

Natural Neighbors: Encouraging Cooperation between Conservation Agencies, Museums, and Similar Institutions to Introduce More Urban People to the Natural World

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URBAN PEOPLE NEED TO SPEND TIME IN NATURE FOR THEIR OWN GOOD, and because nature conservation nationally and globally depends on their support: in an urbanizing world, people will value nature only if they care about nature where they live. In metropolitan regions, several kinds of institutions, along with conservation agencies, are designed to educate and sensitize people to the natural world, but they rarely work together toward that purpose. The institutions include natural history museums, science centers, zoos, aquariums, botanic gardens, and museums of cities and regions. The conservation agencies include those responsible for nature reserves and wildlife management.

Cross-promotion is the simplest and easiest way for such institutions and agencies to cooperate. For example, a museum can provide visitors with information about natural places to explore nearby, and visitor centers in protected areas can direct people to museums. In most cases, this doesn't happen. To correct this, natural history museums and similar institutions can do the following:

- include more and better exhibits about local and regional nature,
- direct their visitors to “real nature” nearby,
- stock and promote a good selection of natural history guides to their regions,
- work with conservation agencies in engaging with schools, universities, and underprivileged neighborhoods, and
- link their websites to one another.

Conversely, managers of protected areas can find ways to inform their visitors of opportunities to learn more about nature at nearby museums and similar institutions.

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The project

The Natural Neighbors project is working to encourage more cooperation between such organizations toward these ends. It is being carried out by InterEnvironment Institute in cooperation with the Urban Specialist Group of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, with the support of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority. The project follows up a recommendation in *Urban Protected Areas: Profiles and Best Practice Guidelines* (Trzyna 2014), a volume in the IUCN Best Practice Guidelines Series.

I began by collecting examples of cross-promotion, or the lack of it, through IUCN and other networks, discussing the subject at meetings of museum and conservation professionals, and visiting 36 museums and similar institutions in six countries. I also visited many protected areas in urban regions (Trzyna 2015).

General findings

There are fine examples of what natural history museums and similar institutions can do to encourage their visitors to spend time in local natural areas. Some simpler but effective things require minimal investments of time or money. These institutions have captive audiences, but at most of them, unfortunately, this is a lost opportunity.

Many institutions devoted to educating and sensitizing the urban public about the natural world pay little attention to their local and regional environments. The major ones often see their roles as global, rather than local.

No examples were found of protected area visitor centers publicizing nearby museums or similar institutions.

Exhibits

More and better exhibits about local and regional nature are needed in natural history museums and similar institutions. In many cases, exhibits in these institutions focus on the exotic, giving visitors the impression that nature is someplace else. Entrances to zoos, for example, can feature buildings in pseudo-African style with signs in Swahili and piped-in tribal music.

In some cases, there is virtually nothing about the natural environment of the region. Most such institutions are organized by kinds of animals and plants, rather than by habitat, biome, region, or country. Even where there are exhibits of species found in the locality or region, they may not be labeled as such. Here are good examples of what *can* be done:

- The Oakland Museum of California's 25,000-square-foot Gallery of California Natural Sciences focuses on seven places that depict the state's ecological diversity, including Oakland.
- The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County has a Nature Lab with exhibits on native wildlife and invasive species in the Los Angeles area. A large interactive wall map points to wildlife species found in the built environment, rather than natural areas.
- The California Science Center in Los Angeles has an "L.A. Zone" in its Ecosystems section with displays on water, waste, energy, and wildlife. A large wall map of the region has photos of a few native plants and animals found in the built environment, but does not tie them to natural areas that can be visited.
- The American Museum of Natural History in New York City has a Hall of New York State Environments focusing on Stissing Mountain and the farming village of Pine Plains, 90 miles from the city.
- Among museums of cities and regions, the Chicago History Museum has exhibits on over-trapping of fur animals and deforestation in the nineteenth century.

