NHMW Reports 8

Katrin Vohland & Andreas Kroh

Research Strategy Natural History Museum Vienna

naturhistorisches museum wien

Contents

Preamble

From the very beginning, the Natural History Museum Vienna (NHMW) sees itself as an important non-university research institution and a place for cultural and environmental education, in accordance with the dedication "To the Realm of Nature and its Exploration", which is placed above the main entrance. It preserves, develops and increases its scientific collections. From the foundation of the collections by Emperor Franz I. Stephan of Lorraine around 1750 to the construction of the museum by Emperor Franz Joseph and then opening in 1889, society and the scientific landscape have changed significantly. At the founding, the representation of the collections and the education of a certain bourgeois class were among the core tasks. With the Federal Museum Act on the occasion of the independence in 2003, the research and education aspect were strengthened and the acquisition of funds for scientific research projects was greatly expanded. In its participatory vision and mission statement developed in 2021, the NHMW expresses its wish to become effective within the normative framework of the Global Sustainable Devolopement Goals (SDGs) This resonates with the new icom museum definition, which focuses more on aspects of global justice and inclusion than before.

All this still requires excellent, independent, and free basic research. In addition, much greater reflection and evaluation of mediation formats as well as new ways of knowledge transfer and implementation of results are needed; the implementation of scientific findings is understood both as technical and social innovation.

The following strategy of the NHMW is intended to anticipate scientific and societal changes in order to fulfil its task in the best possible way with regard to the selection of topics and methods as well as the allocation of resources.

Dr. Katrin Vohland

Director general and Scientific Director of the Natural History Museum Vienna

Mission, vision and museum concept

In a participatory process in the years 2020 and 2021, the museum developed a mission statement from which mission and vision were derived. As part of a departmental management consultation in February 2025, the mission statement was reflected and, with the exception of minor adjustments, was still found to be appropriate and valid.

The strategic goals derive from its mission and vision statement, and the museum's concept.

Mission Statement

The Natural History Museum Vienna preserves, expands, researches and presents its extensive collections covering biology, earth sciences, anthropology and archaeology in a building designed as a total work of art. It conveys the diversity of nature, the evolution of Planet Earth and life, and the related cultural development of humankind. Furthermore, it serves as an inspirational meeting place for dialogue and exchange of ideas between the scientific community and the general public.

Vision Statement

The Natural History Museum aims to make a significant contribution to sustainable development in Austria, Europe and the world. We strive to achieve this goal through our excellent disciplinary, interdisciplinary and participatory research, by opening up our collections to a wider audience using digital technology, by employing innovative, inclusive and inspiring approaches to teaching science, and by becoming a fully carbon-neutral museum by 2030.

Figure 1: Dedication above the main entrance of the NHMW *"to the kingdom of nature and its exploration"*; photo

Museum Concept

Founded over 270 years ago, we are a research museum whose origins date back to the imperial collections of the 18th century. „Dedicated to the kingdom of nature and its exploration“, our building, exhibitions and collections form a total work of art with a unique atmosphere in the heart of Vienna.

Collecting, preserving, researching, presenting and communicating have always been central to our museum. Our staff takes pride in preserving, expanding, displaying and studying the museum’s collections comprising more than 30 million objects from biology, earth sciences, anthropology and archaeology. We share the results of our independent, excellent research work in a variety of ways, including exhibitions and activities held both at the museum and online. We strive to make research visible as a dynamic process that constantly raises new questions.

We present an overall picture of our planet and its history, showcasing the diversity of nature as well as the evolution of life and the biological and cultural development of humankind. The main museum building and its branches invite a diverse public to enjoy the wonders of nature. These locations should serve as places of inspiration where visitors can learn to appreciate the natural world. We see it as our task to create an inclusive platform for participation, dialogue and an exchange of views on current issues.

In times of global change, our museum staff cooperates closely with the international research community to address burning issues like climate change, rapid loss of biodiversity and the changing relationship between humans and nature. With our expertise we wish to contribute to creating broad awareness of the causes and the consequences of ongoing developments and are committed to responsible action for the future.

o: Wilhelm Bauer-Thell / NHMW

Strategic goals

The team of the NHMW has formulated as a vision that it performs *"excellent disciplinary, interdisciplinary and participatory research"* – based on the digitally open *"extensive biological, earth science, anthropological, archaeological and cultural collections"* in the fields of *"the diversity of nature, the evolution of planet Earth and life and the associated cultural development of humans"*. The aim of the research is to *"help to raise broad awareness of the causes and consequences of ongoing development and to promote responsible action for the future"*.

