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This Is a Local Museum, for Local Natural History Specialist Groups



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Abstract

With more people taking part in biological recording, surveying, and joining natural history societies than ever, how and why should museums work with these groups? Although there is overlap in interests, these societies often either do not engage with museums or, at worst, have a mistrust of them. In 2011, the Oxford University Museum of Natural History held a symposium for specialist interest groups in Oxfordshire and, ever since, has worked to build trust, engage more deeply with this audience, and cultivate mutually beneficial relationships.

This paper summarises the findings from this symposium and other research into what natural history specialist interest groups and museums can offer each other to grow each organisation, deepen links, promote collaboration, and create both wider and more impactful participation in natural history events. We will describe our findings of what specialist interest groups feel is best practice from museums, a selection of different methods of collaborating with specialist interest groups, and how our museum has developed its model of engagement to build a strong local network of those engaged with natural history but not natural history museums.

Keywords: public engagement, natural history, OUMNH, natural history societies

Introduction

Natural history museums have large captive audiences of visitors who are fascinated and stimulated by their subject matter. An ever-increasing number of people are joining natural history societies and wildlife groups and involving themselves in citizen science projects. Natural History programmes and films have never been more popular, and there is a great public love of the natural world. However, the links between active immersion and involvement in the natural environment, further scientific understanding of it, and the subject matter in the museums are often missing in both the minds of the visitors, members of natural history groups and societies, and sometimes even by museum staff themselves.

Without these links, it is arguable that natural history collections may become ignored and their data forgotten by those involved in studying the natural sciences; natural history groups and societies miss the chance to engage with an already self-selected audience interested in finding out about their work; an engaged public leave without a clear direction in mind as to where they can go to further their interests, and the museums and collections begin to lose all relevance to modern society and risk becoming historic visitor attractions harping back to a bygone age; in short, big rooms full of dead stuff as pertinent to the public as an historic ruin, or burial mound in a featureless, though atmospheric, landscape, and as just likely to receive public acknowledgment and



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funding.

With this in mind, staff at Oxford University Museum of Natural History set about assessing the museum's offer for both the general public and specialist interest groups (encompassing wildlife groups, recording schemes, site specific conservation groups, etc.). Prior to 2011, engagement with special interest groups was sporadic and largely opportunistic in nature. Whilst feedback from the events held was generally positive overall, there was also a sense of disconnect, with no long-term links or connections being formed between the two parties. Understandably, this led to a sense of frustration, both for visitors who struggled to conceptualise how the museum and its collections connected to the world outside the walls of the building, and for staff internally who were looking to promote and increase accessibility for all.

Of particular frustration was the oft-repeated phrase 'I didn't realise that I could use the collections here', heard on numerous occasions and most especially from local wildlife recorders and amateur naturalists working on identifying their own materials. It became obvious that if this barrier was to be overcome, the museum needed to devote some time to investigating the problem so as to better understand underlying causes before any work could be done to resolve the situation.

Assessing the offer

To this end, in November 2011, the museum held a symposium for special interest groups. The aims of the event were to formally introduce the museum, the collections and work to those groups, and gather feedback and suggestions on how the museum could work either directly or indirectly to support and promote the interests of both parties in the furtherance of the shared goals of increasing interest, involvement, and awareness of the natural sciences amongst the general public.

Over 60 groups were invited to take part in the symposium, of which 37 attended, with 26 groups supplying formal feedback in the form of questionnaire responses. A broad range of interests were represented from across the natural sciences, encompassing the four main disciplines within the museum (Zoology, Entomology, Mineralogy, and Geology) and beyond, from subject specialists such as university lecturers leading ecological research projects and nature recorders, through local site specific nature groups, to representatives of

national groups such as the RSPB. The parameters for inclusion were kept as broad as possible to reflect the diversity within the specialist interest group cohort as a whole, but excluded those perceived to be placed within the arts, as these were considered to be a different audience overall, though it should be acknowledged that there is some overlap between these areas.