- One of the Hong Kong Museum of History’s eight large galleries is The Natural Environment.
- At the Oakland Zoo, a planned California Trail exhibit “will honor our state’s most revered wildlife and enable visitors . . . to understand how the stories of California’s plants and animals are actually our stories too.”
- The Los Angeles Zoo has a California Condor Rescue Zone, an immersive, facilitated play space for primary school-age children.
- Aquariums are often focused on their immediate environments. The Monterey Bay Aquarium in California relates mainly to Monterey Bay and its submarine canyon.
- The Aquarium of the Pacific in Long Beach, in metropolitan Los Angeles, focuses on the marine environments of Southern California, Baja California (Mexico), and the Pacific Ocean more generally.
- Also in metropolitan Los Angeles, the 85-acre Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont is planted with California native species by region, and promotes understanding and conservation of these plants and their use in horticulture.

Information about nearby natural areas and other museums

Museums and similar institutions, as well as protected areas, rarely tell their visitors about each other, although this can be done easily and can benefit all involved.

Once they become interested in what they have seen in a natural history museum or similar institution, visitors can be directed to natural areas close by to see the “real thing.” This can be done by staff or with maps, models of terrain, kiosks, websites, apps, or brochures. Conversely, visitor centers in protected areas can publicize nearby museums and similar institutions where they can learn more about nature. Finally, such institutions can publicize each other; for example, a natural history museum can post information about nearby aquariums, botanic gardens, and zoos.

This is where almost all of the institutions visited fail, although little cost need be involved. The reason given by museum professionals is that their institutions compete with each other for funds from many of the same donors. Here are examples of what *can* be accomplished:

- In Chicago, on summer weekends, rangers from nearby Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore are posted at the entrance to the Field Museum of Natural History to show visitors what they will find at the lakeshore and how they can get there.
- At the Oakland Museum of California, panels in the Gallery of California Natural Sciences include a map and information about the nearby East Bay Regional Parks, which include many natural areas.
- At the Peggy Notebaert Museum in Chicago, panels with maps and photos direct visitors to protected areas within a short driving distance of the city.

Books

Selling books about nature in the city or region is usually a lost opportunity; so is selling toys and souvenirs with a connection to local nature. Few stores at natural history museums or similar institutions sell more than a token selection, if that, of natural history guides to their localities or regions, even when many such titles are in print. Typically they carry generic nature books for children.

In Los Angeles, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County sells a few nature guides focused on California. The Los Angeles Zoo and the California Science Center have none. In Chicago, the Field Museum and the Brookfield Zoo once had serious natural science bookstores

that attracted graduate students from local universities, but these were closed some years ago. The Bronx Zoo in New York City carries only generic titles, mainly for children, although there are many nature guides available for New York City and its region.

It may be that only a very small fraction of visitors will be interested in such publications, but a very small fraction of 1.2 million (in the case of the Field Museum), 1.3 million (the California Science Center) or 1.9 million (the Bronx Zoo) is still a large number and is certain to include people whose lives will be changed by reading and using these books. Good examples of what *can* be accomplished:

- The Monterey Bay Aquarium’s store displays many field guides on California’s marine and terrestrial species and ecosystems. It also carries many of the books of John Steinbeck, who wrote about the Monterey area and its natural environments in such novels as *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row*.
- Although it is small (5,000 square feet) and has only 70,000 visits a year, the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History, in Santa Cruz, south of San Francisco, prides itself on the broad selection of books it sells, making the museum store “*the* place for hard-to-find publications on natural history.” This in a university town with no shortage of bookstores.
- The bookshop at the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont has many titles on California natural history, especially about plants and birds.

Other onsite activities

In addition to tours and onsite events, some institutions include drop-in centers or natural or quasi-natural areas. Almost all institutions offer tours of their sites to school and other groups, and hold events such as nature festivals. Depending on the content of exhibits and events, these can be useful in introducing people to local nature. School groups account for most such visits, and staff confess that they have limited value: two-thirds of these trips are taken up by logistics, and students tend to pay more attention to each other than to exhibits. Public events are attended mainly by people already interested in nature. Good examples include the following:

- The Natural History Museum in London has the drop-in Centre for UK Biodiversity, which helps visitors with public identification of specimens, research, and equipment, such as microscopes.
- Along a restored bank of the adjoining Bronx River, the Bronx Zoo has the half-mile-long Mitsubishi Riverwalk, with signs identifying the many birds and mammals found there.
- The Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont has the Grow Native Nursery, which sells and helps gardeners with California native plants.