Strategic objectives at an overarching level for all NHM research are therefore:

- substantially expand the understanding of the development and modification of the Earth system and its components with all organisms living on it and in it
- and especially to understand the formative role of humans in the natural-human-cultural relationship and to
- play a design role for the digital accessibility of the collections.

Figure 2: One of the NHMW's strategic goals is to raise awareness of the many changes that have taken place over the long history of the Earth and can be traced in deposits from earlier eras (such as here in the deep-sea sediments off the coast of Zumaia, Spain). Photo: Carlos Bruzos Valin / shutterstock.com

Operational objectives and measures

The following operational objectives, measures to achieve them, and indicators for measurability are derived from the strategic objectives:

Further strengthen disciplinary excellence in basic research

Research at a high scientific level requires special expertise in the respective departments. Accordingly, the aim is for scientific staff to pursue research at the collections (Vohland et al. 2025) along current and relevant questions.

This requires adequate resources for the scientists as well as the active acquisition of research funds and strategic cooperation with the relevant institutions.

Shoulder responsibility as a relevant research institution and research infrastructure at Austrian, European and international level

Not only the sustainability goals are of global relevance, but also many research questions, for example when it comes to the future-proof use of resources, whether raw materials or plants. The collections contribute to the understanding of the Earth system on a global level. They are as scientific commons part of global research infrastructures and at the same time carry a historical burden, be it racially motivated research during the colonial or Nazi era or patriarchal knowledge structures.

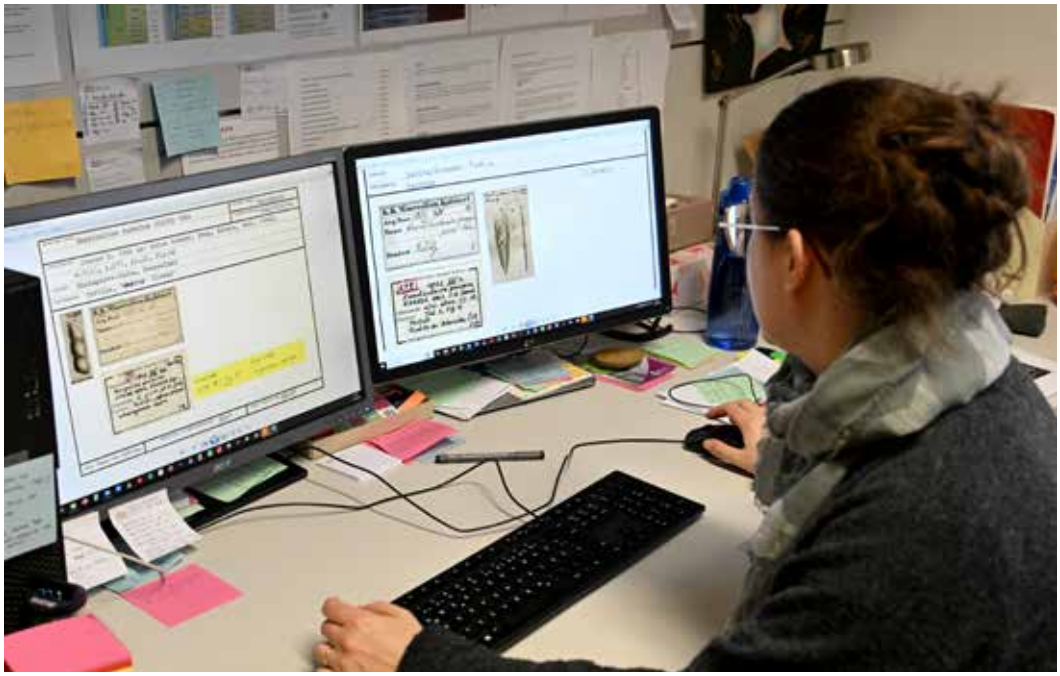

Figure 3: The NHMW's collections are of global relevance, which is why the NHMW strives to make them available to the scientific community in digital form as part of its Open Science Policy (Vohland et al. 2022; Gottwald et al. 2024). Photo: Chloe Potter / NHMW

