

## Position and Candidate Specification



**Smithsonian**  
*Tropical Research Institute*

## **Director, Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute**

**PREPARED BY:**

Mary B. Gorman  
Michele E. Haertel  
Austin D. Crouse

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The [Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute](#) (STRI) was founded to increase and share knowledge about the past, present and future of tropical ecosystems and their relevance to human welfare. This work began in Panama in 1910 when the Smithsonian led one of the world's first major environmental impact studies to survey and catalog the flora and fauna of lowland tropical forests that would be flooded for the creation of the Panama Canal. A century later the Smithsonian in Panama is the standard-setting global platform for research on the astounding biodiversity of tropical forests and marine ecosystems, and the cultural diversity of the peoples that make use of them.

Panama provides a rich and unique platform for biological research. Tropical forests and reefs represent a small portion of the Earth's surface - two percent and less than one percent, respectively - but contain most of the planet's biodiversity. As a research institute in the tropics, Panama is home to an astonishing variety of life and as a narrow land bridge that separates two oceans and connects the biodiversity of two continents, Panama's geological history creates a perfect experiment in evolution to learn how organisms changed with the climate in deep time.

At a dozen field stations and laboratory complexes in Panama and in collaboration with more than 70 partner research sites around the globe, STRI coordinates multinational and multi-institutional research alliances and fosters independent investigations by its staff scientists. It maintains some of the world's longest-running databases on tropical marine and terrestrial ecosystems while simultaneously promoting innovation and novel approaches. The Institute advances basic research, with an emphasis on field studies, to understand tropical organisms and communities and their role in the biology of our planet as a whole. Its research is not only shared widely within the global scientific community, but also reaches policymakers, receives international media attention and is the foundation of an outreach and training program for hundreds of teachers and tens of thousands of schoolchildren.

STRI is not only a remarkable research platform, but also a world-class education, training, and outreach organization for the Central American region and beyond. Every year, STRI hosts approximately 800 young scholars from undergraduates to Ph.D. students in field courses as well as interns with staff scientists and fellows pursuing their own research questions. They join one of the largest and most diverse communities of early-career academics anywhere in the tropics. With public outreach sites at Barro Colorado Island, Punta Culebra Nature Center, Bocas del Toro Research Station and Galeta Point Marine Laboratory, each year approximately 100,000 students and day visitors discover the amazing plants and animals of the tropical rainforest, experience hands-on science, enjoy recreational spaces and learn about science that reveals the many wonders of tropical nature.

## KEY SMITHSONIAN TROPICAL RESEARCH INSTITUTE FACTS

- \$35 million annual budget; 75% from federal appropriations. Balance from endowment payouts, grants, gifts, and other revenue
- Approximately 400 employees, including nearly 30 staff scientists
- More than 1,400 scientific visitors per year, ranging from undergraduate interns to postdoctoral investigators to tenured research associates
- Hundreds of ongoing research projects, spanning the fields of anthropology, archeology, paleontology and marine and terrestrial ecology and evolutionary biology
- 400+ peer-reviewed articles in scientific journals per year

## OUR PLATFORM: THE ISTHMUS OF PANAMA

STRI has research facilities and field stations across the Republic of Panama. Most of STRI's facilities are located along the Panama Canal and provide easy access to the highly contrasting ecosystems separated by the narrow Isthmus of Panama.



Reporting to the Under Secretary for Science and Research of the Smithsonian Institution, the Director works in close collaboration with the dedicated advisory board of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI). As the leader and top ambassador for the world's preeminent tropical research institute, the Director is responsible for the strategic, scientific, educational, financial, operational, and cultural health of the organization, and is expected to develop substantive, collaborative relationships with the leadership at the Smithsonian, with the government and private sector of Panama, and with major donors.

## KEY RELATIONSHIPS

**Reports to** Under Secretary for Science and Research of the Smithsonian Institution

**Direct reports** Associate Director for Advancement  
Associate Director for Communications  
Associate Director for Finance and Administration  
Associate Director for Legal and External Affairs  
Associate Director for Science Administration  
Dean of Academic Programs

**Other key relationships** Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution  
Fellow leaders of Smithsonian Bureaus, including the Directors of Smithsonian Facilities, Smithsonian Libraries, and colleagues in the Institution's Science Leadership  
Members of the STRI Scientific Staff  
Regional and Global Research Institutions and Universities  
Relevant Government Committees and Agencies in the U.S. and Panama  
Members of STRI's International Advisory Board and its local Fundación Smithsonian  
Major International and Science Donors  
Regional Smithsonian Affiliate Organizations

## PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT DIRECTOR

- Maintain and enhance STRI's position as the world's highest-impact tropical research institute, reinforcing its excellence in science and international reputation
- Capitalize on the strong reputation of STRI to increase its visibility and global impact
- Continue to create an environment that attracts top scientific talent and position STRI to lead in emerging scientific issues in tropical biology
- Build and strengthen the relationships with Panamanian leaders, looking for ways to deepen the symbiotic relationship between STRI, its science, and the leaders of Panama's government, private sector, and academic and cultural organizations
- Strengthen collaboration and mutual understanding with Smithsonian leaders balancing regulations from Washington with the scientific and operational framework in Panama
- In partnership with the strong and committed advisory board, identify and develop the next generation of science donors and board members, ensuring STRI has access to the philanthropic support and expertise it needs to thrive

## IDEAL EXPERIENCE

STRI is eager to engage with scientific leaders who bring some combination of these qualities and experiences to the opportunity:

- Strong scientific credentials and a knowledge of and passion for the work of STRI; a body of work that gains immediate credibility with the science staff
- Relevant experience and the capacity to lead and manage a complex organization that spans two countries and is global in reach
- An understanding of, and preferably experience working and living in a multi-cultural, international organization, ideally in Latin America
- A demonstrated ability to build deep relationships with, and inspire and elicit support from a wide range of valued stakeholders
- The ability to develop strong institutional partnerships that are mutually beneficial and advance the organization's mission
- The ability to communicate in Spanish is a plus; a willingness to learn is critical

## CRITICAL LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES

### Strategic, Visionary Thinking

In the rapidly evolving world of scientific knowledge and research, ensure that STRI stays at the forefront by:

- Developing and executing an ambitious yet pragmatic plan that builds on the institute's unique strengths and positions it to continue to lead in the understanding of tropical sciences and increases its voice in emerging scientific discussions
- Developing a clear set of priorities, identifying areas for new or continued investment, outlining topics for increased global scientific impact, securing the necessary financial support and measuring progress
- Communicating the strategic direction for STRI with passion and energy to a broad range of stakeholders
- Providing thought leadership on an institutional, national and international level about the value of basic scientific research in the tropics and its applicability to current and future issues

### Collaborating, Influencing and Securing Support

STRI occupies a singular position in the Smithsonian system. Located outside the United States and not a museum, STRI is a guest of the Panamanian government, it is supported in part by US federally appropriated funds, and it is ruled by both US and Panamanian law. STRI supports scientists from all over the globe and employs a largely Panamanian staff. The next director must be a sophisticated, nuanced leader who can motivate and build partnerships with key stakeholders by:

- Understanding the interests of others, developing authentic relationships and motivating stakeholders to serve the common goals of STRI
- Embracing the opportunity to build and nurture relations with the people and leaders of Panama
- Partnering with the Smithsonian leaders in DC to forge a path that supports the distinctiveness of STRI while meeting applicable Institutional and US Federal requirements
- Serving as the chief fundraising officer for STRI, cultivating donors and ensuring that STRI has a cadre of philanthropic supporters who are deeply committed to the institution

## Organizational Capacity Building

In an organization driven by the entrepreneurial spirit of scientists, embedded in the framework of the Smithsonian, and located in the country of Panama, ensure that STRI's organizational capacity supports great science by:

- Building capacity to support the evolving work and needs of scientists, expanding the impact of scientific discoveries, and scaling to support new opportunities
- Developing and retaining talented scientists, administrators and staff throughout the organization and ensuring that they are energized, aligned, and working collaboratively
- Building and refining business processes, administrative functions, systems, and protocols that support STRI's ambitions and reflect the opportunities and challenges of its geography and culture
- Fostering an environment that supports and enables excellence and teamwork
- Communicating objectives clearly, delegating responsibility, and articulating and measuring success and impact

## SEARCH PROCESS

The Smithsonian is an equal opportunity employer and strongly encourages individuals of all backgrounds, cultures, and nationalities to consider this leadership position. The Smithsonian's commitment to inclusivity encompasses, but is not limited to, diversity in nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, and disability.

The search committee is being assisted by Spencer Stuart in this search process. The committee welcomes comments, questions, nominations, and expressions of interest.

To contact the committee, please send an email with any supporting materials to the confidential email address below: [STRIDirector@spencerstuart.com](mailto:STRIDirector@spencerstuart.com)