Both formal - responses to a written questionnaire - and informal feedback was sought from participants on the day, which was composed of a series of talks, behind the scenes tours, and a public-facing event. The questionnaire included ten set questions followed by a free-text field. The first five questions asked participants to rate how interested they would be, on a scale of one to five, in participating in a series of different kinds of events - including but not limited to: meetings, talks and annual general meetings, training, public-engagement events - and to estimate the expected audience numbers associated with this. These events were considered to be 'passive' on the part of the museum, as the questions were designed to gauge how much appetite there was for using the museum's internal facilities, and on-site visits. It is interesting to note here that the answers collected regarding audience numbers were often annotated, displaying both the respondents' lack of confidence in their answer and the desire for the museum to take over this responsibility.

The second set of five questions tackled more 'active' topics that involved an action on the part of the museum to complete, such as sending a member of staff to participate in an external public engagement event. Overall, this section of the questionnaire recorded stronger responses. The top three things that groups were most interested in were:

1. publicity for their group, either at the museum or via the museum's website
2. using the museum to attract new members
3. museum staff to give talks or lectures to group members at their location.

This section also had a greater ability to shift people's scores to either end of the spectrum in terms of level of interest.

Answers from these questions were then plotted against distance travelled, to see if there was any correlation. Distance travelled for the 26 respondents ranged from 1.2 – 53.5 miles, with

the average being 14.24 miles. It might have been expected that those from further away would be less interested in using the museum-based facilities. As it was, there was very little correlation between distance and the strength of interest expressed in the various different offers. Upon closer inspection, it became obvious that there is a broad range of factors at play that had not previously been considered, including, among many others: size of organisation, strength of brand, age of organisation, presence or absence of internally held collections, percentage of membership that could be considered as professional, and facilities immediately available to organisations. With the questions that were posed on this occasion, it was not possible to collect the more fine-grained information that might allow patterns to be identified. Previous to this survey, although the general opinion within the museum was that distance was the most limiting factor in whether an offer would be taken up, and whilst it certainly seems to be true that there is an upper limit to the distance most participants are willing to travel on average, further work has proved that this is not immutable and depends largely on what is being offered.

The free-text field provided a wealth of information, and requests for a wide variety of things that groups felt the museum should offer. Staff used answers from this section to pull together a list of the 20 most frequently occurring requests. Ranked according to priority for the specialist interest groups, the top three requests were for:

1. help with surveys/fieldwork
2. identification of material
3. education packs tailored to the group.

All of these require high investment in terms of time and resources from the museum, but have little potential for return, and as such were not something the museum felt it would be able to offer within the remit of this work. Instead, staff undertook their own ranking exercise, dividing the list into the three sections of low, medium, and high priority. Low priority activities were those determined to be cost-heavy, as outlined earlier. Medium priority activities were often ones that the museum already had or did in some capacity, which could be re-worked to increase the attractiveness of the offer. However, the return would merely be an increase of use rather than a new use, hence the medium priority ranking. High priority requests were therefore those that were novel offers, cost

little, or could be quickly built on resources the museum already had in place. Efforts have been focussed on those offers ranked as high priority for the museum in the first instance, but staff are looking to work on lower priority requests as the work programme develops in the coming years. For those activities - such as surveys and identifications - that groups ranked as some of their highest priorities, the museum has been applying some lateral thinking, and making an attempt to connect groups and interested parties that may be able to help each other. Staff felt that it was important for the museum to acknowledge the requests made, even if it was only in a limited capacity, as ignoring or refusing these requests would have done nothing to foster productive working relationships.

The next phase of work was concerned with creating a structured approach, incorporating statements of intent into the museum's strategic plan, and establishing a baseline of events within the public engagement programme. Staff resolved that the overall aim of this work was not to increase footfall, but rather to deepen the overall level of engagement that people had with the museum, with the longer-term goal of promoting the museum within the wider community as a knowledge portal or pool, an 'honest broker' of engagement with the natural sciences to which they could turn for informed and impartial information.