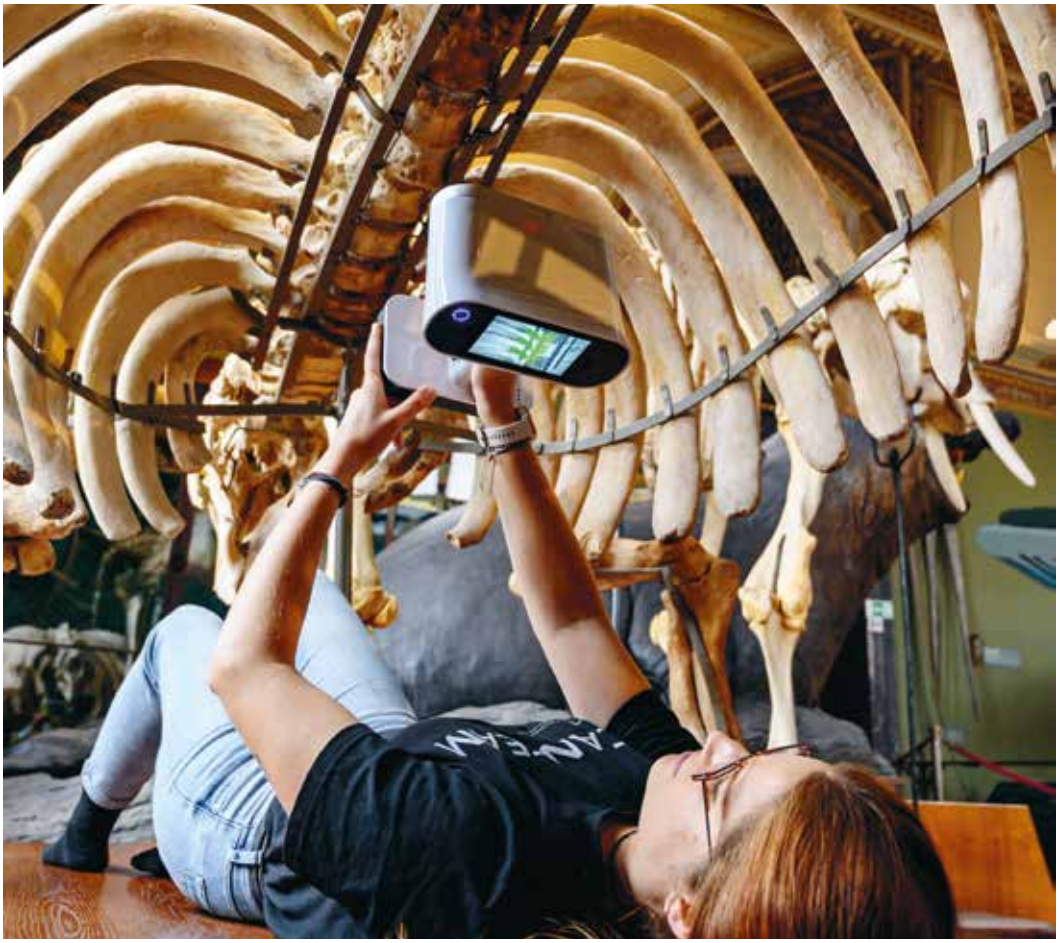

Figure 4: Modern methods – such as the 3D digitisation shown here – are being used increasingly in the digital opening up of collections. Photo: Christina Rittmannsperger / NHMW

We are therefore pushing for the digital opening of the collections, taking into account FAIR (**F**indable, **A**ccessible, **I**nteroperable, **R**euseable; Wilkinson et al. 2016) and CARE criteria (**C**ollective Benefit, **A**uthority for Control, **R**esponsibility, **E**thics; z. B. Russo Carroll et al. 2020; Jennings et al. 2023) as well as other ethical aspects such as personal rights, in particular through the further development of the new collection database DIVINA (Vohland 2025) as well as through the creation of interfaces to the virtual herbarium JACQ and the dateabase for grave finds Thanados. In addition, we participate in the improvement of competences and standards in Austria, e.g. via OSCA (Open Scientific Collections Austria) (Korth et al. 2025) and the Kulturpool, the portal and competence centre for digitally available cultural heritage in Austria, and cooperate with international networks such as CETAF (Consortium of European Taxonomic Facilities).

