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Journal of Natural Science Collections

Title: Creative Collaborations: Humanities programming in a natural history museum

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Source: Wood Finkle, P. & Innella Maiers, V. (2022). Creative Collaborations: Humanities programming in a natural history museum. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, Volume 10, 107 - 114.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/2730>

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Creative Collaborations: Humanities programming in a natural history museum

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Received: 23rd July 2021

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Accepted: 11th Nov 2021

Citation: Finkle, P. W., and Maers, V. I. 2022. Creative Collaborations: Humanities programming in a natural history museum. *Journal of Natural Science Collections*. 10. pp. 107-114.

Abstract

Many museums seek new opportunities to creatively collaborate while sharing their story. The Werner Wildlife Museum at Casper College, located in central Wyoming, has actively engaged in creative initiatives that focus on humanities programming with primary, secondary, and higher education students majoring in diverse disciplines. Once seen as a museum “full of dead things” the museum is working to encourage a new perception as a place for active learning through humanities programming, as detailed in this article.

Keywords: Natural history, humanities programming, wildlife museum, collaboration, museum studies, arts

Introduction

The Werner Wildlife Museum at Casper College has been undertaking initiatives, such as humanities programming, to connect more students with its natural history collections. Located in the central United States, in Wyoming, the Werner is one of two institutional museums. The Werner Wildlife Museum and its collections were gifted to the College 50 years ago by rancher Herman Werner (1892-1973), who collected specimens in diverse geographical locations from Australia to India and the Rocky Mountain west, which surrounds Casper College. As a recreational hunter, Werner collected specimens throughout his life joining safaris in Tanganyika (The United Republic of Tanzania) and chartering a ship, with crew, to reach Polar Bear off Spitsbergen Island

(Norway). These specimens were considered trophies. The 11' foot tall polar bear (*Ursus maritimus*, Phipps 1774) was ranked 30th in the Boone and Crockett records of big game animals when donated in 1973 with several other polar bear specimens (Howard, 1973, p. 4). Mr. Werner spoke of his hunt in Alaska noting, “If anyone is interested in fresh air and a thrill, he should take on a polar bear” (*Casper Star-Tribune*, 1965, p. 7). These trophies weighed between 800-1,400 pounds and today, dazzle the eyes of many visitors, especially young children.

Early plans for the museum proposed exhibiting Wyoming wildlife with commissioned landscape murals highlighting “life zones” from mountains to



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prairies and the icy northern home of these bears (*Casper Star-Tribune*, 1970, p. 24). His idea for a museum was a response to “requests of some of the city’s schools and other groups to see his wildlife trophies, which first prompted him to think of a permanent repository for the trophies and other outstanding trophies that would be of interest in the community” (*Casper Star-Tribune*, 1965, p. 7). The City of Casper donated the land and Mr. Werner financially supported the construction effort of a 5,000 square foot building (Figure 1). The idea of sharing the natural history collections space with art was one of Werner’s initial ideas and the museum housed exhibitions of art by members of the Casper Artists’ Guild in early years. That practice was later discontinued but has been revisited today to engage student visitors in connecting with the specimens. In 1965 Werner stated, “I sincerely hope that this museum will be a point of interest and attraction. It will be educational. I hope to have literature, books and pictures and so forth, that people can read and acquaint themselves more with wildlife and what wildlife means to young people growing up today” (*Casper Star-Tribune*, 1965, p. 7). Humanities programming at the Werner Wildlife Museum allows this connection, that Werner foresaw, between primary, secondary, and college students seeking emic understanding of their world.

Museum collections and staffing resources

The museum collections were initially assembled from multiple sources inclusive of Herman Werner’s trophies, the Ullery Collection, the Utzinger collection of 15 Rocky Mountain Bighorn

Sheep from the city of Casper, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, avian taxidermist Nate Gibson, and donations from Casper College faculty. In the spring of 1977, the Werner Wildlife Museum lower level was expanded with a diorama containing North American pronghorn antelope and a badger in a prairie life zone (*Casper Star-Tribune*, 1977). Alumni contributed as well; a former Casper College Zoology student donated a platypus (*Ornithorhynchus anatinus*, Shaw 1799) and other examples of Australian mammals (*Casper Star-Tribune*, 1980).