A key factor in any work going forward was to curate a consistent basic offer, with the intention that this would fulfil a number of important functions. Firstly, it would provide clarity to all parties over questions on resources, space use, associated costs, and investment of staff time, so as to promote the museum as being open, honest, and accessible to all. Secondly, it would allow for the creation of more efficient workflows for staff within the museum by creating a single access point for all information and arrangements regarding engagement activities. This allowed for the more formal integration of collections-based sessions with those of the museum's public engagement team, whose main focus was on providing education and public-facing events. Whilst staff had been maintaining an informal information exchange system, this push towards greater integration had the benefit of highlighting this work to the attention of the museum's upper management. Gaining support from the leadership team to pursue this work has proved to be extremely important, as it is not a fast-build project with immediate income potential but rather a long-term investment, with

reputation and audience loyalty as the rewards. Thirdly, by establishing a set basic offer, the museum could position itself so that it had an achievable minimum number of events, leaving room for growth, risk-taking, and eventual evolution in line with changing audience demands over time.

The Five-Point Plan

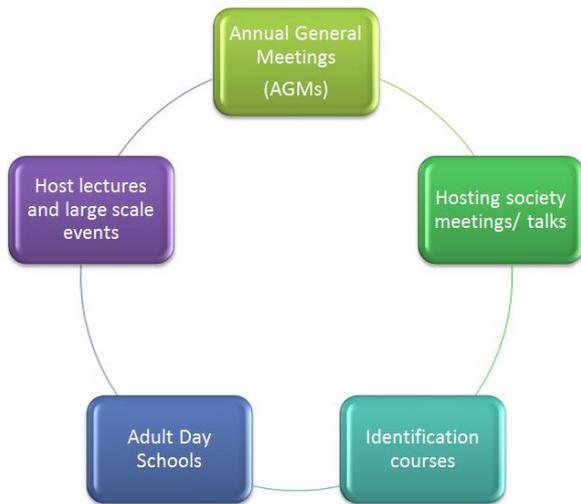


Figure 1. The Five-Point Plan at its initial conception.

Annual General Meetings

Annual General Meetings (AGMs) proved to be one of the easiest events to host, logistically. The museum has a large lecture theatre with a modest audio-visual suite that allows computer-based presentations and microphone access for an audience of up to 300 people. Given that most AGMs for specialist interest groups only have an audience in the region of 30-70 people, depending on the size of the organisation, this leaves a comfortable amount of space for current attendees but also room for audience growth. Organisations that most often take up this offer are those who are relatively highly specialised, but that have a national reach. The museum generally hosts these events for free, but provides little outside of access to our facilities. It was understood that these events would be largely run by the groups themselves, with the burden of audience recruitment placed on them. The largest single change to any offer has since occurred in this event category, with the museum taking on a portion of this responsibility by implementing a small but highly significant change in insisting that, wherever possible, AGM events be free and open to the general public. In exchange for this concession, the event is placed in the

museum's public engagement calendar, is featured on the print publication of the museum event programme, and is advertised through social media. As a result, event attendance is increasing by a small but significant percentage year on year, and it is hoped that this will translate into an increase in membership for these groups.

Society meetings or talks

Hosting society meetings or talks is essentially a small-scale version of AGMs, with the audience being generally somewhere in the region of 10-30 attendees and more local in reach. Invariably, these events are held on a weekday night, which significantly impacts on the distance that people are willing and able to travel to attend. Given the small potential pool of attendees, these events have proven to be difficult to populate for groups with either poor organisation or publicity skills. The museum has had to work hard to generate momentum with some groups, and it has proven to be the more risk-prone area of development.

However, where it has been successful it is demonstrably a more-than-worthy addition to the museum's roster of events, with the 'open-door' policy as used with AGMs being successful in driving attendance numbers up. In winter, Oxford Mammal Group, for example, holds a series of monthly lectures by mammal researchers that regularly attracts an audience of more than 100 members of the public, as well as their own members, and the group has significantly increased its membership through the programme. The museum offer consists of facilitated free access to space and audio-visual facilities from a member of staff. To reciprocate, it is expected that groups keep the cost to their members to the bare minimum, only collecting money to cover costs for refreshments and/or speakers. The museum also takes the opportunity to advertise other upcoming events to group members through printed media or a short introduction from the hosting member of staff.