Establishment of interdisciplinary, cross-departmental research areas

One of the unique features of the NHMW is the spatial proximity of the natural sciences and humanities as well as the various collections and laboratories, which make it possible to open innovative fields of research. In an iterative internal discussion process, three fields of research have emerged as promising and feasible.

Fields of Research of the Natural History Museum Vienna

- Cluster Taxonomie, Evolutionary and Biodiversitäty Research including Museomics
- Human-Nature-Culture Co-Evolution: Research of important excavation sites
- Cultural contextualisation

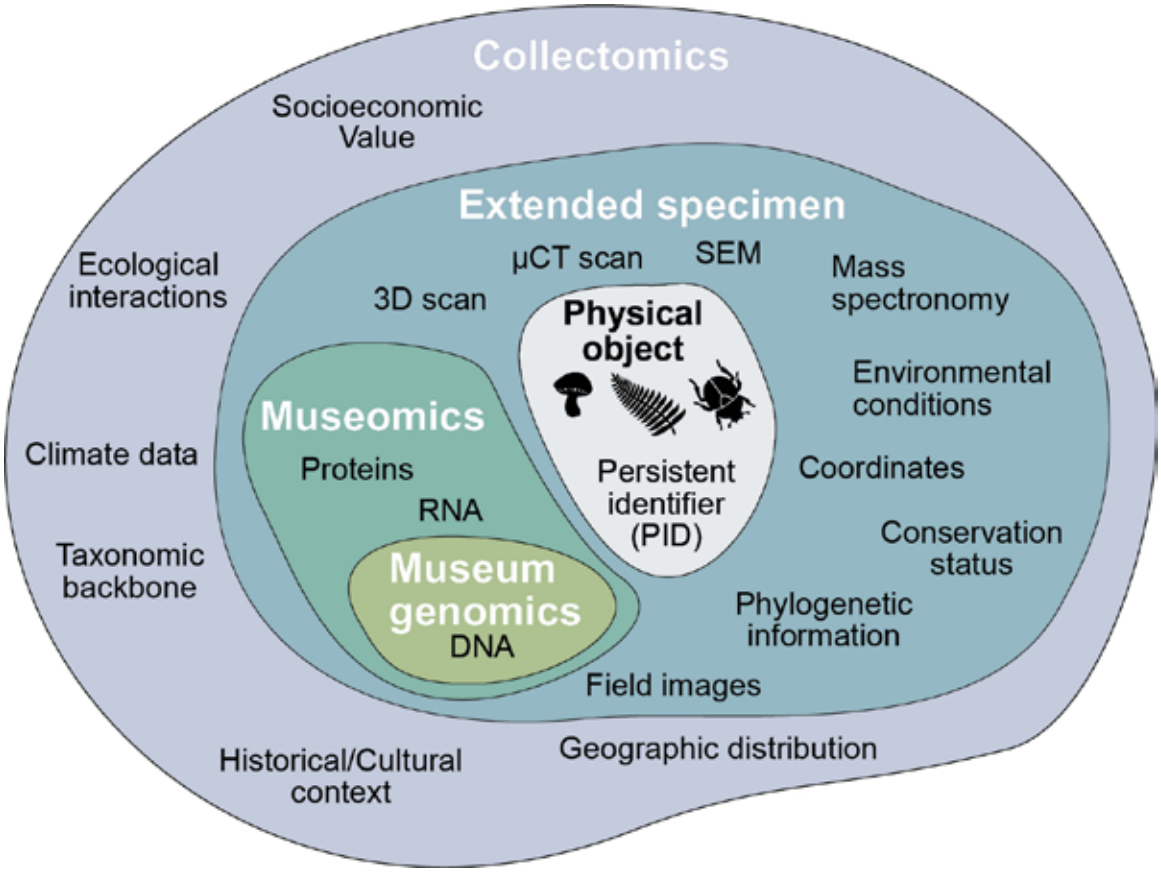

Figure 5: Definition of the term "museomics" in relation to other concepts in the museum and academic environment; graphic: Kapun et al. 2025 (CC BY 4.0)

Cluster Taxonomy, Evolutionary and Biodiversity Research and Museomics

Regarding biological collections, the core competence of the museum lies in the integrative taxonomy. This basic research forms the basis for many other research fields, above all biosystematics, biodiversity research and evolutionary research.