Activities in metropolitan areas

From field trips to engaging with schools, universities, and underprivileged neighborhoods, natural history museums and similar institutions have opportunities to work with protected areas on several levels. Good examples of such connections include the following:

- In the Chicago region, several natural history museums and similar institutions, as well as conservation agencies, are among the over 300 members of the Chicago Wilderness Alliance, which works on four fronts: restoration of natural areas, green infrastructure, climate change, and “leave no child inside.”
- In Tucson, Arizona, the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum cooperated with the National

Geographic Society and Saguaro National Park in putting on a BioBlitz, an intense period of biological surveying.

- The New York City Museum School, an elite public high school established in 1994 that has 500 students, draws on the resources of the city's science, art, and cultural museums.

Electronic media

Websites of museums and similar institutions, and those of protected areas, could easily provide links to each other, but they rarely do. On the other hand, things made possible by advancing technology are being given more attention from museums, to the point where exhibits are becoming ever more distant from real nature. Such fashionable technology often fails to take into account visitors' interests or needs. For instance, QR codes in exhibits often get near-zero downloads; the reason given by museum experts is information overload.

Web-based park directories could include natural history museums and similar institutions, but usually don't. Examples of such directories are Oh Ranger!, a GIS directory of parks in the United States available on the web or as an app, and LAMountains.com, an online guide to parks and trails in the northwestern part of the greater Los Angeles area. In both cases, the only museums listed are those within parks.

Promoting nature conservation and sustainability

Almost all of the institutions visited actively promote nature conservation in their regions, as well as sustainability more broadly. These are examples of institutions doing just that:

- Zoos Victoria in Australia, under the banner of "Love Your Locals," is committed to helping save 20 local animals from extinction through captive breeding, reintroduction, research, and raising their profile locally and nationally.
- The American Alliance of Museums, whose membership includes all the types of institutions mentioned in this report, has been active in promoting sustainability standards and best practices, for example, in its 2014 publication *Museums, Environmental Sustainability and Our Future*.
- Many of the institutions visited include climate change messages in their exhibits and outreach. For example, the Field Museum has a Chicago Community Climate Action Toolkit in print and on its website. In London's Science Museum, "Climate Changing Stories," spread throughout the museum, focus on personal behavior.

Promoting good eating habits

Childhood obesity is a serious public health problem in the United States and many other countries. At some point in their scholastic careers, almost all students will visit at least one of the kinds of institutions described in this report. Yet few of these institutions take this opportunity to offer healthy choices in their eating places.

Typical are the Los Angeles Zoo, which has a prominent Churro Factory, and the Brookfield Zoo near Chicago, which features the Midwestern equivalent, funnel cakes (both foods are made of deep fried dough sprinkled with sugar.) Also common are institutions that have onsite branches of fast-food chains.

A pioneer in offering healthy food choices is the Monterey Bay Aquarium, where the café operates with the slogan "Savor sustainability: we source our ingredients locally from farmers, ranchers, and fishermen who use sustainable practices." As part of First Lady Michelle Obama's Let's Move! initiative "to get kids moving and eating healthy food," the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services has a program called Let's Move! Museums & Gardens. None of the Cali-

ifornia institutions described in this report are members. Museums and similar institutions could learn from an initiative of the Institute at the Golden Gate, Food for the Parks, which aims to expand availability of nutritious, local, organic, and fresh food in U.S. national parks.

Next steps

Project results to date are being shared in the nature conservation and museum communities. In California, a steering committee is being formed, to include representatives of conservation agencies, museums, and similar institutions in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. At the international level, next steps will be decided in consultation with the IUCN and key museums and conservation agencies, especially those which are IUCN Members.

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