

Statement from the Director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History

This fall we will begin a long-planned renovation to the West Court and other areas of the Natural History Museum, to better serve our visitors, including the larger crowds we expect to host when the new fossil hall opens in 2019. These plans include the closing of the IMAX Theater on September 30, a move that will enable us to create new space for public programming and accommodate a more spacious and sustainable restaurant.

The IMAX Theater was an important part of the original renovation to the West Court that opened in 1999. However, since its opening, attendance at the theater has dropped off dramatically, with most showings at barely 20% capacity. Less than 4% of our visitors attend IMAX films.

As Director, it is my responsibility to ensure that we fully meet the needs of about 7 million people who visit the museum every year. In the years since the West Court project was conceived, we have renovated nearly all of the public space in the museum, creating new exhibition halls, an educational facility for young people and significantly expanding our public programs, which includes lectures, family festivals and films. We are reaching more people than ever before to further their understanding of the natural world and our place in it.

Unfortunately, our current restaurant is incapable of handling the vast number of people who wish to purchase food during visits to the museum. Lines often extend into the main hallway of the museum. The restaurant planned for the West Court will alleviate those pressures and enable families to comfortably spend more time in the museum. The changes to the West Court will also offer more space for public events, displays and educational activities.

The Smithsonian has enjoyed a long and beneficial relationship with IMAX films and the people who make them. We respect what these filmmakers do and appreciate their interest in showing films at as many venues as possible. Fortunately, the Smithsonian still has two other IMAX theaters – across the Mall at the Air & Space Museum and in Dulles, Virginia at the Udvar-Hazy Center – which will continue to present both popular and traditional IMAX films, consistent with the educational mission of the Smithsonian.