With the development of further optical, chemical, and particularly genetic methods, the term "Museomics" has become established in the scientific community, an artificial word of "museum" and "genomics" that describes the application of increasingly powerful genetic analysis of museum material (e. g. Kapun et al. 2025).

Under the leadership of the Department of Central Research Laboratories, the field has further established itself on the use of methodology in questions of evolutionary biology or biodiversity research and also contributes to method development. In this context, the "**A**ustrian **B**arcode **o**f **L**ife" (ABOL; Zimmermann et al. 2013) as the Austrian arm of the "**B**arcode **o**f **L**ife **D**ata Systems" (BOLD) also plays an essential role. The ABOL database creates a direct link between the collection object and the DNA barcode.

The participation of citizen scientists, for example in BIOBLITZ action days (Sonnleitner et al. 2022), represents an opportunity to involve the general public in biodiversity research and to raise awareness on the loss of biodiversity. The taxonomic and biosystematic expertise of the NHMW is to be made even more visible in order to apply for further research projects with a high probability of funding and to be able to acquire projects through research partners and research cooperations.

Figure 6: Museum collections such as those at the NHMW hold the key to many questions about habitat change, biodiversity loss, and the relationships between species. Traditional morphological work and genetic analysis go hand in hand at the NHMW. Photo: Chloe Potter / NHMW


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Human-Nature-Culture Co-Evolution: Research of important excavation sites

The NHMW, with its natural and cultural sciences departments, enables interdisciplinary research, especially in human-nature-culture relations. Especially the Prehistoric Department with its extensive collections of artefacts from many sites is explicitly concerned with the human-nature-culture relations since the Stone Age (Grömer et al. 2025). In addition to epistemic findings, the transferability of insights and solution strategies plays an important role. Therefore, as another aspect, the development of diseases should also be highlighted in connection with medicine. All this requires the work on the various important excavation sites to link different disciplines such as anthropology and paleopathology, archaeology, mineralogy, geology, archaeobotany, archaeozoology, history of science as well as the interplay between different methods of visualisation.

Hallstatt is an outstanding site in this respect, as the place is closely interwoven with the history of the NHMW, which can be found in the collections and historical decoration program of the museum. Research at the Archaeology Centre "Alte Schmiede" in Hallstatt's Upper Valley also shows established relationships with Salinen Austria AG and Salzwelten with their excellent infrastructures.

We will expand national and international research networks with strategic partners (e.g. HEAS, ÖAW, and universities) as well as cooperation with comparable institutions (Keltenmuseum Hallein etc.). In addition, from 2027 summer schools will take place in Hallstatt, starting with the scientific recovery, conservation, and restoration of finds.

Figure 7: Modern methods such as 3D digitisation are enabling new insights. Pictured: a tray with a 3D model of the mine, as used in excavations at the Bronze Age site Christian-von-Tusch-Werk in Hallstatt. Photo and montage: Daniel Brandner / NHMW

Cultural contextualisation

Figure 8: Foto: Chloe Potter / NHMW

Dealing with object histories is an intrinsic part of any collection-based research, as the scientific value of objects increases with their contextualization. In recent years, increasingly problematic origins have been addressed, especially from the time of National Socialism and in the colonial context.

While many public discourses deal with the past, the new attention to colonial contexts and global justice issues is a chance to re-establish and strengthen historical links with different countries, to develop joint research questions around the understanding of nature-human-culture relationships and to carry out corresponding projects, for example, within the framework of KolText (e. g. Berner et al. 2024; Krenn et al. 2024).

In this context, we want to strengthen global cooperation with New Zealand, Australia, Brazil, and selected African countries, for example, in order to facilitate ethical discourses on various historical and current value systems and conflicts. A thematic volume on research into colonial acquisition contexts in natural history collections was published in 2024 in the "Annals of the Natural History Museum Vienna" (Krenn et al. 2024).