Today, the museum houses just over 400 taxidermied wildlife specimens, 90 percent of which are on exhibit. The large majority of them are from North America. While much of the collection was initially donated 50 years ago, there have been many additional acquisitions including an albino mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*, Rafinesque 1817), an endangered Black-footed ferret (*Mustela nigripes*, Audubon & Bachman 1851) and most recently, a North American sheep “grand slam” (Dall Sheep, *Ovis dalli* Nelson 1884); (Rocky Mountain Bighorn Sheep, *Ovis canadensis* Shaw 1804); (Stone Sheep, *Ovis dalli stonei* J. A. Allen 1897); (Desert Bighorn Sheep, *Ovis canadensis nelsoni* Merriam 1897).

The museum has three staff members, two of which are part time and an advisory board. Part-time staff members perform visitor services functions as the “face” of the museum, providing tours for primary school groups, drafting the museum newsletter and developing programs such as the lecture series and the summer programming.



Figure 1. Werner Wildlife Museum 2015. (Photo India Hayford)

Additional responsibilities include collections concerns such as cleaning the mounts and maintaining the database. The museum director, whose office is located in the Tate Geological Museum at Casper College, develops new programming, liaises with college faculty, and is concerned with budgetary and institutional matters. As with most museums, staff are “wearing many hats” and thus, bigger programming ideas face limitations. However, partnering with college faculty in areas outside the School of Science has opened the door to understanding the collections in new manners. Beyond the scientific didactic knowledge provided in the exhibitions, humanities faculty are posing questions about the collection itself. How and why were the specimens collected? By whom? What is the human connection? What is our emic reaction to inquiry and observation of the natural world? Probing epistemological context can help students engage with collections.

Learning through museum collections

Through the centuries, scientific collections at institutions of higher learning have inspired students. For example, Rembrandt van Rijn as a young student at Leiden University would have experienced the Hortus botanicus where the tulip was first cultivated; tulips are realistically painted in the oil painting *Saskia as Flora* (van Putten and Schaepe, 2019). The Hortus botanicus also held cabinets of curiosities inclusive of animals, skeletons, and natural specimens. Perhaps this inspired the room of objects including biological collections of shells and that Rembrandt kept in his Amsterdam home when a working artist. In the 19th century, the Paris Botanic Garden collection offered reference for the exotic landscape backgrounds in works by Henri Rousseau as he learned to paint.

Centuries later, learning through collections continues; museum educators and teachers study and use myriad theoretical frameworks to facilitate significant understanding of the natural world (Black, 2007; Hohenstein and Moussouri, 2017; Genoways, ed., 2006; Hilton, Watkins-Colwell, and Huber, 2021; McCarthy, 2020). Museum educators can also find publications for training their staff and docents (Johnson, et. al, 2009; Talboys 2005). Museum conferences and organizations are instrumental in the exchange of ideas for teaching through collections. An example is the Natural History Education DemoCamp (2020) through The Society for the Preservation of Natural History Collections, aimed at sharing methods for museum educators to facilitate more learning opportunities utilizing their museum’s collections. Other examples of science programming based on

museum collections, developed by museum educators, can also be found online including resources through museums such as the American Museum of Natural History in New York (American Museum of Natural History, 2021).

At the Werner Wildlife Museum, programs to engage the community, developed by staff with a biology background, included a monthly lecture series highlighting the work of both professional and community scientists as well as a children’s education program that was held in the backyard during the summer months. The Werner Wildlife Museum has also traditionally worked with teachers, especially from Casper College. In past decades, the museum hosted a curator from the Biology department and worked with Casper College science classes to host Wildlife Management and Environmental Science classes.

The intersection of art and science can also be found in some museum programs today. An example of community adult education at Harvard Museum of Natural History that involves the arts is *Sketching and Mindfulness*, “for deepening mindful awareness of our surroundings, and how mindful awareness can enrich... sketching practice” (Harvard Museum of Natural History, 2021). Other museums include art such as the *Birds of America* collection by John James Audubon at the Natural History Museum in London, which can help visitors frame their understanding of birds in natural settings through a different modality than a diorama or exhibition case. An example at the Wales National Museum was an installation titled *NOMORPLASTIC* sea plastic displays, which allowed “working with young people to make space for activism in the museum” (National Museum of Wales, 2021). This was considered an artistic response to the problem, engaging students to look closer at their world. The natural world is vast and enticing. Nature surrounds and engulfs us, even in urban settings, but few people really take the time and effort to study the natural world around them. Natural history museums can bridge that gap and the Werner Wildlife Museum staff wanted to expand beyond their traditional audience and engage students through humanities disciplines such as the visual arts, English and communication, and museum studies.

