

## Introduction

### ***Transforming the Gallery of California Natural Sciences***

Lori Fogarty, Director and CEO, Oakland Museum of California, September 2014

The Gallery of California Natural Sciences was the third of the Museum's three core collection galleries to be transformed as part of the Oakland Museum of California's \$63 million renovation and reinstallation project, launched in 2006 and culminating in 2014. It has been an eight-year journey of disruption, dilemma, discovery, and I believe, ultimately, delivery, both for the natural history field and for our visitors.

As a bit of background, the Oakland Museum of California opened in 1969 in an indoor/outdoor building and campus designed by Pritzker Prize-winning architect, Kevin Roche, and landscape architect, Dan Kiley. The roots of the Museum, however, date back to three predecessor organizations—the Oakland Public Museum, the Oakland Art Gallery, and the Snow Museum of Natural History—which was the antecedent of the Natural Sciences collection and program. The Snow Museum was founded in 1922 in a former residence near Lake Merritt to house the collection of Henry A. Snow, the Oakland explorer best known for motion pictures of big-game hunting in Africa. Originally specializing in Arctic and African animal specimens, the collections expanded through the efforts of Snow's daughter, Nydine Snow Latham, who developed holdings of California and Western fauna and created a center for the interpretation of natural history and conservation. While each small civic institution focused on a distinct discipline—and, in the case of the Snow Museum, had a scope that was much broader than California—they shared a long-standing tradition of education and community engagement.

The original Natural Sciences Gallery—or, as it was called upon its founding—the “Hall of California Ecology”—was very bold in its origin and reflective of the time in which it was created. As acclaimed architecture critic, Allan Temko, noted in his 1989 essay on the Museum's landmark building, “On the lowest level, closest to the earth, there would be a gallery devoted to the nature of the region and the varieties of life it supported: in other words, what providence had given to northern California, from the Pacific to the Sierra. This idea, we know, was proposed a full decade before the United States was swept by the ecology movement.” The design of the gallery was led by Gordon Ashby and what must have been an extraordinary group of highly accomplished taxidermists, artists, and technicians, and was characterized by highly detailed in-wall dioramas, dozens of habitat cases, and, most distinctly, open habitat and specimen platforms where the interaction of animals, plants, and habitats created immersive experiences unique among natural history museums of the era. Notably, there was essentially no evidence of human habitation in the Gallery exhibits.

The Hall of California Ecology became the basis for the Museum's science education programs for many years and was beloved by generations of visitors, particularly naturalists who recognized OMCA for having the most comprehensive representation in a museum of California's biodiversity anywhere in the state. Close to forty years after the opening, however, the Museum recognized the need for change, particularly in the context of evolving expectations among visitors to museums, the increasing challenges for cultural institutions amidst the proliferation of physical and virtual destinations, and with the dramatic shifts in demographics, especially in California.

OMCA's transformation was launched in earnest in 2002 when the residents and taxpayers of the City of Oakland voted by more than 75% to support a bond measure that called for: "a major expansion, reinstallation and renovation of the History Gallery, the Art Gallery, and the Natural Sciences Gallery to reflect the changing faces and environment of California and to include new information, interactive technology, and multicultural, multilingual presentations." While the seed funding provided by the Measure G bond commenced what was originally conceived as a building and gallery renovation, it began a process of institutional reflection and, ultimately, organizational and cultural change that altered the very way the Museum works, both internally and with visitors and the broader community.

OMCA's renovation project took place in phases, with the ambition of the initiative expanding as the capital campaign progressed and fundraising milestones were surpassed. The Gallery of California Natural Sciences was the last of the three galleries to begin the design process in 2009, with the opening in June 2013 and the Gallery being completed and evaluated in 2014. In many ways, being the final of the three galleries, it benefited from the staff's experience with the other two spaces, and the vision for innovation and change became even bolder as the project progressed. In turn, the unique complexities of a natural sciences gallery—with much more elaborate exhibit elements than in the Art and History Galleries, including a number that could not be moved from their existing location during construction and reinstallation—made this component of the Museum's transformation the most challenging.