Figure 9:Autographs such as diaries, field journals, drawings, and similar documents (pictured here is Ferdinand von Hochstetter's first New Zealand diary surrounded by contemporary watercolours and original finds) are rich sources for research into questions of provenance. Photo: Alice Schumacher / NHMW

Increasing the effectiveness (impact) of research through science communication, deliberation and co-design

A special feature of museums as well as the NHMW are the interfaces with various publics – be it the approximately one million visitors to the house, school classes, families or tourists, the TV viewers and newspaper readers or even companies. We would like to become even more effective in society in such a way that the understanding of evolutionary, or cultural processes increases, but also the enthusiasm and understanding of research itself continues to increase.

In addition to the further development of science-based education programs and training courses for scientists of the NHMW in the field of science communication, we will further expand the scientific evaluation of selected formats and activities with partner institutions (e.g. with the University of Vienna, the Central European University (CEU), the Krems University of Applied Sciences).

Citizen Science

The concept of citizen participation in science dates back to the 18th century. Since then, citizen scientists have been enriching scientific research. The NHMW is a member of the Austrian citizen science platform „Österreich forscht“, because the NHMW in particular offers numerous opportunities to make a significant contribution to many research and collection activities. Whether observing and recording in the field or working on the museum's collection – anyone interested has the opportunity to support the work of researchers and thus create new knowledge. There are currently more than 30 citizen science activities at the NHMW, involving around 300 citizens from different backgrounds and with different areas of expertise. The museum shares its knowledge with the public through open and participatory formats on Deck 50, including citizen science activities.

Figure 10: The NHMW's interactive experimentation room “Deck 50“ facilitates intensive exchange between science and society. Low-barrier and playful opportunities allow younger visitors to participate as well. Their drawings are animated, embedded in an immersive world and thus made visible to everyone in the room. Photo: Stefan Gergely

Measuring success

The outstanding research on topics is measured by typical metrics such as the number and relevance of scientific publications or the amount of third-party funding raised. In addition, altmetrics plays an important role; at the NHMW this includes in particular concrete work on the collections (physical set-up, digital accessibility, physical security, etc.) as well as increasing effectiveness through participatory research and activities with a view to communicating the results to the public, whether by means of media or by means of scientific communication formats.

