

Naturalis Biodiversity Center

Abstract

Naturalis Biodiversity Center, before the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie (State Museum of Natural History), was founded in 1820 in Leiden. The focus of Naturalis is threefold: accumulating and maintaining a collection of natural historical objects, conducting research into the collection and exhibit the collection to a broad audience. A large part of Naturalis' collection originates from the former Dutch East Indies and other former Dutch colonies. In the 19th and 20th century, scientists amassed large collections of natural historical specimens in these regions.

History of the museum

In 1820 [King Willem I](#) established the '[Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie](#)' by Royal Decree. The museum has been called Naturalis Biodiversity Center since 2010. The museum collection was formed by combining the collections of Leiden University, 's Lands Kabinet van Natuurlijke Historie (the National Cabinet of Natural History) and the personal collection of the first director [Coenraad Jacob Temminck](#). During the nineteenth century these collections, which were initially collected as curiosities, attracted increasing interest from nascent scientific disciplines. Temminck succeeded in getting Dutch people abroad to acquire natural objects to add to the collection of the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie (RMNH). For example, the collection of natural objects from Japan accumulated by [Philipp Franz von Siebold](#), whose ethnographic collection later served as the foundation of the Rijks Etnografisch Museum in Leiden, was also added to the RMNH collection.

The foundation of the present-day Naturalis collection is, thus, explicitly linked to the colonial past. In line with developments in the scientific field, the so-called [Natuurkundige Commissie voor Nederlands-Indië](#) (Natural Sciences Commission for the Netherlands Indies) was established in 1820. This commission, based at '[s Lands Plantentuin](#)' in Bogor (then Buitenzorg), was tasked with seeking minerals and mapping the local flora and fauna. From 1839 to 1847 the commission's findings were published in the *Verhandelingen over de natuurlijke geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Overzeesche bezittingen*, which was edited by C.J. Temminck, director of the RMNH. After the dissolution of the commission in 1850, the publications, collected objects, correspondence, etc. were included in the collection of the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie. Even after the Natuurkundige Commissie was disbanded, collectors in Indonesia and elsewhere were encouraged by the RMNH to continue making their collections available to the museum.

In 1878, the Geology and Mineralogy department split from the RMNH to form its own museum, the [Rijksmuseum voor Geologie en Mineralogie](#) (RGM). This National Museum of Geology and Mineralogy would continue to exist separately until remerging with the National Museum of Natural History in 1984. While the RGM's collection initially focused on the former Dutch East Indies, under its first director [Karl Martin](#) it was expanded to include objects from other areas, including the Dutch colonies in the Caribbean. In the early years both the National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of Geology and Mineralogy were primarily intended for interested scientists. Only toward the beginning of the twentieth century did they more frequently open their collections to the general public.

During the twentieth century the collections of both the RMNH and RGM were expanded considerably, retaining close ties with the areas colonised by the Netherlands. After moving

to another building in 1998, the once again reunited collections continued under the current name Naturalis. In 2010 the collections of the Zoological Museum Amsterdam and the National Herbarium Netherlands were also merged with Naturalis. Since 2019 Naturalis has been located in its current, newly built premises, where the museum's three tasks – collection, science and museum – are even more closely linked.

Former directors

Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie

- Coenraad Jacob Temminck (1820-1858)
- Hermann Schlegel (1858-1884)
- Fredericus Anna Jentink (1884-1913)
- Eudard Daniël van Oort (1913-1933)
- Hilbrand Boschma (1933-1958)
- Leo Brongersma (1958-1972)
- Willem Vervoort (1972-1982)
- Jacobus Theodorus Wiebes (1982-1989)

Rijks Geologisch en Mineralogisch Museum

- Karl Martin (1878-1922)
- Berend George Escher (1922-1955)
- Isaäk Martinus van der Vlerk (1955-1961)
- Cornelis Beets (1963-1977)

[image] *Exhibition of Surinamese animals in the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, 1972* ([Jan Holvast / Erfgoed Leiden](#))

Provenance research

The archival and image collection of Naturalis comprises the merged collections of the Zoological Museum Amsterdam, the Nationaal Herbarium Nederland, the Herbarium Vadense (Wageningen) and the herbarium of Utrecht University. The Naturalis collection also includes the geological collections of the former Rijksmuseum van Geologie en Mineralogie, and herbarium collections of Amsterdam and Delft universities. Archives and other supplementary collection and research-related data are available through the [Naturalis archives website](#). The [overview page](#) provides a handy display of all archives. The Naturalis archives contain valuable material such as manuscripts, drawings and notes that paint a clear picture of the (colonial) past. For example, the notebooks in the [archive of Korthals](#) contain drawings of the former Dutch East Indies showing panoramas and houses, local residents and plants.

