



**NatSCA**

Natural Sciences Collections Association

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## NatSCA News

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### Partnership infrastructure

- A steering group to define the high level objectives and outcomes of the campaign
- A BBC-led campaign delivery team to coordinate all aspects of campaign delivery, including liaison with external partners
- Two BBC-funded workstreams to mobilise and resource external partners, led by organisations with relevant expertise in mobilising participation in Communities, and with Children and Young People
- 12 regional delivery teams to coordinate the effective delivery of the campaign across the UK
- A partnership stakeholder group for regular consultation, advice and information sharing

### A few simple conclusions

- Start with the audience
- Keep it simple
- Make it purposeful and the impact tangible
- Work in partnership – both with your own sector, but also by looking outside to new partners

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### **Susie Fisher, Director, The Susie Fisher Group** **What do people want from a Natural History Gallery?**

*The Horniman Museum has a Natural History gallery of the old school, with wood and glass cases full of stuffed animals and a display structure untouched since the 1950's.*

*Committed now to refurbishing and restructuring, the Museum consulted its local audiences to find out how they felt about Natural History. What did they know, what was the shape of the subject in their minds, what were they looking for? Would anything be left of the old Victorian gallery? This paper explores the tight-rope walk between preserving the old, introducing the new and leaving the visitor delighted, thoughtful and informed about Natural History.*

#### *The Horniman has a Natural History Gallery of the Old School*

- It has barely changed since 1900. Even including a face-lift in 1950.
- It has a spectacular collection of Victorian stuffed animals and birds, all with their Latin names on tiny typed labels in mahogany and glass cases.
- There are organising principles e.g. Armour, Motion, but these are very hard to spot.
- It is all housed in a balconied and barrel-vaulted hall with the proportions of a small cathedral.
- The Horniman itself has an enviable relationship with its audience. It is beloved and used by the local community. One generation introduces it to the next, in a mixture of nostalgia and investment for the future. It is full of children.
- It offers much to engage people, an imaginative new Gallery of Musical Instruments, extensive park and gardens, an ethnographical collection and an aquarium.

But The Natural History Gallery is perceived by many as the heart of the Old Museum.

*question*                      *against this demanding background, what does a modern audience want from a natural history gallery?*

### **Picture the dilemma**

The gallery has become an icon in its own right.  
“It’s like a time warp, being in an Indiana Jones movie.”

Peoples' musings suggest that this is where they get in touch with their better selves.

"You come in here and it's calm and quiet. You've got time to think, just time to be. No one rushing you along."  
- Parent Visitor

Has it come to symbolise a seat of learning, a belief in the redemptive power of the old traditional institutions, in an older, more traditional society?

"I feel age. I feel it's old. I feel I'm walking into the past, it's the building. I just like the layout and everything, the art."  
- Visitor over 60

The imposing grandeur of the building combines with a reverence for learning to assume the proportions of a religion.

"In Milan I went into the big cathedral and had a similar experience." - Adult Visitor

*questions*

- *with so many symbolic issues tied up in the place, is any kind of change possible?*
- *how is natural history to assert itself against such a loaded background?*

### **Three useful audience segments emerge:**

1. Adults with children
2. Adults visiting without children
3. Teachers

The theory is that each of these is a state of mind and that people slip easily from one state of mind to the other. This means that we all have within us the desire to teach, to muse and to be gobsmacked by turns. This suggests that a gallery should be able to stimulate each of these experiences by turns. This leads to personal satisfaction of a high order.

### **1. Adults with children**

"I think the older they get, and each year you come, the more they'll see of it. That's why I don't have an issue with them walking round quickly"

- Parent visitor

#### What's the purpose of the visit?

To expose children to the learning of the Museum, to let them see the animals up close, to keep them amused, to set them on a path of learning and understanding.

#### What's the mood of the visit?

Running from one end to the other.

Stopping short, nose-to-nose with a strange animal.

Adults showing their own favourites to the children.

"Oh come and look at this, you'll like this!" Parent visitor

Children asking off the wall questions - "What do hedgehogs eat?" It's short, noisy, excited.

