in the Classroom** — In April, Museum educators delivered American shad embryos to 22 classrooms across the state. These classrooms spent the week learning about fish restoration and management, the shad's life history and survival, and the species' cultural and biological importance, all while raising them and ultimately releasing the hatched fry into the Neuse River. The program has been funded annually by the Albemarle-Pamlico National Estuary Partnership and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- **Magical Migrations** — In January, 12 North Carolina educators participated in the Museum's newest Educators of Excellence Institute: Mexico's Magical Migrations. The primary focus of this trip was on visiting sites in Mexico's Central Mountains with millions of overwintering monarch butterflies, many of which may have migrated along corridors that cross North Carolina. More than 700 teachers participate in Museum professional development programs each year.
- **Heritage Celebration** — The N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville held its annual Waccamaw Siouan Heritage Celebration in late November. Coinciding with National American Indian Heritage Month, the event included dance demonstrations, vendors and remarks from tribal leaders.



Archiving the Natural World

The many wonders you find on display at the Museum are just the tip of the iceberg. They house one of the largest scientific collections in the Southeast, with more than 4.5 million specimens cataloguing biological, geological and paleontological diversity.

- **New Look at Eastern NC** — Around 20 million years ago, in a time known as the early Miocene, an interesting selection of large mammals roamed eastern North Carolina. Museum paleontologist Dr. Sean Moran recently documented animals ranging from small red pandas to giant “terminator” pigs based on fossils that had been collected by professional and amateur paleontologists over the past few decades.
- **Popular Press** — Dr. Paul Brinkman, Head of the Museum’s Environmental Humanities Research Lab, published a new book titled “Now is the Time to Collect: Daniel Giraud Elliot, Carl Akeley, and the Field Museum African Expedition of 1896” in August. According to Brinkman, “Museum constituents of all kinds — curators, directors, donors, museum visitors, etc. — need to understand the history of how and why museum collections and exhibits were first made.”



Driving Research and Conservation

Research led by Museum scientists helps shape conservation efforts locally and globally, and contributes to policies that protect wildlife, from fish to woodrats to whales.

- **Conserving Crayfish** —

A proposal co-authored by Head of the Non-molluscan Invertebrate Lab Dr. Bronwyn Williams was selected for full funding by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The multi-year project will use an integrative approach, combining traditional field sampling techniques with extensive genetic analyses, to build a robust understanding of a species of conservation importance — crayfishes — across North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia.

- **Thriving Coyotes**

— New research by Museum zoologist Dr. Roland Kays

and colleagues shed light on how coyotes, North America's most successful predators, are responding to various environmental pressures. "Our work suggests that promoting the recovery of large carnivores, is more likely to reduce coyote numbers than people directly hunting them," Kays notes.

- **Cold-stunned Turtles** — Veterinary Sciences and Living Collections staff led a Museum Conservation Action project helping the N.C. Aquarium Veterinary team and the Roanoke Island Sea Turtle Assistance and Rehabilitation center to aid in the rehabilitation of five cold-stunned sea turtles in December. Museum Chief Veterinarian Dr. Dan Dombrowski returned the last of these turtles to the ocean in August.



Inspiring a Love of Nature

People make memories at the Museum — on family outings and school trips, during a quick zip past the seahorses, attending BugFest, or participating in one of our many enrichment programs.

- **Top 10 Museum** — USA Today ranked us 3rd among the 10 best museums in the U.S. that people can visit for free. “Always offering free general admission, the NC Museum of Natural Sciences allows visitors to explore the wonders of nature and science across two buildings of labs and exhibits. Guests of all ages will find something to spark their curiosity here, whether it’s dinosaurs, butterflies, the ocean, fungi, space travel, or all of the above.”
- **Alternative Storytelling** — Slow-motion video of a globular springtail insect quickly became popular after Head of the Evolutionary Biology Research Lab Dr. Adrian Smith’s work was featured by national and international outlets including Newsweek, BBC Science and IFL Science. “It only takes a globular springtail one thousandth of a second to backflip off the ground and they can reach a peak rate of 368 rotations per second,” Smith says, “faster than any other animal on Earth.” The video has more than 363,000 views.
- **Sensory Friendly Mornings** — This summer, more than 800 visitors explored the Dueling Dinosaurs exhibit with reduced noise effects and smaller crowds. The effort was geared toward making the exhibit more accessible to neurodiverse audiences.



AAM Reaccreditation

The Museum is preparing for reaccreditation by the American Association of Museums (AAM) in 2026. The process happens every 10 years and the Museum last received AAM Accreditation in 2016.

As the museum field's mark of distinction since 1971, accreditation offers high profile, peer-based validation of a museum's operations and impact. Accreditation increases a museum's credibility and value to funders, policy makers, insurers, community and peers. Accreditation is also a powerful tool to leverage change and help facilitate loans between institutions.

With its mix of self-assessment, peer review and public recognition, AAM Accreditation helps to ensure the integrity and accessibility of museum collections, reinforce the education and public service roles of museums and promote good governance practices and ethical behavior.



A Significant State Asset

The North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences consistently delivers on its mission for North Carolina's citizens. It engages people from all 100 counties in awe-inspiring science exhibitions and programs, spurring economic development in the process. It provides one-of-a-kind science professional development for nearly 1,000 educators annually, inspiring improved pedagogy, a desire to



stay in the classroom, and the next generation workforce. And it stewards our state's natural history and scientific collections, which are central to understanding today's biodiversity and other pressing issues. Without question, the Museum is a major contributor to scientific advancement, economic growth, and workforce development in our state and society. Simply stated, those who visit the Museum, engage with its resources, and participate in its many programs, love what we do.

While the state's investment in the Museum of Natural Sciences has allowed us to build this nationally-recognized museum, maintaining that reputation requires continuous attention to the following areas. After 25 years, the Museum's Nature Education Center needs significant facility upgrades ranging from new carpet to a solution for the often-broken escalators. Budget limitations prevent the Museum from keeping open year-round the most popular exhibit, the Living Conservatory, which immerses children and families in the natural world. We have a statutory requirement to hold North Carolina's history in biodiversity, and our scientific collections are at risk due to a lack of archival-grade cabinetry that protects specimens from damage and limits overall capacity. As the public advocates for this special state resource, we respectfully recommend additional recurring and one-time support for these and other necessary updates and upgrades that will secure the Museum's mission and impact into the future. The Museum shapes our state's future in myriad and important ways — and it should be a priority for additional investment.

Museum staff, volunteers and supporters know first-hand how this Museum inspires the people of North Carolina by providing a quality experience. We invite you to join us in this commitment to ensuring that these resources and programs continue to thrive.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences Advisory Commission,

Rhonda Beatty, Chair

