



NatSCA

Natural Sciences Collections Association

<http://www.natsca.org>

NatSCA News

Title: Representing Nature in Museums: the Roles of Attitude and Authority

Author(s): McGhie, H.

Source: McGhie, H. (2006). Representing Nature in Museums: the Roles of Attitude and Authority. *NatSCA News, Issue 9*, 41 - 43.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/254>

NatSCA supports open access publication as part of its mission is to promote and support natural science collections. NatSCA uses the Creative Commons Attribution License (CCAL) <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/> for all works we publish. Under CCAL authors retain ownership of the copyright for their article, but authors allow anyone to download, reuse, reprint, modify, distribute, and/or copy articles in NatSCA publications, so long as the original authors and source are cited.

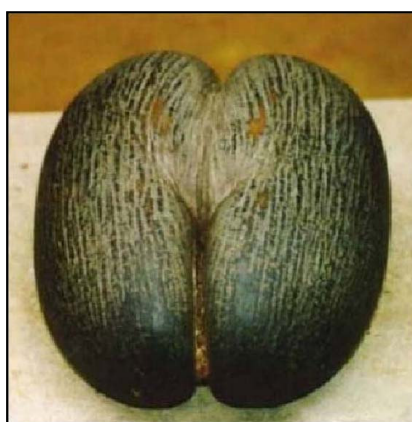
collection was that he

‘...endeavoured to obtain specimens of each species from as many different countries as possible, so that the changes a species undergoes as a result of climatic influences could be clearly recognised. This meant, of course, that each species was represented by many sheets in the herbarium’ (Weiss, 1930)

This statement about environmental change seems ever more poignant today. Botany collections are about many things but most of all they are about data. The challenge is to use that data for maximum public benefit. Going back to the quote earlier on from Emma Anderson, it seems a mistake, certainly in terms of botany collections, to put the ‘visitor’ at the centre of everything. It is much more effective to put the ‘user’ at the centre of everything.

Reference:

Weiss F.E. 1930. Three Manchester Botanists. *Notes from the Manchester Museum*. No. 33



**Henry McGhie, Head of Natural Sciences, The Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester
Representing nature in museums: the roles of attitude and authority**

The Manchester Museum is in the process of recontextualising its Natural History galleries with a view to redevelopment. ‘Natural history’ has been considered to be in decline for over 100 years and the role of museum natural history stands in question. In this talk, some of the preconceptions and changing attitudes to ‘nature’ and ‘natural history’ will be touched upon. The changing role of museum galleries, from presenting a particular world view to one which advocates global citizenship and earth stewardship, will be explored. As a specific example, the representation of gender in a natural history gallery will be explored.

In this article, I will explore some of the issues which our redevelopment faces, in terms of what we might want to say and what the public might want to hear. Unfortunately, I do not plan on coming up with solutions here, but to recognise some of the issues and tensions which exist.

So what is natural history; what is a natural historian? Do we think of Gilbert White, communing with nature in order to make sense of his own place in the world? Or do we think of imperialists such as Joseph Banks, using knowledge of the natural world to drive political movements? The answer is that natural history covers both aspects, White’s ‘Arcadian ecology’ and Banks’s imperialist technoscience, are merely two different facets of the same movement. It is interesting to note that the three stated aims of the forthcoming Linnaean tercentenary, namely creativity, curiosity and science, encapsulate both of these strands.

Natural history has been considered to have become a ‘deeply unsexy’ subject (eg. Secord 1996). Fewer and fewer universities offer courses in natural history and many museums have rebranded themselves as natural science institutions. In its original meaning, natural history meant the description and enumeration of things, not necessarily restricted to plants, animals, minerals or phenomena. A ‘natural history’ was re-

quired in order for the fields of experimentation and analysis to proceed; it was a kind of ‘definition of terms’. Natural history has been separated from the fields of investigation and analysis since renaissance times, these latter fields being referred to as natural philosophy, which was long considered as a loftier enterprise. It is natural philosophy, with its scientific method and question-based research, which is the real progenitor of ‘natural sciences’.

Museums have always been important locations of natural history and are clearly identified with the subject in the public mind. This can be demonstrated by interrogating the internet for web hits: searches for terms related to ‘natural history and museums’ outnumber those of ‘natural sciences and museums’ many times over. I also note here that interpretations and investigations of nature are traditionally confined to a scientific viewpoint within museums, although visitors will more often engage with displays and objects on an emotional level.

Natural history museums are very characteristic of a particular period during the latter half of the 19th century; most of the more prominent museums which have opened since that time have been branded as science museums or science centres. These latter institutions are more concerned with the process and production of knowledge, rather than with the raw materials upon which knowledge was produced. This reflects a shift in the method of knowledge production, from object to text to media.

So what did natural history museums seek to demonstrate? Why were they opened in the first place? It has been argued that museums can only be understood in terms of their social governance (Bennett 1995: 28):

“The conception of the museum as an institution in which the working classes- provided they dressed nicely and curbed any tendency towards unseemly conduct- might be exposed to the improving influence of the middle classes was crucial to its construction as a new kind of social space.”

