“Lewis & Clark: The National Bicentennial Exhibition” Opens May 12 
at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History

In 1804, at the request of President Thomas Jefferson, Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark set out from St. Louis to explore the vast, newly acquired Louisiana Territory. The president hoped the pair would find a water route to the Pacific Ocean. Along the way, they also were to map the interior of the country; collect plant, mineral and animal specimens for science; and, most significantly, develop relationships with the Native American tribes they encountered.

A special traveling exhibition commemorating the 200th anniversary of this legendary journey, “Lewis & Clark: The National Bicentennial Exhibition,” will be on view at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History from May 12 through Sept. 10. This is the final stop in the exhibition’s five-city tour. More than 80 objects in the exhibition are part of the Smithsonian’s collections.

The exhibition examines both the successes and failures of this monumental expedition. Simply reaching the Pacific and returning to St. Louis in 1806 with only one life lost was an astounding accomplishment, and the storehouse of knowledge Lewis and Clark acquired on their journey transformed their countrymen’s image of the West. But there was no feasible water route to the Pacific, and the important aim of bringing western tribes into commercial and political alignment with the United States had been impossible to achieve.

The exhibition also compares the assumptions of Lewis and Clark and the Native Americans they encountered on such topics as politics and diplomacy, gender, geography, animals, landscape, clothing, language, trade and property, healing and health, and plants. These cultural contrasts reveal how the expedition overcame barriers of communication or, in some cases, failed to overcome such obstacles.

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Exhibition Highlights

The exhibition will feature more than 400 artifacts—including 84 objects from the Smithsonian Institution’s collections—that illustrate cultural encounters along the pair’s journey. Period objects and art will show the equipment the explorers used, the land they trekked and the Native American tribes they encountered. The core of the exhibition will be formed by artifacts, artwork and documents organized by the Missouri Historical Society. Artifact highlights include:

• **Pocket compass** - In the spring of 1803, Lewis began to purchase scientific and mathematical instruments for a pending expedition into the northwestern region of North America. Among the items he purchased from Philadelphia instrument maker Thomas Whitney is this silver-plated pocket compass. It has a mahogany box, a silver-plated brass rim that is graduated to degrees and numbered in quadrants from north and south, a paper dial, two small brass sight vanes and a leather carrying case.

By the time they returned to St. Louis in September 1806, few of the instruments that were purchased for the trip had survived the journey. The pocket compass, however, was kept by Clark as a memento. He later gave the compass to his friend, Capt. Robert A. McCabe, whose heirs donated it in 1933 to the Smithsonian Institution. Courtesy of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History.

• **Washakie war robe, pre-1897** – Washakie, the great 19th-century chief of the Wind River Shoshone, was born the year before Lewis and Clark encountered his people. He later achieved the war honors shown on this robe which depicted events in a symbolic realm of deeds. Courtesy of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian.

• **Knife and sheath, c. 1820-1840** - This rare and early style of sheath, covered with whole bird quills, was used by both the Santee and the Missouri Valley Sioux. Courtesy of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History.

• **Quiver, pre-1839** - Clark described the Yankton Sioux as armed mainly with bows and arrows “and very much deckerated with porcupine quills.” This quiver may have been the type he was seeing. It was collected by artist George Catlin. Courtesy of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History.

• **Grizzly bear headdress, pre-1881** – This headdress, formed of the upper skull of a grizzly bear, belonged to a Teton Lakota man named Bear Head. Headdresses like it were worn only by men with bear power and were used in curing ceremonies or in dances held in preparation for a bear hunt. Courtesy of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History.

• **Bear claw necklace, mid-1800s** - Lewis wrote that “the warriors or such as esteem themselves brave men” wore necklaces of grizzly bear claws. “It is esteemed by them an
act of equal celebrity the killing one of these bear or an enemy.” Courtesy of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History.

Public Program

Exhibition curator and Lewis and Clark scholar Herman J. Viola, Smithsonian curator emeritus, will explain the important role of the western Indians in helping Lewis and Clark successfully complete their epic trek across the continent as part of the museum’s Friday at Noon lecture series in the Baird Auditorium. The talk on May 12 at noon is free and open to the public.

Exhibition catalog

“Lewis & Clark: Across the Divide” by Carolyn Gilman, published by Smithsonian Books will be available in the Museum Store for $39.95 beginning May 12. This book is the companion to the exhibition.

About the Exhibition

“Lewis & Clark” was organized by the Missouri Historical Society and presented in partnership with the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia; the American Philosophical Society; the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; the Library of Congress; the National Archives; the Oregon Historical Society; the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology; the Smithsonian Institution; and the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Inc.

This exhibition has been made possible through the generous support of Emerson. Additional support has been provided by the National Park Service and the state of Missouri.

About the Museum

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W., in Washington, D.C., welcomed more than 5.5 million visitors in 2005. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Please note the Natural History Museum will have extended hours this spring and summer. The museum will be open from 10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. every Friday and Saturday from March 10 through May 20. The museum will remain open from 10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. every day from May 26 through Sept. 3. Admission is free. For further information, call (202) 633-1000, TTY (202) 357-1729 or visit the museum’s Web site at www.mnh.si.edu.

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