*implication*                      *this will be a cumulative process, many visits, a little at a time. children's' needs are paramount.*

### **2. Adults without children**

"We want to learn at our level and at our own pace. You want something to inspire you and look into it more." Adult visitor

"I'm not going to study something. I'm going to spend my time on something, which I like. I pick up bits

and pieces. I can't remember everything. Adult visitor

What's the purpose of the visit?

To do something good for yourself. Away from the usual blaring media.  
To explore, have things revealed, be engaged and fascinated. Taken out of yourself.

"I study on the internet and TV. Here I just walk round and enjoy." Adult visitor  
"I was in the fossils for ten minutes. I feel I'm doing a little something. Not just in front of the telly." Adult visitor

What's the mood of the visit?

Dreaming, light hearted, wandering, drifting. Time out, no pressure. Uplift, mysteries revealed. The unexpected. Exploring.

"You can have a little wander. Go round several times." Adult visitor  
"It's a nice change to see something different." Adult visitor

*implication*            *this is not a formal learning agenda. drifting and chance play a part. it is about sudden fascinations, mysteries revealed.*

**3. Teachers are on a mission**

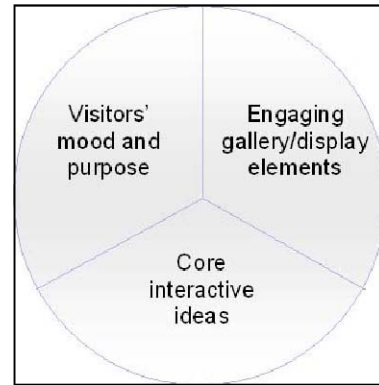
"As a teacher, you do certain topics at certain times of year. Can they have changing exhibitions?" Teacher

"They should group in habitat and show camouflage." Teacher

"They could have research areas upstairs." Teacher

What's the purpose of the visit?

To underpin the biology curriculum, to make the theory more real, concrete.  
To demonstrate particular principles.  
To have access to experts and high quality teaching aids.  
To see the real thing, the collections and build enthusiasm.



What's the mood of the visit?

Mind expanding, out of school, task orientated. Exciting. Intimidating. A big memorable day. Intellectual satisfaction for teachers themselves.

*implication*            *these are goal orientated visits leavened with the unexpected of the collections. everyone feels relieved, freer? if the goal can be achieved.*

What strong ideas emerge?

Seeing real animals close to.  
Seeing animals in their habitats.  
Exploring animals I might see in everyday life.  
Hands on experience for me.  
Vision bytes.

All of these lent themselves to all three agendas. They are the pillars on which the gallery interpretation can confidently rest.

Seeing real animals close to

“You can see what you’re studying in real life. You don’t get a chance to see things close up on TV. TV’s not real.” - Adult Visitor

“You can’t visualise the size of things. It’s good to see what they’re really like.”  
- Parent Visitor

Stuffed animals are essentially real animals. And this makes them precious. Their diversity leaves you awestruck.

You can see the size and the detail.

You can be ‘nose to nose’, with only a pane of glass between you.

You can see up close; fur, scales, spines, ears, eyes, noses, paws, tails.

You can gaze as long as you like.

Today’s media may blur the distinction between real and mythic animals (think ‘Lord of the Rings’). To see strangeness in the animals and to know they are real is potent against this background.

*implication            the museum’s stuffed collection is the only environment where visitors can be guaranteed real animals, ‘nose to nose’.*

Seeing animals in their habitats

“A badger doesn’t live in a glass case. Where it lives makes it interesting.” Parent Visitor

“They should have something visual behind, pictures of the landscape, the context. Get them asking questions about the environment.” Teacher

For all their advantages, stuffed animals are dead. Visitors want them brought to life, without losing the integrity of the account. This encourages the visitor to become an observer.

An evocation of habitat; vegetation, a view of the terrain, other creatures alongside.

A view of the animal moving, flying, attacking, eating.

