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Museum Visitors & Dinosaurs

- G-Gina Koutsika, Audience Advocate, Natural History Museum, London

Those of us that work in a natural history museum with dinosaur fossils are not surprised that when our institutions are described as the *dinosaur museum*.

From various studies that have been undertaken with the Natural History Museum visitors, we have found out that many of our visitors specifically come to see the Museum's dinosaurs. The dinosaur gallery is particularly popular with younger children up to the age of eight.

Children usually become interested in dinosaurs between the ages of four to six and already possess related books and toys at home. It is difficult to generalize specific knowledge, but children, as young as five have background information of a concrete nature, often linked to their favourite dinosaurs. They are also able to recall basic characteristics of individual dinosaurs and use their name correctly.

The moving robotic dinosaurs (animatronics) that are displayed both in the permanent gallery and in the temporary exhibitions are for nearly all children the first on the list of favourites-*Tyrannosaurus rex* being a really captivating one. What attracts children to the animatronics is their life like size, the movement of the head and tails and the realistic qualities. Even though, some younger children find *Tyrannosaurus rex* and the other big animatronics frightening, they are still eager to see it. It was the size in particular that frightened children but also the blood, movement, the eyes and the lights. For most, the encounter remains positive, with fear heightening the experience.

*'The first time my 5 year old went he was too scared –
but he went back up the path to look.
He was very pleased that he did' (mother, 2005)*

It is only a small minority that remain in their guardians' arms and do not dare look.

Fossil digs also appear to be very popular with the process of *looking for* the replica dinosaur bones being the exciting aspect. Children Museums in the States that had developed dinosaur dig confirm that they are always very popular with both staff and visitors. During the *Gobi Desert* exhibition at the Natural History Museum, almost everybody (95%) enjoyed the dig because it involved dinosaurs; it was fun, was a practical activity and gave the opportunity to learn together. Children appreciated the combination of the prehistory of the dinosaurs and the history of the dinosaur expeditions.

Models of big dinosaurs and full size skeletons are also popular. The size of models is an attraction but also a source of fear. Visitors prefer specimens to casts, requesting a clear distinction between them. Where fossils are used, drawings of skeleton increase understanding and help appreciate them.

In the front-end evaluation for *Dino Jaws*, the current temporary exhibition, teachers visiting dinosaur displays appreciate the emphasis on scientific processes. Children were keen to learn more about what dinosaurs ate and how it compared to their food. Many also wanted to know about teeth and their shape and use. Several mothers mentioned that for their younger children, linking information to their own lives and bodies would help their understanding and interest.

The summative evaluation for *Dino Jaws* is currently taking place with internal staff from Learning and Interpretation. It is qualitative and complements the quantitative feedback (exit surveys) organised by the Marketing Department. It uses a combination of research methods, in order to increase validity, reliability and accuracy. A sample of 100 families is tracked and 50 interviewed. In addition, 10 schools are tracked and five are visited at schools. Further data is collected through email or web questionnaires and peer review discussion groups.

The aim is to assess the degree to which *Dino Jaws* meets the visitor outcomes and whether it is appealing and accessible to its target audience (families with children four to 11 and primary school groups). More about it ...in another issue.