“MODERN MONGOLIA: RECLAIMING GENGHIS KHAN” OPENS AT SMITHSONIAN’S NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

“Modern Mongolia: Reclaiming Genghis Khan” opens July 3 at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History. Using the traditional home of Mongolian nomads as backdrop, the exhibition invites visitors to experience 20th-century Mongolian life and discover Genghis Khan’s lasting legacy to his people. The exhibition is on view through Oct. 25.

“Modern Mongolia” was organized by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology with the support of the National Museum of Mongolian History, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Many of the objects and archival photographs on display are on loan from the National Museum of Mongolian History.

“In 1206, nine years before the signing of the Magna Carta in England, Genghis Khan brought Mongolians the gifts of independence, nationhood and the basic principles from which they would one day build a modern democratic state,” said Paula Sabloff, senior research scientist at the University of Pennsylvania Museum and curator of the exhibition. “Today, Mongolians identify Genghis Khan with their contemporary democratic principles.”

Central to the exhibition are three life-size gers (the Mongolian word for yurt, the nomads’ traditional home), which will feature many of the 192 Mongolian costumes and artifacts on display. These authentic gers and 35 rare archival photographs enable visitors to reconstruct 20th-century nomadic life. Four films made especially for the exhibition provide historic background and illuminate Genghis Khan’s (1162-1227) relationship to contemporary Mongolians’ democratic ideals. Dr. Sabloff’s 1998-1999 research on the Mongolian people is also presented.

- more -
Exhibition Highlights:

- A life-size early 20th-century ger, a treasure of the Mongolian people
- Two half-gers showing the changes in lifestyle experienced during the last century
- Hands-on area where visitors can try on an authentic Mongolian costume
- Film by Sabloff presenting the nature of politics and the cultural lifestyle in modern Mongolia

“Modern Mongolia” illustrates the impact of the different 20th-century governments on nomads’ and city dwellers’ everyday life. The country has experienced three types of government over the last century including feudal, communist, and democratic. The three gers will chart this history by creating an authentic Mongolian home for each of the political periods. The first ger takes visitors inside a wealthy home in the beginning of the 20th-century when Mongolia was under the rule of the Manchu Dynasty of China. A half-ger displays both the changes and continuity of life around the 1960s, during the height of communism. A final half-ger is set in 2000, a decade after the Mongolian government formally embraced democracy and free market economy.

The exhibition provides a comparison of the 1992 Mongolian and 1787 American constitutions, as well as the Mongolian people’s distinct perspective on the meaning of democracy, which is inspired by Genghis Khan’s democratic principles.

“Modern Mongolia” closes with a video presentation featuring recent interviews with Mongolians speaking on the heritage and the future of Mongolia.

The exhibition is accompanied by the book Modern Mongolia: Reclaiming Genghis Khan, richly illustrated with more than 120 rare color photographs and specially created maps. Edited by Sabloff, it features interpretive essays on Mongolia’s history, culture and political life. Modern Mongolia will be available in the exhibit store for $34.95 for cloth cover and $17.95 for paperback.

The exhibit store at the exit of “Modern Mongolia” will also include authentic Mongolian merchandise, including silk sashes, boots, hats and cashmere shawls.

A special feature of the Smithsonian exhibition will be the addition of a cast deerstone, which will be installed in mid-July. These striking stone monuments are icons of Mongolian culture and are a spectacular reminder of the country’s ancient heritage. A few hundred deerstones are scattered in sites throughout Mongolia and have never before been exhibited outside of the country.

- more -
The exhibition coincides with a new Mongolian research initiative by a multi-disciplinary team at the Smithsonian’s Museum of Natural History. Led by William Fitzhugh, chair of the Museum’s Department of Anthropology and director of its Arctic Studies Center, the team is in Mongolia as part of a long-term research program in the country – open to western scientists for the first time in nearly a century. Fitzhugh is studying the ancient origins and role of the reindeer-herding people, and participating in excavation of burial mounds and a 4,000 - 5,000-year-old Neolithic house. Daniel Rogers, curator of archaeology in the Department of Anthropology, is focusing on urban centers and empires including the ancient capitol at Kharkhorin (also spelled Harhorin) and the imperial palace of Monkh Khan, Genghis Khan’s grandson. Rogers is also researching the history of Mongolia as told from a Chinese point of view. Paula DePriest, curator for the botany section in the Department of Systematic Biology, is studying the gradual disappearance of plants and lichens which comprise the reindeer’s main dietary source.

“The opening of Mongolia to the western scientific community is a rare opportunity to gain new knowledge about important issues of human migration and circumpolar connections,” said Fitzhugh. “‘Modern Mongolia’ enables us to bring these exciting findings to the rest of the world.”

The Arctic Studies Center is part of the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History. Established in 1988, the center is the only United States government program with a special focus on northern cultural research and education. In keeping with this mandate, the Arctic Studies Center specifically studies northern peoples, exploring history, archaeology, social change and human lifeways across the circumpolar world. The center’s Web site is www.mnh.si.edu/arctic.

The National Museum of Natural History, located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W., welcomed more than 8.4 million people during 2001, making it the most visited natural history museum in the world. Opened in 1910, the Museum is dedicated to maintaining and preserving the world's most extensive collection of natural history specimens and human artifacts. It also fosters critical scientific research as well as educational programs and exhibitions that present the work of its scientists and curators to the public. The Museum is part of the Smithsonian Institution, the world's largest museum and research complex. The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History is open for special summer hours from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day through Sept. 2. Regular hours are 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Admission is free.

###

NOTE TO EDITORS: Images are available upon request.
SI-305-2002