Noises and smells, what call the animal makes.

The environment it faces at different times of day and what it does in it.

“You might have a little screen and see the bird in flight.” Parent Visitor

“Just to hear what the animal sounds like.” Parent Visitor

“It’s putting them in their natural setting is the most important.” Teacher

*implication            stuffed animals work well alongside technology and intelligent display techniques, which allow visitors to see the animal in life.*

Animals I might see

“Habitat. My kids don’t know what a hedgerow is. We get the history without getting the fundamental basics.” Teacher

For town children, farm animals and wild animals in the UK are almost as unfamiliar as the animals of the African Veldt. There is an added thrill to finding out about creatures you might actually be able to see in real life.

This extends to the creatures of the town also; pets, urban foxes, birds, insects. What’s needed here is a further degree of explanation, insight, and illustration. The relevance of these creatures is already established.

*implication            the animals on display can be everyday as well as exotic. there is a yawning gap in knowledge about their biology and behaviour.*

Hands on experience

“I think a room would be nice, to have an interactive section.” Parent Visitor

Most visitors are drifting around enjoying the ‘wow’ of the exhibits. Learning is ad hoc, informal.

Hands on experience is held to be the most effective way of focusing young people (and older) on a learning task. Popular are

Models to take apart and reassemble (e.g. bone structures).

Puzzles and challenges (touch the animal skins and group them by family; mammal, reptile, etc.).

Experiments (microscopes, differences between light and dark activity, etc.).

Living cultures (beehive, ant colony, pond life).

It is the doing and its attendant problem solving which generates the learning and the insight.

It is most effective when mediated by a kindly expert.

*implication*            *hands on is a complementary way of exploring the animals. it will work best when the tasks are related to the displays.*

Vision Bytes

‘See it in one’

The principle is the same as for sound bytes. The essence is that the visual display is rigged so that it clearly expresses a single idea. By looking at it, without words, the visitor can grasp the idea.

These vision bytes can become stepping stones for the gallery as a whole. The fundamental ideas are expressed unambiguously without words. The visitor cannot fail to ‘see’ the key ideas. The complexities can then be built on a firm foundation.

The easiest ideas to express in this way may be:

A sequence of events over time (e.g. evolution of the horse’s hoof).

A defined action (e.g. an owl catches a mouse).

Cause and effect (e.g. this fish dies out, that bird goes hungry).

*implication*            *vision bytes and sound bytes may be the preferred level of explanation for this generation. a compromise between wordy paragraphs (not read) and technical details (not understood).*

**Interpretation**

All these approaches are popular. The gallery that uses them will be entertaining and will engage. But the skill surely lies in linking them to the fundamental questions which a Natural History Gallery hopes to address. This is hard.

First we have to identify the questions which visitors raise themselves. These will be the way into the wider issues of Natural History in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

*What questions do everyday people raise?*

“It would be interesting to see the evolving of a particular species.” Visitor over 60

“Does anyone here believe in God? I don’t but I believe there’s something up there that started all this.”  
Parent Visitor

“I find myself drawn to the varieties that are extinct. I feel very sad about it.” Visitor over 60

**What lives on earth?**

This is about the full diversity of living things.  
Animals                      Humans                      Plant life                      Hard Remains (e.g. fossils)

**What kinds of environment do they live in?**

**How does life on earth change?**

Creation and Extinction.  
Evolution over time.  
The order of things e.g. numbers of large and small species, brain sizes, insects compared with mammals, etc.

*comment                      there seems a clear understanding that animals change over history but much less understanding of how the environment is involved in species adaptation.*

*What questions do teachers raise?*

“There is interdependence to teach and adaptation is tied to interdependence.”                      Teacher

**What lives on earth?**

Plant kingdom, animal kingdom, hard remains

**What is the range of habitats?**

Earth, sea, endangered?

**Who were the great naturalists?**

**How do living things adapt?**

This is the core question.

**How do you describe the web of interdependent ideas that answer this question?**

Habitat, food chains, life cycles, Evolution, Extinction, Creation.

