

Symposium Title: *Civically engaged natural history museums: transforming public programmes to address societal challenges*

Tuesday 7th June, 2-330pm

Symposium Chair: Jack Ashby, University Museum of Zoology, Cambridge / NatSCA

People are increasingly looking to public institutions such as museums to help make sense of the civic and environmental challenges that we are facing. The ongoing impacts of Covid-19 – in particular on wellbeing and social inequality – have made it all the more urgent that museums engage with discourse around these issues, and that they actively contribute to solutions.

Some museums are rising to this new challenge for the sector, innovating in their public programmes to use their collections to effectively engage public groups on issues that are important to them individually and to society as a whole. While there are excellent examples of this work within natural science institutions, art and social history sectors appear to have been ahead of the game with this emerging civically engaged practice. In the age of Extinction Rebellion and Black Lives Matter we need to ask ourselves how we can use our collections to have positive social impact and to respond to wider civic needs and priorities, demonstrating their relevance to the challenges faced by society and the natural world.

This symposium, organised by the Natural Sciences Collections Association, will look at how public programming across natural history institutions and the wider museum sector is responding to and engaging public audiences with three key civic agendas:

1. health and wellbeing;
2. representation, decolonisation and social injustice; and
3. the climate and ecological crisis.

We will discuss how participants can identify ways in which their existing work can fit into this practice – and how we can identify and nurture good practice – with the aim of placing natural science collections at the heart of civically engaged practice. There will be practical examples as well as wider scene-setting, with plenty of opportunity for discussion.

1. 2-2.15pm

Introducing the 'civically engaged natural history museums: transforming public programmes to address societal challenges' symposium.

Liz Hide, Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences, University of Cambridge
Dean Veall, University of Bath

How can natural history museums respond to societal issues to make a positive impact for both people and the natural world? This is the challenge natural history institutions face as the awareness of the impact of social inequalities and the climate and ecological crisis increases in society. Across the cultural sector in the UK a number of museums have innovated in their learning, engagement and participation practice to respond to issues their local communities and society as a whole are facing. This civic or socially engaged practice has resulted in people and audiences become central to decision-making of these organisations.

My talk will introduce the theme of the symposium. We will draw on thinking and examples from the UK of how natural history institutions could 'activate' their spaces, collections and people (scientists and curators), creating public programmes that convene discussion around how we respond to

climate change and biodiversity loss, are focused on creating positive outcomes for people such as improving individual health outcomes and become more representative of historically marginalised voices and underserved audiences.

2. 2.15-2.30pm

Museums, Health and Wellbeing

Miranda Stearn, Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge Museums

In the UK and internationally, recent years have seen an increasing recognition of the role cultural organizations, including museums, might play in contributing to the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. No longer just a sometimes-acknowledged by-product of our engagement with culture for education or leisure, health and wellbeing outcomes have become something to be planned for, measured, evaluated and, on occasion, commissioned or prescribed. Policy makers, funders, the health and social care sectors, museum workers and individual museum goers are all showing an interest in understanding how museum experiences might relate to our health and wellbeing, helping respond to key societal challenges such as mental ill health, social isolation and ageing well.

Unhelpfully for natural history collections however, the conversation about the difference museums and their collections might hope to make has often been subsumed into wider discussion around 'culture and health' or more frequently, 'arts and health', making it more difficult to make the connection. This is a shame, especially when one considers the parallel growing recognition of the importance of access to nature for our health and wellbeing, and the potential of natural history collections to bridge both these agendas.

This paper offers an overview of current evidence, policy and practice, considers how Natural History collections are responding or might respond, and shares the experience of developing and adapting health and wellbeing programmes within an interdisciplinary museum consortium at the University of Cambridge Museums.

3. 2.30-2.45pm

Reveal, Reclaim and Recognise: Digging under the hidden narratives of natural history collections

Miranda Lowe, Natural History Museum, London

Decolonising natural history collections and related knowledge requires tracing how specimens and objects were collected, acquired and moved worldwide as well as acknowledging the collaboration of diverse communities in the process. It reveals the influence of local academic or Indigenous knowledge and its subsequent suppression. These narratives are commonly absent from the interpretation of natural history collections particularly in relation to colonial histories which will be explored in this talk. The misrepresentation of the past is problematic because it alienates non-white audiences. Acknowledging difficult pasts is an important first step in creating more inclusive and representative interpretation across the natural history arena.

4. 2.45-3pm

Natural history collections and social impact in the context of the climate and ecological crises

Isla Gladstone, Bristol Museum and Art Gallery / NatSCA

How are museums innovating in their public programmes to respond to and engage public audiences with the climate and ecological crises? This talk will draw examples from across different types of museum collection to provide wider scene setting. It will then focus in on natural history collections within this context to consider examples of best practice and opportunities for increased social impact and relevance.

5. 3-3.30pm

What next? Taking action to enable natural science collections to be socially engaged – an open discussion.

Chair: Liz Hide, Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences, University of Cambridge

This session will bring together the themes outlined by earlier speakers in this symposium to identify future priorities and actions for both museums and sector organisations to ensure natural science collections can positively contribute to societal change. With input from both symposium speakers and audience participants, we will discuss:

- How can we as a sector draw on the ideas and research in these presentations to create a more socially engaged approach to our public engagement? How can we make sure we are part of the solution to societal challenges, not part of the problem?
- What are the barriers to our museums and collections delivering this type of work? for example, are they about staff skills & confidence, management support, access to information, links with communities, funding?
- As well as the societal challenges exacerbated by the pandemic, are there also opportunities for us?
- What could we put in place to support and address this work ?