In the Victorian mind, an educated society was a more controllable society. Museum displays demonstrated human superiority over nature and the separation of human society from the ‘natural’ world: even the Natural History Museum had its statue of Adam on the roof (until it was blown off during the Blitz). By extension, museum displays perpetuated imperialist beliefs of Western superiority over non-Western cultures.

When we discuss ‘nature’ many of us probably have some idea of green spaces, farmland, woods and rolling hills, with birds and butterflies. Many would separate ‘nature’ from ‘humanity’, certainly from urban living. Yet these beliefs have a cultural dimension: the British model of the countryside developed in response to rising industrialisation; the belief that human society had somehow fallen ‘out of balance’, with the innocent belief that before industrialisation it was somehow in balance. The construction of the rural idyll of Constable’s ‘*Haywain*’, or the sublime nature of Wordsworth and others. Much has been written about cultural constructions of nature and criticisms thereof, but, as one writer puts it:

“*To protect the nature that is all around us, we must think long and hard about the nature we carry inside our heads*”
(Cronon 1996, p. 22).

American environmentalist Michael Soulé distinguished between a number of constructions of ‘nature’, ranging from the idea of the great provider, the paradise, the place for physical exercise, the new age temple. To give an example of how quickly public perceptions can change, I think of the example of ‘*Emmerdale Farm*’, formerly the territory of men with mutton chop sideburns and ferrets in their pockets. This image, which had clearly fallen from favour (as evinced by declining viewer numbers), was replaced by the much snappier ‘*Emmerdale*’: the ‘farm’ element was dropped, to be replaced by hang-gliding and other leisure activities and associated conspicuous consumption.

Of course, different people have different attitudes to animals based upon their cultural background and individual experiences. Stephen Kellert devised a questionnaire which categorised individuals’ attitudes to animals in terms of eight classes of attitude and associated behaviours (Table 1). Kellert’s questionnaire has been used to investigate attitudes to animals with relation to gender, occupational group, social group and nationality. This has demonstrated that nationality has an important impact on attitude (Figure 1). Interestingly, Kellert has also demonstrated that those who have a scientific background (as most natural sciences curators do) have a strong affinity with one particular attitude, the scientific. They (we) tend to explain things in terms of how they work, their mechanics. This has been found to be of only minor interest to the ‘general public’ (whatever that is), who are likely to identify with animals primarily in humanistic and mor-

alistic terms (Fig. 2).

Table 1. Attitudes to animals (from Kellert 1980).

Kellert's 'attitude'	Description	Example of associated behaviour	Benefits
Moralistic	Concern for ethical treatment of animals	Membership of animal welfare organisations	Mental health
Humanistic	Interest in individual animals	Ownership of, and affinity with, pets	Companionship
Naturalistic	Interest in wildlife and outdoors	Walking as leisure activity	Physical and mental health
Ecologistic	Interest in how animals interact	Membership of conservation organisations	Mental health
Scientistic	Interest in how animals work	Collecting, observing closely	Mental health
Negativistic	Fear or avoidance of animals	Avoidance of proximity to animals	Avoidance of physical or emotional harm
Dominionistic	Interested in mastery and control of animals	Recreational hunting and fishing	Mental health
Utilitarian	Interest in practical and material value of animals	Hunting and fishing with a view to providing food	Consumptive benefits

My intention has been to explore some of the issues around what it is we are trying to say? Why are we saying it in the first place? How does that relate to what people want to hear? To conclude, I will quote from Thomas (1983):

“The work of many anthropologists suggests that it is an enduring tendency of human thought to project upon the natural world (and particularly the animal kingdom) categories and values derived from human society and then serve them back as a critique or reinforcement of the human order, justifying some particular social or political arrangement on the grounds that it is somehow more ‘natural’ than any alternative.”

Rather than believing that natural history displays are separate from human society, we should perhaps be considering what it is that we are trying to promote to our visitors, in order that they can make sense of their own place in the world.

References

Bennett, T. (1995). *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge.

Bennett, T. (2004). *Pasts Beyond Memory: Evolution, Museums, Colonialism*. London: Routledge.

Cronon, W. (ed.) (1996). *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. London: W. W. Norton.

Kellert, S. R. (1980). Contemporary Values of Wildlife in American Society. Pp. 31-60 in W. Shaw and I. Zube (eds.). *Wildlife Values*. Fort Collins (Colorado): U. S. Forest Service.

Schultz, W. (1987). Attitudes towards birds. Pp. 23-29 in Diamond, A. W. and F. Filion (eds.). *The Value of Birds*. ICPB Publication no. 6. Anagram, Guildford.

Secord, J. A. (1996). The crisis of nature. Pp. 447-459 in N. Jardine, J. A. Secord and E. C. Spary (eds.). *Cultures of Natural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Soulé, M. E. (1995). The social siege of nature. Pp. 137-170 in M. E. Soulé and G. Lease (eds.) *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*. Washington: Island Press.

Thomas, K. (1983). *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800*. London: Penguin (1987 edition).

Yanni, C. (1996). Divine display or secular science: defining nature at the Natural History Museum in London. *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, **55** (3), 276-299.

Yanni, C. (1999). *Nature's Museums: Victorian Science and the Architecture of Display*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.