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Live Animals in Museums and Public Engagement.

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Introduction

Having attended the recent NatSCA conference and AGM “Public Engagement in Natural Sciences” I have decided to produce this article on how live animals are used in museums from a public engagement perspective. I would like to point out that have not carried out any public surveys to support this article but I have 8 years of experience in this field.

Museums are always striving to be socially inclusive, making sure that they appeal to all audiences and reach everyone with an aim to have a positive impact on their lives. Indeed the mission statement of Tyne and Wear Archives and Museums is “to help people determine their place in the world and define their identities, so enhancing their self-respect and respect for others.” Live animals give the museum an extra dimension in appealing to a wider audience and inspiring visitors to think about the world in different way.

The Great North Museum

In our newly developed museum – the Great North Museum: Hancock, we have a number of live exhibits including Royal Pythons (Fig. 1), Bearded Dragons, Carpet Python, tropical marine fish, Horseshoe crabs, and a Dabb lizard. We have a Zoo Licence at the museum. This means that our premises have been inspected and the conditions and provision of care meets government standards. The museum also holds animal handling days, for handling selected reptiles, which are hugely popular.

Engaging reptiles

Wandering through the galleries I constantly find myself saying things like “*Can you see the little crab having his dinner?*”, “*The snake has just been fed so it’s curled up asleep*”, “*It’s really hot inside this tank because these lizards come from the desert in Australia*”. This adds an extra level of information for the visitor, they can see that the animal is alive and needs care; It isn’t a model or a taxidermied specimen. The parents / teachers / guardians get a surprise that the animals are real. Plus, I personally quite enjoy interacting with the visitor like this.

In my experience live animals evoke a number of reactions in our public. Either they are thrilled, want to know something more about them, want to touch them, want to ask more about how to keep them as a pet, want to know more about their natural environment and are happy to watch them and come back repeatedly to see what the animal has been up to, or they are not happy about the animal being kept on public view and used to entertain. It’s all about interpretation; how you interpret the fact that we are using a live animal in the gallery to support a theme or story that we are telling.

Increased visitors

A good example of the effects on visitor figures would be the installation of a permanent live animal exhibit in South Shields Museum and Art Gallery. This is a largely a social history / art museum. A gallery was set up to house the live animal collection from the Hancock Museum while the Great North Museum project was undertaken. The museums visitor figures noticeably improved and we found that teenagers/ young adults were visiting the museum regularly. Animal handling days were inundated with large numbers of family groups, teenagers and young adults. One to one discussions with people about the animals obviously had a positive effect. Visitors were engaged and interested in the animals and listened intently to information given. We saw that people returned to the museum regularly to see the animals on display. I feel that even if the visitor takes with them the fact that there are live animals in the museum and they are well cared for, and they might go and see them again, this is a positive outcome because that person is interested in something at the museum. If they read the text or ask staff a question about the animals that is a plus point.

Some museums go one step further with their live animal exhibits having an active conservation message,

using their animals to promote awareness of conservation issues in their natural habitat. Manchester Museum contributes to captive breeding programmes of endangered species. They aim to change attitudes towards world wide issues, and to engage the public to think about habitat protection. This relies upon the museum dedicating more resources but it is a good way of justifying why you have live animals in the first place; much like any zoo.

Public and live displays

So what does all this mean from a public engagement point of view? Will people spend longer in an exhibition if it has a live animal component? Will people visit the exhibition especially because there is a live animal in the gallery? Do people ask other people to come back and visit the museum another time because there is a live animal in the exhibition? People like to engage with live animals through handling sessions and it adds to their experience.

The current thinking in museums that collections, which would include live collections, may benefit the health and well being of individuals is an interesting consideration. Studies due to be published later in 2010 will shed light on this topic. A specific study into the effects

that live animals have on audiences from the point of view of health and well being would be an interesting addition to this study. Given that there is a lot of research into the benefits of owning a dog or cat, I think that being able to come to a museum to see an animal may have a similar impact.

Key considerations

So does this mean that every museum should have live animals in their galleries?

Other museums have asked me directly if keeping live animals in galleries is a good idea. I have advised them that live animals are a good idea if displayed and managed well. This is the key. The public will not stand for animals to be kept in inadequate conditions, and neither should museums. They will question the very best of conditions and make their feelings well known to the animal keeper, the management and possibly even the RSPCA.

Museums need to consider a few basic things before committing to having live animals in a gallery;

- Can the museum care for the specific animals? This means, will someone take responsibility for the welfare of the animals and be there when things go wrong? I have been known to take sick animals home to care for them on a daily basis.



Fig. 1. “Sid” our Royal Python on display supporting the geology story of the Mesozoic. (Image copyright Great North Museum).

