

Adding Humans to a Natural Sciences Gallery

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Excluding visitors and docents, human sightings remain rare within the world of natural history exhibits. Unless the topic is archaeology or human origins, our species generally doesn't get in without a ticket. Here at the Oakland Museum of California, our habitat cases and dioramas have mostly followed that same line—depicting timeless, pristine settings without significant acknowledgement of human existence, let alone the major impact we've had on these places. When *Homo sapiens* gets a mention, it's a note in the label rather than any major time on stage. We celebrate our exploits in the art and history galleries upstairs.

But we're really not separate from the natural world—we just like to think so. Whether or not one subscribes to the notion of the *Anthropocene* as the latest geological epoch, human impact on the planet and the other species with which we share it, is harder and harder to ignore. We are now the primary agents of environmental change. If we want our museums to help the public engage with the day's pressing environmental issues, we need to move beyond depictions of idealized nature toward the hybrid environments that we actually have. We need to represent the enormous impact that our species has on the world. This will surely challenge the expectations of visitors and staff, but it's imperative in a time of accelerating environmental loss. It's impossible to comprehend the greatly changed California we have now without considering our role in those changes.

Viewed in this way, bringing humans into the natural history gallery is an obligation, but it's also an opportunity to strengthen the appeal of the experience. It's no secret we like to talk and hear about ourselves—even when the stories don't flatter. Adding humans to the natural history mix greatly expands the possibilities for visitor engagement. It provides all sorts of hooks and affordances that are unavailable if we remain offstage. Acknowledging how people have shaped California supports a contemporary natural history of this place that is more engaging and more intelligible.

In renovating the OMCA Natural Sciences Gallery, we've added a strong human presence to a gallery that previously had almost none. We've done this through multiple approaches—none of which we've come close to perfecting or exhausting. But the mix seems to be working, and I think we've created a platform that will serve OMCA and its community well.

Of course we've worried about the emotional fatigue that comes with considering our environment crisis and how that fits in a leisure experience. But it's possible to be both serious and fun. It calls for an eclectic, non-reductive approach—a rich mix of experiences that visitors can adapt to their purposes. Early evaluation results suggest our new gallery is a source of delight as well as concern.

Early work on this project focused on the so-called “diorama dilemma”—the recognition that dioramas are not an all-purpose medium. In the new gallery, we've sought to balance both the dioramas' shortcomings and appeal with complementary elements that offer more interactivity and insight into dynamic processes. For the most part we've made these additions as context around the dioramas rather than within them, but these efforts were no less effective for leaving the originals intact. As demonstrated by the reopened gallery, OMCA's cases and dioramas still possess considerable power to engage visitors of all ages and levels of experience.

Our old gallery was organized as an imaginary walk across California from the sea through valley and mountains to the desert. The cases and dioramas in that gallery represented specific places, but emphasized their habitat types rather than their locations. A key change we made was to reframe the new gallery around seven real California places that showcase the state's incredible biodiversity and the threats it faces. That shift is crucial to some of the other strategies I'll mention below. We've reorganized the cases and diorama around those places, modifying their contents when necessary to reflect their new contexts.

Including Oakland among those seven places is especially significant. Not only is this part of the gallery the only substantial space devoted specifically to Oakland within OMCA, it is the one closest to home for a majority of the museum's visitors. It offers opportunities that the other six can't match.

Specific places have specific histories that illuminate how those places came to be the way they are today. In the case of California, not all of those stories are inspiring—but they are necessary for understanding. In each of the seven places, we've included historical elements that reveal how people changed those places from the way they were before.

Real places also come with real people who have relationships with those places. Through a strategy we called “community voices,” we've tried to include plenty of those relationships in the gallery—both to enrich our depiction of the seven places and to model an empathy for place that we hope proves contagious. Through first-person videos, graphics, and live presentations, we've tried to reflect the experiences and views of the people who live in these places. These stories cut

both ways in depicting how humans have damaged the environment and how they've worked to restore it.

We've also built in opportunities for updating the exhibit throughout the gallery with science news, political developments, and other stories related to the seven places and to California's environment in general. Most of these are low tech, but flexible, with room for visitor dialogue. The visitors' own voices are community voices, too.

Citizen science has offered yet another way to work humans and their stories into the gallery through direct and vicarious participation in scientific research. We've tried to create a showcase for local projects and an on-ramp for new citizen scientists. We'd like OMCA to be a place where those new to citizen science can learn about those projects and find out how to get involved. Ultimately, we're less interested in the data gathering than in the mingling of scientists and ordinary citizens and in inspiring people to investigate the places where they live.

OMCA's extensive gardens offer an accessible site for beginning these investigations. We've taken the first steps toward making the OMCA campus a place where visitors can develop the skills and confidence to observe and begin to understand what is going on around them. We've built in places within the gallery to aggregate those observations and make them part of other visitors' experience.

Another dimension of the human presence within the gallery is creative expression. Symbols, stories—and dioramas—aren't passive representations of the world; they're lenses and filters that shape our understanding. Admitting historic and contemporary art into the natural history gallery opens us to other ways of seeing. Making things and making meaning are not far removed. The large amount of art we've included in the gallery is one expression of that. Showing ourselves making the gallery is another crucial part of adding humans to the mix. Sometimes intentionally, sometimes out of desperation, we've done a lot of our work in front of our visitors, and that's been a good thing for them and us. But we've also included multiple opportunities for visitors to make things and to share their work with other visitors.

I'll close with a few thoughts on museum practice and the needs of the living people in our museums. It's not enough just to depict humans in our displays— we need to do it in ways that acknowledge the humanity of our visitors. They're whole people—not deficient scientists or historians. Our exhibits need to respect what they bring to the museum experience and provide opportunities for them to use it. Our galleries need to work as social and emotional spaces if they

are ever to work as cognitive ones. What we can do best is to gently unsettle our visitors—to open them up to seeing themselves and the world in new ways.

However dire we think the state of the planet, we need to remember why visitors come to our museums. It's not just for more information. There is so much more to our work than providing content—more than big ideas, messages and interpretive plans. The hard problem in exhibit development is NOT delivering content...but engendering care. We need to work on that as hard as we work on delivering the facts.