A shift to learning in the humanities with museum collections

In an effort to reach new audiences and expand the museum’s engagement with students, an in-depth review of the history of the collection at the Werner Wildlife Museum was begun but there

was the problematic issue of limited didactic information on the specimens, which would limit some academic probes of the collection. Taking another road to engagement, exploring an individual's response to the collections, yielded a different avenue of inquiry and learning - through the humanities. Stakeholders considered the work of theorists, such as Falk (2013) on how visitors make meaning, and Roppola's (2012) concept of "broadening". After also extensively studying visitor experiences, Roppola (2012) found four processes including framing, resonating, channeling and broadening as ways that people interface with exhibitions. Broadening is "context-related meaning" made by visitors "across multiple planes"; visitors become "co-participants in the creation of discourses" (Roppola, 2012, p. 216; 256). As Roppola (2012) stated, "Taxidermied specimens can be decontextualized from the natural world" and to alleviate this phenomenon, necessitates "an interrelationship within a broader scheme, within a story" (p. 228). The object experience and the affective manner in which the object can be understood is part of this theory. The humanities programs used at the Werner Wildlife Museum, discussed below, offer concrete ways to embed the specimen in our respective stories. College students, as an audience that is striving to learn, tell their stories, and consistently trying to "connect", are ideally suited to this pedagogy.

This type of expanded use of collections has also been recently developed at the University of Wyoming Art Museum. The Pat Guthrie Special Exhibition Teaching Gallery project involves object based learning for college students from various University of Wyoming majors. Faculty select works of art from the museum collection that relate to their specific course outcomes. In the fall of 2021, this included courses in environmental studies, chemistry, history, anthropology, and geology (University of Wyoming Art Museum, 2021). Students at Brown University even reimaged the "lost" natural history collection of the Jenks Museum through the lens of art and history, as a catalyst for understanding the history of museums and visitor engagement (Lubar, 2017).

Researching collaborations

To glean how other colleges were using the collection for object-based learning, and to investigate humanities programming at other institutions, Museum Director, Patti Wood Finkle, and Museum Studies Professor Valerie Innella Maiers reached out to the education staff at the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A) seeking to better understand, not only the practical applications of

such a program, but also to gain an understanding of their development and creation. Colleagues at the V&A offered guidance and advice, which were instrumental in the conceptual development and inclusion of this concept into the current Museum Studies curriculum. The backpack program at the V&A allows families to engage with new and permanent exhibits without the need for an age-appropriate tour or tour guide. They come with trails and activities for a specific age range and are free for visitors to check out using an ID for collateral. Habitat/travel bags, as exemplified by the V&A, were discussed. These types of backpacks encourage families to think about different locations and have items to help "transport them" to another location. There was a brief brainstorming session on creating a South American travel bag in conjunction with the quetzal specimen that could include a rainstick to mimic the sounds of rain, maps to discuss travel routes, and hats and gloves appropriate to the environment. These props could assist a variety of learners (audio, tactile, even aroma, in theory) and a variety of ages to engage with the exhibits in a new way. It was proposed that younger learners may enjoy the dress up aspect, while older siblings might enjoy plotting a route on the map. It was also revealed that while ages 6-7 make the most use of the backpacks at the V&A, it seems that they helped the families of the under 5 age group stay focused longer than those of the same age who didn't use a backpack. Other relevant topics covered appropriate age ranges for backpacks, developing activities, and looking for low-cost items that were both easy to clean and durable.

Based on this research coming back to Casper College, museum studies students developed a lesson plan to create parameters for visitor usage and an activity to engage and educate museum guests about museum specimens. These practical exercises for future museum professionals create opportunities for learning about natural history collections in tandem with cultural history and practice.

Using these interactions, Casper College museum studies students were prompted to create lesson plans for "education backpacks" focusing on specimens, such as the resplendent Quetzal (Figure 2), which stands out from many other collection specimens, having been collected 100 years ago. Praxis was connected with theory, such as Howard Gardner's (1985) theory of multiple intelligences, in designing the resources, to increase accessibility for users of the backpacks. Increasing accessibility, cultivating understanding of the natural world, and seeking to understand how



Figure 2. Quetzal, *Pharomachrus mocinno*, WM00285, La Llave 1832.

the collections were established, with all of the inherent problems of that process, are concerns for the Werner Wildlife Museum.