**Formal subject areas all contribute to the core issue of adaptation**

Classification, Genetics, Form and Function, Animals and ageing, Micro organisms.

*comment                      teachers see an interdependent web of ideas founded on the core idea of adaptation. they argue that you can’t understand any one aspect fully unless you understand the rest.*

**The challenge is to communicate this web of ideas, centred on adaptation**

The teachers have the answers and they are couched in urgent unmistakable terms which can be under-

stood by anyone.

“There are questions about how the animals are changing.” Teacher

“How does the animal get its dinner?” Teacher

“The habitat has a knock on effect. If this fish goes, what does that bird eat?”Teacher

*comment - this is a dynamic view of natural history. everything is in the process of change. There are causes and effects. Human beings also contribute to cause and effect.*

### **So how, ideally, would we tie all these strands together?**

Are we looking for:

A habitat which shows where an animal sits in relation to his dinner?

A hands on experiment to change the environment of a living colony to see if you can change its behaviour?

A vision byte to show how a tadpole becomes a frog?

### **And how will it all look in this world of internet and computers?**

Horniman visitors were not, by and large, impressed with garish metal and plastic.

“It can be quite a subtle thing. It doesn’t have to be too, you know, all lights, buzzing and clashing.” Parent Visitor

They wanted to preserve the feel of Nature itself. As though they were Naturalists observing animals in their habitats. Natural materials are a help.

Displays were asked to create the illusion of natural environments e.g. an English woodland, the jungle at night, sea life.

And they would like confident stage craft to help achieve this; Ambient sound, Dramatic lighting to mimic time of day, Video illustrations, video backdrop, Living specimens, including plant life,

Water interactives were interpreted as hands on objects and challenges, not simply pushing buttons and playing with machines.

*Comment - a natural history gallery which feels in tune with nature has a certain pleasing unity of purpose.*

### **And the Horniman dilemma? Would they be allowed to change anything?**

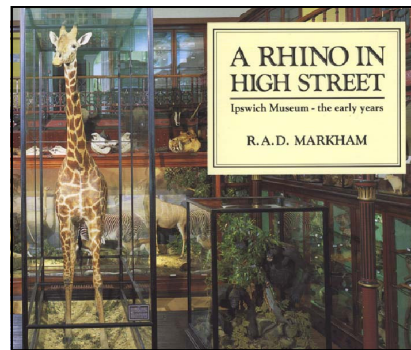
Well, good sense prevailed.

Consider two ends of the spectrum.





Paris, Modern



Ipswich, traditional

- Paris was judged too arty and alienating
- Ipswich was a disappointment, nothing new
- Horniman should pursue a middle path, keeping its cathedral architecture, the icons, which reassure about scholarship and integrity...but with a trusting invitation to develop the display of its wonderful collections, just as we have been discussing here.

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**Simon Chaplin, Senior Curator, Hunterian Museum, Royal College of Surgeons**  
**Beautiful bits that bob: redisplaying John Hunter's collection in the 21st century**

*The Hunterian Museum at the Royal College of Surgeons in London re-opened in February 2005 after a three-year, £3.1million facelift. At its heart is the collection of the 18th century surgeon and naturalist John Hunter, with over three thousand preparations of human and comparative anatomy and pathology. This paper explores the interpretation and design strategies which the project team followed to present an unusual and highly specialised scientific collection to a new public audience.*

**Opportunities and challenges**

- The Hunterian museum houses a unique collection of 52,000 objects.
- It holds important historical resources with 3,500 Hunterian specimens, 7,000 instruments and 500 paintings and drawings.
- It also houses important scientific resources, including important primate material and human and comparative anatomy and pathology.

**Challenges**

- The infrastructure of the building was outdated
- The environment and security of the building was poor.
- The space was inflexible
- The building was physically inaccessible
- The Interpretation of displays and exhibits was poor.
- The design was confused
- The museum was intellectually inaccessible

**The Hunterian Museum Project**

Challenge: to make the collections accessible, relevant and secure for our target audiences