
Citizen Science in a Democracy

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Abstract

When English scientist James Smithson left his fortune in 1829 to found an establishment named the Smithsonian Institution devoted to "the increase and diffusion of knowledge," his endowment was specifically directed to a new democracy, the United States. After the Institution was founded in 1846, the scientists who directed its programs made a conscious effort to involve a broad array of citizens across the United States and abroad in its scientific programs. Known today as "Citizen Science," programs such as the Meteorology Project and an international specimen exchange network were established in the 1850s. Farmers, medical doctors, soldiers, teachers and telegraph operators, for example, recorded daily weather observations and sent them to the Smithsonian to be compiled and analyzed for patterns. For their efforts, these volunteers were listed in the Institution's annual report and sent copies of scientific publications. Isolated trappers and rural doctors could maintain some ties with cultural and educational centers. This paper will discuss how Citizen Science arose and was cultivated at the Smithsonian in the 19th and 20th centuries, from weather observations to satellite tracking, from specimen collecting to panda pregnancy watches at the National Zoo. The role of amateurs has ebbed and flowed as attitudes towards professionalization changed. This paper will trace the various ways citizens in a democracy have participated in Smithsonian scientific work and how their relationship to the Institution has varied over the decades.

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