Humanities and creative collaborations at the Werner Wildlife Museum

The Werner Wildlife Museum has now been exploring new avenues to diversify how the collections are utilized, especially by the modern college student, beyond the traditional science programming.

Visual arts

New collaborations include co-hosting various events with the Visual Arts department to bring students to the museum, for the first time, as well as working with instructors' pedagogy. For exercises in learning about creating forms in three-dimensional space, art students in a sculpture class created wire "sketches" of the

specimens in the museum galleries. In a drawing seminar, students brought their drawing pads and explored specimen grouping. In another example, ceramics classes visited the museum and gained inspiration from the exhibits. Working both in the museum to sketch or photograph their specimen, they returned to the studio to begin creating their piece. Students revisit the museum on multiple occasions to view the specimen or to ask the staff questions. This has yielded both exhibitions of the ceramic art in the museum and in other locations with a natural setting such as along the Platte River Trail in Casper. (Figure 3) This art collaboration, initially only open to students, has grown into two professional juried art shows facilitated by the museum each academic year. The museum issues a statewide call for artists with a wildlife or nature theme inclusive of fine art in the fall, and craft pieces such as needlework and leather working in the spring. The staff have worked to



Figure 3. Ceramic art installed at the Werner Wildlife Museum. (Photo Patti Wood Finkle)



Figure 4. Poetry, Pottery, and Paintings Poster, Casper College.

cultivate relationships with local artists, particularly art students, and also with others from around the state in order to bring more artistic diversity to the show (Figure 4. *Poetry, Pottery, and Paintings* Poster, Casper College).

English and communication

Another creative collaboration was established with the Casper College Department of English. through a collaborative process, faculty provided

workshops for students and the community in a program titled, the *Werner Wildlife Museum's Writers Workshop*. The idea originated with a program given by the American Museum of Western Art (2018), who invited a writer's group to their facility to be inspired by the art. The Werner Wildlife Museum's director realized the potential for a similar program and partnered with the Casper College English department for a new winter program that highlighted the museum's collections as well as invited a new and unique (to Casper College) opportunity for students to engage with each other outside of the classroom. Faculty facilitated the workshops, choosing topics that interested and inspired them, increasing their engagement with the participants in the evening programs.

In one workshop, the faculty member taught "reductive writing" by taking pieces of literature, magazine articles, pages from books, and other media and subtracting the language that wasn't deemed necessary by the workshop participant. Pages were appropriated and re-imagined leaving an entirely new piece, built upon an original work. Another faculty member, who is a published wildlife writer, talked about the genera and gave both critiques on pieces produced in his workshop as well as advice on submitting articles to wildlife magazines. After each semester, the Museum published these creative endeavors in a booklet that was produced with the Casper College Public Relations department. (Figure 5) For several Casper College students aspiring to be writers, this was their first publication.

Museum studies

Casper College Museum Studies students also worked with the Werner Wildlife Museum to learn about curating an art exhibition; including the issues of creating knowledge, appropriating culture and/or identity, and manners of exposing

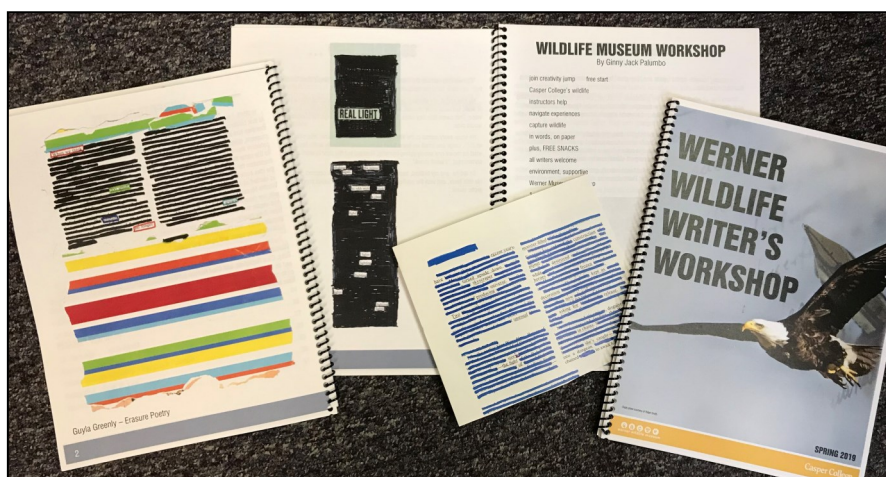


Figure 5. Werner Wildlife Writer's Workshop publication and example pieces. (Photo Patti Wood Finkle)