The [museum collection](#) and [library](#) are both browsable via their own websites. In addition, the physical library is now publicly accessible at the museum. There is also a separate [repository](#) where many (historical) scientific publications are available. Several books from the Naturalis collection are also available through the international digital platform [Biodiversity Heritage Library](#).

If you have questions regarding your research or would like to visit the collection, you can submit a request at collectie@naturalis.nl.

Related Aids

- [Sources](#)
- [Civil servants in colonised territories](#)
- [Scientific research in colonised territories](#)
- [Royal Cabinet of Curiosities](#)
- [Wereldmuseum Leiden](#)
- [Wageningen University & Research](#)
- [Koninklijk Bataviaasch Genootschap van Wetenschappen en Kunsten](#)
- [C.G.C. Reinwardt](#)
- [Museon-Omniversum](#)
- [International Colonial and Export Exhibition 1883](#)
- [Natuurhistorisch en Volkenkundig Museum Oudenbosch](#)

Primary sources

Book:

Haan, W. de, P. W. Korthals, Salomon Müller, H. Schlegel, C. J. Temminck, en Natuurkundige Commissie in Oost-Indië. Verhandelingen over de natuurlijke geschiedenis der Nederlandsche overzeesche bezittingen. Leiden: In commissie bij. S. en J. Luchtmans en C.C. van der Hoek, 1839 All the Proceedings of the Natuurkundige Commissie in Oost-Indië in combined in a book, divided into three volumes: Land- en Volkenkunde, Zoölogie and Botanie. Available through the Biodiversity Heritage Library website.

<https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.114730>, [WorldCat 12686361 of 816811748](<https://search.worldcat.org/title/12686361> of 816811748)

Magazine:

Koninklijke Natuurkundige Vereeniging in Nederlandsch Indië. Natuurkundig tijdschrift voor Nederlandsch Indië. Jakarta (Batavia): Lange, 1851-1940 Journal of the Physical Society from the former Dutch East Indies. Editions from 1851 to 1922 are available through the Biodiversity Heritage Library.

<https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/bibliography/13350>, WorldCat 927107619

Magazine:

Rijks Geologisch-Mineralogisch Museum. Sammlungen des Geologischen Reichsmuseums in Leiden. Leiden: Brill, 1891-1922. Journal of the Rijksmuseum van Geologie en Mineralogie published between 1891 and 1922 under the editorship of K. Martin. All editions are available through the repository of Naturalis.

<https://repository.naturalis.nl/org/5>, WorldCat 72793114, ISBN 1879-7814

Secondary sources

Book:

Holthuis, Lipke. 1820 - 1958 : Rijksmuseum Van Natuurlijke Historie. Nationaal Natuurhistorisch Museum, Leiden, 1995. Book from 1995 describing the history of the former Nationaal Natuurhistorisch Museum from 1820 to 1958. Contains

structured information about the building of the museum collection and the curators of the time.

[WorldCat 69079231](#), <https://repository.naturalis.nl/pub/268714>

Book:

Gijzen, Agatha. 's Rijks Museum Van Natuurlijke Historie, 1820-1915. W.L. & J. Brusse, Rotterdam, 1938. Dissertation from 1938 describing the history of the State Museum of Natural History from 1820 to 1915.

[WorldCat 896666422](#), <https://repository.naturalis.nl/pub/631350>

Article:

de Groot, G.E. "Rijksmuseum Van Geologie En Mineralogie 1878-1978 : A Retrospect". Scripta Geologica 48 (January 1978): 3-25. Article from 1978 describing the history of the Rijksmuseum van Geologie en Mineralogie from 1878 to 1978.

[WorldCat 899054688](#), <https://repository.naturalis.nl/pub/317444>

Article:

A.M. Husson and L.B. Holthuis. "The Dates of Publication of 'Verhandelingen over De Natuurlijke Geschiedenis Der Nederlandsche Overzeesche Bezittingen' Edited by C. J. Temminck". Zoologische Mededelingen 34, no. 2 (January 1955): 17-24. Article from 1955 outlining and describing all publications of the journal Verhandelingen over De Natuurlijke Geschiedenis der Nederlandsche Overzeesche Bezittingen.

[WorldCat 67808542](#), <https://repository.naturalis.nl/pub/318953>

Article:

Andreas Weber. 2019. "Collecting Colonial Nature: European Naturalists and the Netherlands Indies in the Early Nineteenth Century." BMGN – Low Countries Historical Review. Article about the history of the Natuurkundige Commissie voor Nederlandsch-Indië (Natural Sciences Commission for the Netherlands Indies).

[WorldCat 9627499338](#), <https://doi.org/10.18352/bmgn-lchr.10741>

Relevant Data

TO BE FILLED

*first edited by Wiebe Reints as original_author on 2024-07-10
last edited by Wiebe Reints as original_author on 2025-12-23*