Identification courses

Identification courses are the most specialised offer that the museum has developed. They cater to only a very small number of people, are resource intensive, and require the largest input of staff time. They can also be expensive in terms of speaker costs, especially if a course requires an overnight stay, which, in Oxford, is a significant consideration. Originally, the museum conceived that these were an important offer because of the widening skills

gap in terms of taxonomists and identification experts, and as such it was felt that there was a moral obligation to ensure that something was done to help arrest this worrying trend. Of all the offers developed, this one has proven to be the one for which people have the most appetite. They always gather a full audience of engaged and highly motivated participants, who often travel great distances to attend. The museum strives to keep the cost of these courses down, with the greater percentage of fees going to cover tutor costs. At present, the museum has been able to cap course costs at £15 per head, though this figure is reviewed on an annual basis.

Perhaps the hardest part of arranging identification courses is the recruitment of tutors. It is something of a luxury to have the combination of both collections and experts in-house to provide this kind of session, and, more often than not, one or both of these resources needs to be externally sourced.

Adult day schools

Adult day schools are more formal sessions, which the museum initially coordinated through the University of Oxford Continuing Education Department. More recently, the museum has been able to offer in-house day school sessions run entirely by staff members. Day schools are the most expensive offer, with an average price tag of £60 per head. They usually cover a broad-ranging theme or topic, and are aimed at an older, educated audience with a general interest in natural history. They are mentioned here for two reasons: firstly, the museum has found that there is often movement from this group into other types of engagement events; secondly, some day school themes have been developed that are similar in style to identification courses but with a broader scope, for instance, tackling insect diversity rather than focusing on identification of species within a particular family. These have been important in helping to build the confidence of audience members who have a general interest but feel that they lack the skills or knowledge to participate in what they perceive to be difficult, and thus inaccessible, subjects or courses.

Understanding this has been fundamental to the way in which the museum does its forward planning of events. It is important to understand that the museum's affiliation with the University of Oxford is, for some people, a huge barrier to access, and the museum must take active steps to overcome this.

Events and public lectures

Finally, the museum schedules a small number of large-scale events and public lectures each year. Some of these are opportunistic, capitalising on approaches made by commercial organisations such as publishers. Others are promotional vehicles for marketing such things as exhibitions, both internally within the university and externally in the wider community. The majority of these are run as partnership events, so as to increase the number of avenues through which publicity can be generated.

Natural partners have included university departments, but also specialist interest groups working at a county level, such as the local branch of The Wildlife Trust, the Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire Wildlife Trust (BBOWT), with whom the museum has developed a formal partnership, acting as the flagship site for the counties' annual two-week 'Festival of Nature'. The festival culminates in the large-scale one-day event 'Wild Fair', with BBOWT acting as an organising umbrella group, supporting many smaller wildlife and conservation organisations to present their work with stalls and activities, and with the museum loaning specimens to them. Wild Fair attracted over 4000 visitors in June 2016, a month in which it is traditionally difficult to recruit audiences for events in Oxford city and wider environs, due to the population demographics of the area (approximately 24% of the adult population are students) and large number of alternative offers from other competing organisations. Partnership events have proved to be fruitful, with costs and risk-taking being spread across more than one organisation.

Wherever possible, the museum has made it its policy to keep any costs to our audiences to a minimum. Overall, the aim has been to be cost-neutral, with the benefits, as mentioned earlier, being in the more intangible shape of increased reputation and more formal links with specialist interest groups. It may be that this will change over time, as audience taste and expectations develop. At the time of writing, the museum has been engaged with working on this programme for a little over two years, having started in April 2014 after a period of forced closure while the museum's roof was being refurbished. As such, it feels as though it is still in the test-and-development phase at present.

steady rise in the number of collaborative projects between groups, which has led both to an increase in retention time of people within the system and an overall increase in the general awareness amongst audiences of specialist interest groups as a whole. Access to the system, to the different groups, and to the museum itself, has consequently increased.

Learning moments

It has become apparent that a necessary, yet time-consuming, first step is the formation of working agreements or terms of understanding. These can be short, applicable to only a single event, or lead into long-term working partnerships. Whatever the event, wherever an outside organisation is involved it has proven to be good policy to have a written agreement. The museum has yet to develop formal systems for organising and recording working agreements (see 'Future ambitions' section, below), but, on occasion, these have proven to be worth their weight in gold. One of the hazards of dealing with multiple outside agencies, many of whom are not professional in nature, is that there will always be some with higher expectations than the museum can reasonably meet. In these instances, staff have tried to be as accommodating as possible, although this sets an unfortunate precedent, and it is easy to become railroaded into situations that are less than ideal for the host organisation. In order to reduce any potential for confusion or disagreement, it is useful to supply a clear statement that briefly details the commitments that both sides are agreeing to when organising an event, including respective areas of responsibility, such as facilities and equipment arrangements, publicity and audience recruitment, or access to staff or internal resources.