personal worldviews when drafting signage. When writing catalog entries for each artwork, along with researched biographies of the painters, students asked themselves: “How does the artist’s conceptualization of the composition relate to the artist’s connection with nature?” and “What might resonate with the viewers in their understanding of that environment?”. Revealing and explaining their personal understanding was important to the narrative. For the opening of the exhibition, students invited faculty and students from other academic departments to offer activities from star observations to poetry reading. Additionally, a secondary school teacher planned an education activity that linked natural science and art further strengthening the humanities collaborations seen throughout the program.

Primary and secondary education

As these creative collaborations have grown, more primary and secondary teachers have started using the Werner Wildlife Museum for humanities programs. Another program, that was developed by a local kindergarten/first grade (5-7 year olds) school teacher with museum staff, is the “Wildlife Presentations with Woods Learning Center” night. The primary school teacher wanted to encourage her students’ writing and oral speaking skills in conjunction with first grade curriculum outcomes, with a topic that would interest the entire class. She reached out the staff at the Werner to see if there were learning opportunities beyond the traditional museum tour and together they developed a plan to have the students visit the museum, identify and research a specific attribute of an animal (habitat, diet, appearance, adaptations, etc.), write a one paragraph report, and present their findings to friends and family at an evening open house event. These students learn new vocabulary, to write in complete sentences, how to face their audience when presenting, and the importance of encouraging each other. The museum facilitates the research and the open house, providing punch and cookies. In return, the Werner has more than 200 visitors for each open house, and sees dozens of new people each year, many of them families of the young scholars who love to tell staff about “their ” animals and recount all that they learned. At a local secondary school, fine arts faculty have brought their classes weekly to sharpen drawing skills using the displayed specimens as models.

Future creative collaborations

Future initiatives for the Werner Wildlife Museum include ideas that will allow the collection to grow as well as provide immersive visitor interactions.

Environmental Science

Currently, the staff and board are exploring the creation and maintenance of a wild space near the museum that would feature native plants to attract local fauna. While this idea is not unique to the Werner, certainly it has been championed by larger institutions for years, it is an idea that has not been explored in Wyoming where wildlife seamlessly converges on campus, from wild turkeys, antelope, and deer to fox and ground squirrels. The idea was born out of the desire to teach people the difference between native and non-native plants in the area and to attract local wildlife for viewing. The closest similar space is located in Cheyenne, Wyoming just over two and a half hours away, by car. The space is a free-standing Children’s Garden in a city park that incorporates both native and non-native plants into an interactive space, but it is only accessible during certain hours and is not accessible to wildlife, with the exception of birds and a few squirrels. The Werner space will be accessible 24 hours a day, rain or shine, to people and wildlife. It will provide a space for visitors to walk, and can be utilized as an outdoor classroom space for primary, secondary, and higher education classes. Creating this new “gallery”, a tactile space full of scent and textures, allows for the touch of non-toxic native grasses and plants, thereby meeting the needs of differently abled visitors. The project should spark further programming both with the museum and the natural space, especially for courses in the School of Science and the School of Fine Arts and Humanities that have an environmental scope, such as the Environmental Literature course.

Travel and tourism

A future program for students of higher education in the Casper College Outdoor Tourism and Recreation major in the School of Business and Industry could consider eco-tourism and the toll on some sites but economic benefits to communities. Thus, opportunities to connect to the natural world, collaborate creatively, and learn about.

Conclusion

The Werner Wildlife Museum at Casper College aspires to create new and innovative learning opportunities. Through thoughtful collaborations, such as faculty directed and facilitated programming within the humanities, the museum has expanded its offerings, created new partnerships, and brought the natural world to a new generation of visitors.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following people for their part in inspiring our research on this topic. Initial conversations with Alice Bednarova, Learning Producer at the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as Dr. Helen Chatterjee and Dr. Alice Stevenson, both of the University College London gave us a basis to build a new collaborative concept. Additional collaborative concepts came from the Mountain Plains Museums Association and the "Writing the West" Writer's Workshop created by the American Museum of Western Art and the Lighthouse Writers Workshop.

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