

A Curator's Perspective

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In 1988, after months of passing by a hulking gray structure in downtown Oakland, I finally noticed the nondescript mid-century modern letters that spelled out “Oakland Museum of California.” A few weeks later, I stopped in to see what it was about and had one of the most profound museum experiences in my life. I was one of the waning generations of kids whose parents allowed them to explore nature on their own, and each weekend, if I wasn't taking care of my own menagerie or curating my growing collection of nature odds-and-ends, I was catching lizards in a field, fishing on a beach, or watching birds in the cattail thickets of the Upper Newport Bay. Aided by tattered field guides from library book sales and sets of flash cards bought as birthday gifts by my parents, I tried to learn as much as I could about the animals I encountered. I wanted to know who they were, what they did, whom they ate, and how they lived. Supplementing my own expeditions were family visits to state parks, zoos, nature centers, and several natural history museums throughout the state. I felt at home in nature, immersed with those creatures that I considered to be friends.

What made my visit to OMCA so personal was that the Museum showcased the immense diversity of life found in California through amazingly detailed dioramas and habitat cases. Featured in these exhibits were the uncharismatic microfauna, the spiders and newts, horned lizards and pepsid wasps, the cactus mice and canyon wrens that I knew and loved as a kid. More importantly, these organisms are the tiny cogs and springs in the fine machinery of an ecosystem that are essential for nature to function. They are the overlooked animals that virtually all museums forsake to feature larger, colorful, and more impressive megafauna. OMCA excelled in showing and telling the complex tales of California nature, illustrating the mysterious interrelationships between plants and animals, and conveying both the beauty and the importance of the biodiversity in our state in a way that no other museum in the world had done.

Nearly two decades later, after securing three degrees in the natural sciences, working as a biology professor at a local college, and as natural history curator and researcher at the California Academy of Sciences, I had the opportunity to join OMCA in 2007 as the Chief Curator of Natural Sciences. This was a tumultuous time when the Museum was reinventing what it was, who it served, and how it would reshape its galleries and collections to achieve these goals. There was a fear among the staff and some Museum stakeholders that the dioramas and habitat cases would be scrapped for more “interactive” exhibits, which was admittedly a concern I had. After seeing some of my favorite nature centers and some museums set aside/forego dioramas as

perceived old or obsolete ways of depicting nature, and replacing them with exhibits that were even more removed from the natural world, I wanted to make sure that there was careful consideration and deep discussion on how these unique gems could be re-used or repurposed to better convey the importance of our wildlife and habitats to our audience in new ways.

Fortunately, Director Lori Fogarty and exhibition design and development consultant Kathy McLean agreed that these hyper-realistic, beautiful, and informative pieces were to be the foundation of an NSF Informal Science Education grant to show the continuing relevance of dioramas as ways to communicate nature, connect with visitors, and provide entry points for in-gallery discussions with scientists, Native peoples, grass-roots conservationists, and other community members who experience and enjoy nature. Thus we began a discussion and exploration of the “diorama dilemma” and how an “archaic” way of depicting nature—through taxidermy and recreation of natural habitats—can provide meaningful and informed connections between visitors, our natural world, and those who seek to protect and preserve it.

As Chief Curator of Natural Sciences, my daily schedule ran a diverse gambit of skills, from fundraising to press spokesperson, from collections curator to the only guy who would relocate wayward opossums from inside museum offices to the outside gardens. What I considered most important was the job of content specialist. In an age when the internet can no longer be a trusted source of information, and educational television networks air staged reality shows that play loose with biological facts and push deliberately misleading pseudo-scientific programs, mass media cannot be relied on for sound scientific content. As a child, I learned immensely from museums, and considered them the paragon of scientific authority. At OMCA, I was committed to providing the most truthful scientific information possible for our exhibits and associated interpretive and interactive elements. While it is easy to just click on Wikipedia as a short cut for research, I aimed to always research initial sources whenever possible, including those researchers conducting the most up-to-date studies on the plants, animals, and ecosystems of California. Long threads of content had to be digested into shorter and more palatable nuggets for the general public. This meant long hours with our label writers refining the content into accessible labels that accurately conveyed information and didn't skimp on real content, while still remaining accessible for readers of a variety of ages and backgrounds— a job that is far more challenging than it sounds or than I first realized.

After seven very long years, the new Natural Sciences Gallery is open, and while the new iteration is much different than what I had envisioned more than half a decade earlier, it is still a vibrant and exciting place that in most ways surpasses what I could envision when I first entered OMCA. Most of the dioramas were retained and re-used in new contextual ways, and some new

ones were even built to fill in the gaps in our coverage. In all, the gallery is by necessity a comparatively modest introduction to the glorious life and land of California. Visitors will get a multi-sensory introduction to the precious and threatened biodiversity our state contains. Perhaps hearing the voices, experiences, and actions of our local and statewide communities will urge them to care more for nature and make a difference in their own community. Moreover, visitors will get facts that are as accurate as we could achieve, based on current scientific research and contemporary knowledge. At the very least, this gallery is an impetus and a portal that urges people to explore what our state has to offer if they venture farther outside. Only careful visitor studies, detailed exhibit evaluation over time, and ongoing conservation and exchanges with our visitors will bear out such assumptions. However, it is my belief, and the main reason why I took the position at the OMCA, that our gallery will be a trusted way to entertain, educate, and inspire generations of children who will want to study and protect those animals that share their land, inspire curiosity, and garner their respect, just as I did as a child visiting natural history museums and engaging with the natural world around me.