- Can the museum continue to fund their requirements e.g. food, heating, vets bills, other equipment into the future and ring fence a budget for them? This is especially important in today's financial climate; live animals cannot be compromised.
- Does the museum have room to house them properly? When a species of snake reaches 12 ft can the museum expand its housing? Has the museum researched the species it wants to keep and is it able to source them from a reliable source?

For example, we wanted to have a green tree python to support the story of camouflage in tropical rain forests. A large tank with an upright tree support for an arboreal species was installed in the gallery. However, the problem came in sourcing a snake. Wild caught snakes were out of the question; it is illegal to import tree pythons, wild caught snakes are prone to infections and stress very easily. It is also unethical, we thought. So, we sourced a captive bred snake, but a baby because it is expensive to purchase an adult. We bought it from a local breeder, and viewed the parents to check for health issues before we purchased it. We have now had the snake for about 2 years and it is not on display yet as it is too small for the large display tank. But we will put it on display when it reached the appropriate size. This shows all of the things you need to consider when selecting display species.

Summary

In my opinion, museums should always have a zoo licence to give themselves credibility, even if they only have a couple of fish tanks and a gecko. This shows that they are committed to the well being of the animals in their care. Information on how to apply for the licence can be found in the DEFRA website. The application for the licence is a thorough and lengthy process involving local government departments and veterinarians. It can also be expensive, as you need to advertise your intentions in local and national press.

So, in conclusion, live animals are a good addition to the material museums display as long as they are justified. In that they support the stories you are telling with the display, or they are part of a discrete display that plays a part in conservation of species and education. It is really important that you know what you are getting into. Don't choose really exotic species that need to eat specific things every single day unless you can commit to this. Do research the species you want to display thoroughly. Have a good vet that will come out to your museum if needed. Build up a network of people who are experts in e.g. large reptiles, so you can ask advice if needed. Make sure your museum has all the health and safety procedures in place. Apply for a zoo licence. Most importantly, have a dedicated member of staff to take responsibility for the animals.

I would be interested to know what you all think about this issue on the NatSCA JISMAIL.

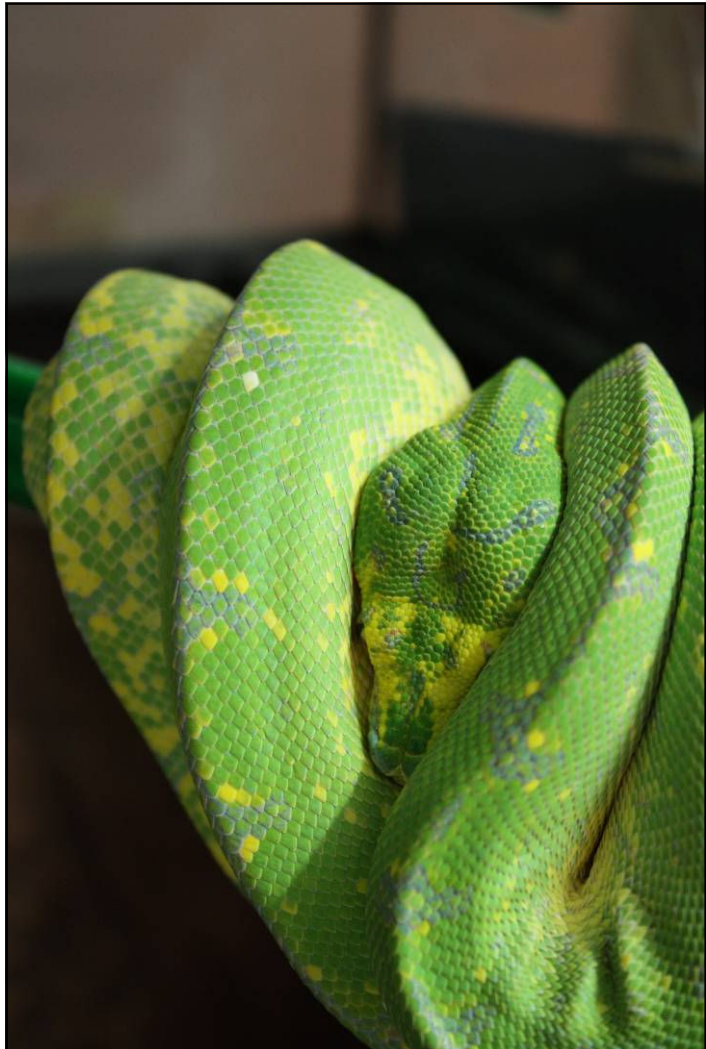


Fig 2. "G.T.P" our Green Tree Python. (Image copyright Great North Museum)