Those parties with which the museum has managed to forge the strongest links are those with the most similar mission statements to that of the museum. For instance, the shared values of BBOWT and the museum have been important in creating a mutual foundation between the two different organisations. This may seem like an obvious point to make, but the important thing to establish early on is that the assumptions each side may be making regarding future cooperation and joint work aligns with forward planning on each side. Being able to be upfront and honest regarding the level(s) of engagement, and thus commitment, eliminates potential problematic areas in the future. It is also helpful to anticipate that things will change over time, and schedule an annual review of all agreements.

In order to ensure parity in dealings with outside agencies, work needs to be supported by upper management and, preferably, written into organisational policy. This not only means that others recognise the value of the work, but helps when the inevitable pressure to generate revenue creates a situation in which this value may be overlooked in favour of funding the bottom line. Where organisations do have money with which to fund activities, however, it is important to ensure that appropriate remuneration is received. It is worth having discussions in advance or setting annual review dates of agreements so as to make these discussions as easy as possible. Whilst many organisations are honest and easy to deal with, situations do change as funding waxes and wanes for both parties.

Experience has taught that it is best to do fewer courses, and do them well, rather than over-extend, and that it is best not to underestimate either the appetite the public has for any course that has natural history at its heart, nor the range of skills present in staff and the amateur community. It is also here that the museum has managed to gain some of its strongest and most vocal supporters. The level of personal engagement with the museum and its staff is at its highest in these kind of high-contact situations. As a result, the museum has found a ready pool of advocates in the surrounding community. Often, people attending identification courses are active participants in other field-based interest groups, and these people are helping to develop the link between the museum and the natural world in real time and space.

Interestingly, the most frequently occurring point of contention is often over the provision, or lack, of tea and coffee. As amusing or trivial as this may seem, it is these small details that often evoke the most vociferous reaction. Establishing in advance who is responsible for providing such things will avoid last-minute panic on the day, at a time when you can usually least afford to be dealing with such things. It is especially important when you are collecting any form of feedback, given that small, avoidable problems such as this have a disproportionately large effect on the responses people give.

Future ambitions

Following on from the positive first phase of work, and looking to capitalise on the successes, OUMNH has recently created an Adult Engagement Group with members drawn from every department within the museum, including research. This

group will pull together the contacts, enquiries, and interests of all parties that use the museum, funnelling all contact through a single point to ensure consistency and reliability of offer. This is designed to utilise engagement to the best effect, by promoting further opportunities for engagement with both collections and the public, to develop better relationships between the museum departments and amongst the user groups themselves through creation of linkages. We have begun to ask adults attending each event to add their names to a mailing list, to publicise all events and cross-pollinate activity within the sector, with the museum firmly placed at the hub of this activity. It is also hoped that this will lead to an increase in our understanding of the interests and levels of engagement that our visitors and users hold and want. This will feed back into our provision for their needs on a number of levels, enabling the development of new types of delivery and engagement.

Future plans also include the development of more rigorous and regular data collection through the use of surveys, informal feedback sessions, and focus groups, where applicable. Keeping accurate records of working agreements is an important part of any future work, and staff are currently putting systems in place that are both rigorous and accessible across the museum. Previous to this, records have been kept within individual departments, with data being collected in a variety of formats.

The current plan is that, as this provision evolves, the museum will begin to discover and develop more professional collaborations, both locally and nationally, that further invigorate the use and need for museums such as OUMNH, and raise the public profile of natural history collections. It is also hoped that this work will eventually develop to the point where it is able to cross regional boundaries, connecting museums through shared project work as well as Subject Specialist Networks or specialist interest groups. If we achieve this, we will be able to illustrate that natural history museums are not just big rooms full of dead stuff, nor just visitor attractions for children who like dinosaurs.

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