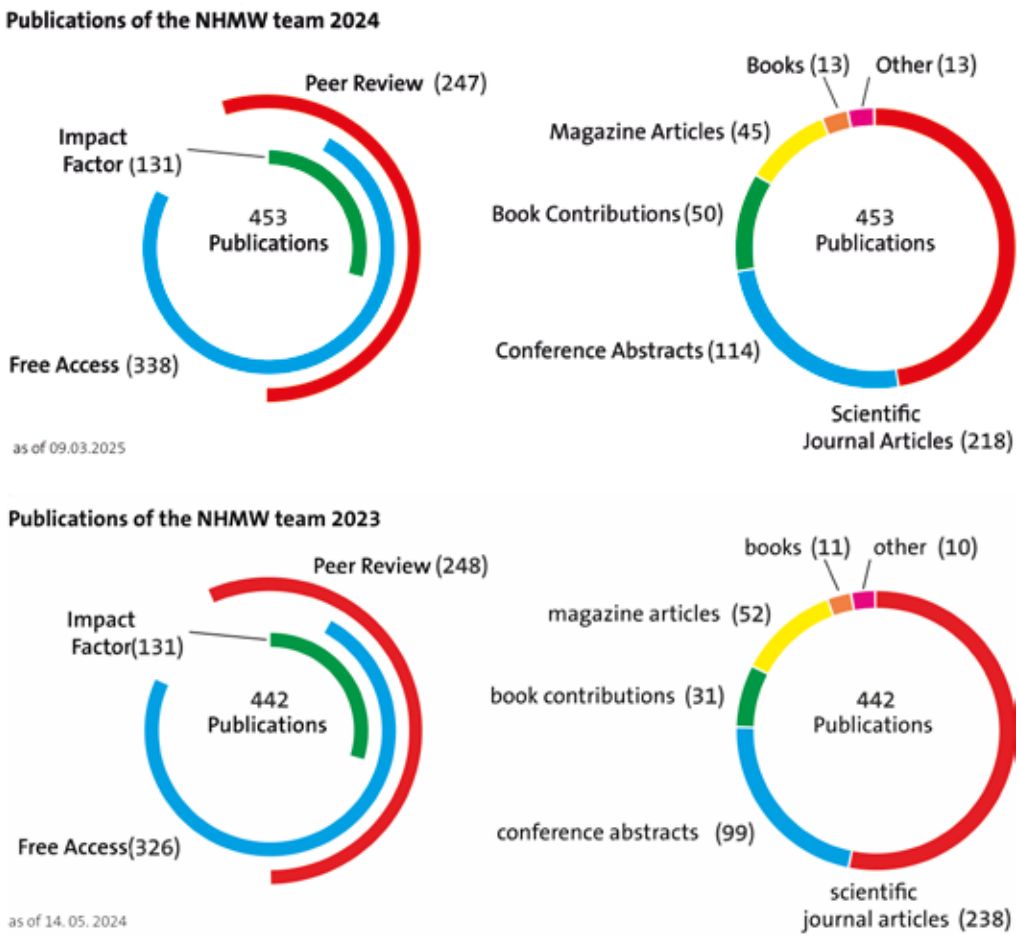

Figure 11: Every year, the NHMW team publishes around 450 publications, half of which appear in peer-reviewed international journals. Supported by the Open Science Policy (Vohland et al. 2022), a good two-thirds of these are freely accessible. Graphics: Andreas Kroh / NHMW

Figure 12: Third-party funded projects also allow for more cost-intensive research methods, such as the research drilling shown here as part of Alexander Lukenender's "Drilling into Earth's History" project. Photo: Alexander Lukeneder / NHMW

Publications

Our aim is to publish all research results as accessible as possible via Open Access as well as in high-ranking journals or the NHMW repository. In addition, socially relevant results are to be made available in popular science or as part of strategy papers, etc. Success is when the research results find their way into the scientific and/or social discourse.

All the NHMW's publications are publicly accessible via Zotero library.

Third-party funding projects

In addition to the specific objectives of the projects, third-party funded projects are successful for the museum if they contribute to the overall objectives of the museum and its collections, scientifically, socially, and in terms of increasing the qualifications of those involved.

All third-party funding projects should be available on the website in a timely manner; the connection of the corresponding information from the NHMW Research Information System (FIS) is in the works. There are currently (6.10.2025) 89 third-party funded projects underway (Vohland et al. 2025: 58–65).

Media visibility

The media presence (print, online, TV and radio in Austria) is a criterion of visibility and is tracked by the company Meta Communication International. Since joining in 2006, the media presence has increased.

On social media, the NHM Vienna has 31,595 followers via Facebook, 22,089 on Instagram, 3,391 on Bluesky, and 3,309 followers on LinkedIn. The NHMW counts 1,551 subscribers on YouTube and is present on Google Arts & Culture (as of October 2025).

Effectiveness (impact)

The assessment of effectiveness is the most challenging and depends on the specific objectives of each intervention. The various visitor studies over the last few years have shown that the NHMW is visited by people from all over the world, with a high proportion of younger people via school classes as well as with their families, that people are more likely to come in groups than alone and that the house is given great credibility.

We want to better understand our visitors' take home message and how we can strengthen their assessment skills and self-efficacy. Under the leadership of the Department of Science Communication, we will develop and carry out joint projects with institutions that have the appropriate expertise in learning psychology and social sciences.

Figure 13: In 2024, the NHMW ran a total of 2,475 educational programmes for children and young people and 331 guided tours for adults, each tailored to the target group. Photo: Chloe Potter / NHMW

Acknowledgement

The present strategy was developed with the participation of many colleagues from various departments and hierarchical levels. The strategy as a whole was discussed and sharpened with the Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) and the Chairman of the Board of Trustees (Kuratorium).

Thank you all for the many suggestions and constructive contributions.

The first draft of the English translation was done via EU e-translation and rework supported by Andrea Krapf.

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Google Arts & Culture: https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/natural-history-museum-vienna?hl=de

JACQ, das virtuelle Herbar: https://www.jacq.org/ (aufgerufen am 8.10.2025)

Kulturpool, das Portal und Kompetenzzentrum für digital verfügbares kulturelles Erbe Österreichs: https://kulturpool.at/

Mitmachen – Citizen Science am NHMW: https://www.nhm-wien.ac.at/forschung/mitmachen

OSCA, Konsortium und Portal für die naturkundlichen Sammlungen Österreichs: https://osca.science/

Österreich forscht: https://www.citizen-science.at/

Publikationsliste des NHMW https://www.nhm.at/forschung/publikationen

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