The process for reimagining the gallery began with a number of convenings that brought together scientists, exhibit planners, evaluators, and leaders in museum interpretation. We began by asking: what topics must we address related to California's natural environment? What are the critical stories in natural sciences that we can distinctly tell? How do we make the Natural Sciences Gallery more welcoming, accessible, and relevant to our audience, including the very diverse community of Oakland? And, perhaps more practically, how do we take the best of our

existing exhibits but address the obstacles and limitations of traditional dioramas that can often seem dated, static, or anachronistic to meet the needs of today's audience?

We set out to answer these questions through a project funded by the National Science Foundation: "Hotspot California: Bringing Dioramas to Life through Community Voice," which is documented in this compilation of studies, articles, and research publications. The project set out to create an exhibit that would showcase a changing California—a region of incredible biodiversity under threat by urgent environmental issues—that would, at the same time, inspire Californians to connect to the natural world in some way, whether through conservation action, personal exploration, or through stories of their own communities. And we would accomplish this, not by scrapping our traditional dioramas and habitat cases and starting over with brand new exhibits, but by embracing the "diorama dilemma" and placing these exhibit elements in a whole new context.

The project called for several innovation strategies, not only to transform OMCA's Gallery, but as a potential model for the field in re-thinking dioramas in natural history exhibitions. These strategies included:

- *Adding interactive, inquiry-based elements* that allow visitors to engage in meaningful ways with the contents of the dioramas and at the same time appreciate the artistry embedded in them.
- *Instilling a "sense of place"* by rearranging the gallery from its former generalized layout to showcase real places in California that are biodiversity hotspots.
- *Using scientific and personal testimony from a diversity of scientists and residents who are passionate about their local place* to inspire visitors to learn more about these places, visit them, and get involved in protecting them.
- *Exploring the selected specific places in the context of rapid change over time* through a combination of simple interactive elements and scenario-modeling visualization technologies.
- *Conducting empirical research on how people make meaning with dioramas* that will test our hypothesis that in order for people to care about nature, visitors need to hear from people who live in and care about those places. We will test the potential to *transfer* an emotional sense of place from those who are of the place to visitors in the museum gallery.

While these were the strategies we outlined in our NSF grant, they don't fully capture what I believe is the full extent of what we set out to achieve. I believe more than anything else we strived to make a real, authentic, and profound connection between people and nature—to show their inter-relationship and to reflect on how the story of any people—and, in our case, the story of California—is inextricably linked to its landscape and the environment. While the dioramas and habitat cases remain central elements in this transformed Gallery, they now share equal space with human stories, artifacts, art works—evidence of the impact people have, for better and worse, on our planet and our place within it.

The documents in this “sourcebook” convey some of what we learned about our visitors' experience of the new Gallery of California Natural Sciences and what we hope will be useful to the natural history field. I will highlight just three of these findings.

*Our staff* has transformed the way we work on exhibits in a myriad of ways. Initiated with the reinvention of the Art and History Galleries, we advanced these practices with the Natural Sciences Gallery, with new types of teams that put aside traditional hierarchical structures and empowered staff positions that bring new expertise and perspectives; by bringing participation and community co-creation directly into the exhibit development process; and by breaking down the traditional silos of disciplines to connect our natural and cultural worlds. You'll learn a bit about these perspectives in the reflections shared by our Senior Curator of Natural Sciences, Douglas Long, and Senior Exhibit Developer, Don Pohlman, both Principal Investigators on the NSF project.

*Our visitors* love the Gallery and they stay a long time. They remember and reminisce about their own experiences in nature, they gain new perspectives on California's natural environment, and many feel a call to action to investigate nature in their own lives or to take direct conservation action. Beverly Serrell's summative evaluation provides more information on visitor responses.

*The field of natural history museums* is grappling with the role museums should play in one of the most pressing and dire issues of our time—climate change—and how to balance serving as a trusted resource while taking on a very active position as advocates and actors in realms traditionally beyond their missions, such as policy and political action. Leading museums are increasingly coming together in solidarity that now is the time to stop talking and—in a unified way—begin acting. The document on our June 2014, *Human Nature*, brings together thoughts on this “call to action” from 18 museums across the country and in Canada.

Our Gallery of California Natural Sciences is just one act along this path. In partnership with our community, with our visitors, and with our colleagues in the field, we are committed to continuing this action.