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Conference Abstract

A New Future for the Biodiversity Heritage Library: From Institutional Reliance to Global Resilience

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Abstract

In April 2025, the Biodiversity Heritage Library (BHL) released a public statement announcing that the Smithsonian Institution, BHL's administrative host since 2006, would cease to host BHL on 1 January 2026. This decision placed one of the world's largest and longest-running open biodiversity data infrastructures at a critical inflection point.

BHL is a global consortium of libraries, museums, and herbaria digitizing and openly sharing biodiversity literature. It provides over 63 million freely accessible pages spanning five centuries of publishing; connecting taxonomic data, historical context, and research infrastructures. The sudden withdrawal of institutional hosting threatened BHL's continuity and exposed the fragility of community-led initiatives reliant on a single institutional anchor.

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The transition from the Smithsonian required immediate action, careful planning, and international collaboration. Within weeks, BHL convened its partners and launched a *Call for Support* to identify new administrative, technical, and financial hosts. Open through mid-2025 and soft-closed on 31 August, the call yielded promising offers. To guide decisions, BHL developed *Guiding Principles for the Transition*, reaffirming its commitment to open access, community-led governance, inclusive collections, modernized infrastructure, and FAIR Principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable). At the time of writing (September 2025), BHL's future remains uncertain. Hosting and financial commitments received thus far will provide interim stability for 1–3 years, securing much-needed breathing space to implement a durable governance and funding model, and to address critical questions: how to distribute long-term hosting across multiple organizations and countries; how to secure sustainable in-kind, philanthropic, and grant-based support; and how to adapt BHL's technical architecture for scalability, interoperability, and continuity beyond the transition.

The Call for Support also raised awareness of BHL's tenuous future among its global user base, sparking widespread recognition of BHL's value to science and conservation, and surfacing the depth of global commitment to BHL. Support has poured in from partners and the wider community of biodiversity researchers and enthusiasts, ranging from firm offers of technical hosting to pledges of cookies. This solidarity demonstrates that BHL is more than a repository of literature: it is a shared scientific resource, deeply embedded in the global biodiversity informatics ecosystem.

This set the stage for a fundraising campaign inviting researchers and the public to support BHL's sustainability. Concurrently, BHL is pursuing grants to strengthen its technical foundation, upgrade core systems, expand persistent identifier coverage, and enhance interoperability with related infrastructures. While these efforts cannot replace institutional partners, they will diversify revenue streams and strengthen the collective stewardship of BHL.

In August 2025, the transition took a major step forward with the establishment of fiscal sponsorship with the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR). This partnership provided BHL with an immediate financial and legal home, enabling the consortium to accept donations, pursue grants, and manage staff contracts. It also marked an important shift towards independence. No longer constrained by the requirements and shifting priorities of a large U.S.-based, federally affiliated institution, BHL now has the flexibility to operate as a neutral, international, community-governed infrastructure.

The BHL transition is an unfolding case study in navigating infrastructural precarity, illustrating the fragility and resilience of community-led infrastructures, and the importance of distributed governance, safeguarded data, transparent values, sustainable funding, and diversified support. Most notably, the shift to a more autonomous structure has intensified the need to modernize BHL's platform to ensure continued relevance as bioinformatics advances. The foundation is already being laid for a more agile,

distributed, and globally resilient BHL, capable of continuing its mission to connect the world to freely accessible, discoverable, and interoperable biodiversity knowledge.

Securing this future requires new partners, sustained investment, and modernized technical infrastructure. Long-term commitments are needed to share responsibility for hosting and funding this global resource. Institutions, funders, and individuals are called upon to safeguard the world's collective biodiversity knowledge. To follow progress and explore ways to contribute, see ongoing #BHLTransition updates on the BHL blog.

Keywords

BHL, biodiversity literature, open access, open data, open science, community, infrastructure, sustainability, funding, transformation, global collaboration

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Conflicts of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.