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UConn gets \$500K ant grant from National Science Foundation

By The Associated Press

POSTED: 04/13/16, 3:18 PM EDT | UPDATED: ON 04/13/2016
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STORRS >> Former University of Connecticut biologist Carl Rettenmeyer and his wife Marian made more than 20 expeditions to the jungles of Central and South America following, studying and collecting army ants.

Their work, including about 2 million specimens of ants and other critters that also live in army ant colonies, soon will be available to other researchers, students and the public thanks to a \$500,000 grant awarded to the university by the National Science Foundation.

The Department of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology, where Carl Rettenmeyer worked from 1971 to 1996, will begin digitally cataloging the dead insects this summer, creating an electronic database of the collection and research notes that will be available online.

“We have bulk samples of many colonies, thousands of vials with preserved things in them, and quite a few cabinets with pinned insects in them as well,” said Jane O’Donnell, the biologist who is managing the collection.

The ant colonies also are documented in 5,000 Kodachrome slides and about 30 hours of digital videotape.

O’Donnell said the idea is to make the work accessible to everyone from elementary school students to the world’s top ant researchers.

The school is planning two exhibits, one about the ants and another about the Rettenmeyers. Carl, who died in 2009, also founded the Connecticut State Museum of Natural History at UConn.

The school plans to build a large-scale model of an army ant that will welcome visitors to school's biology and physics building. There also will be 4-foot-long model ants placed on the side of the building to publicize the collection.

The Rettenmeyers painstakingly documented the complex life of foraging army ant colonies. They became the first to discover many of the other organisms that live there, such as a special mite that attaches to the end of an ant's leg and serves as a sort of hiking boot for the insect, O'Donnell said.

The school expects the additional research on the ants will uncover new details about colony life. The collection, O'Donnell said, also will be a valuable source of DNA for those studying the history of ants and their symbiotic systems.

"We don't even know what some of the relationships with some of these other organisms are," she said. "We're hoping that by putting all of these details together and making it easier to study, some patterns will emerge."

The school hopes to have the initial exhibition ready by early 2017.

"We share billions of years of evolutionary history with these organisms, and we don't even really have an accounting of what's on the planet with us yet," O'Donnell said. "That's part of this."