

Chapter 12

Your Last Chance to See?



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12.1 Introduction

Natural History Dioramas are dramatic, yet static displays that are awesome in their impact and as created spaces described as ‘art in the service of science’ (Quinn 2006).

The dioramas of the Powell-Cotton Museum are stylised habitat displays containing representative samples of the flora and fauna to be found across Africa and in the mountains and jungles of northern and central India respectively. Built during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century they are the work of the explorer naturalist anthropologist and hunter Major P.H.G. Powell-Cotton and his family.

There was a desire among the museum staff for a temporary exhibition that recontextualised the dioramas with the present-day issues and concerns surrounding the ‘habitats’ represented. Biodiversity (Marandino et al. 2015) and climate change are key interpretive considerations in the use of dioramas as educational tools (Reiss and Tunnicliffe 2011). Discussions covered a range of topics including the desire to present habitat loss, climate change, poaching and trophy hunting. A frequent topic of debate among both staff and visitors was whether the museums founder was primarily a trophy hunter or a natural historian. A common response to the dioramas being a mocking ‘no wonder they have gone extinct, he shot them all’ (Summary of comments in Powell-Cotton Visitor book 2006–2014). In response to this often repeated interpretation, the core of the exhibition would be on extinctions.

The idea to develop an exhibition and intervention within the dioramas came from the Head of Education hoping to put education at the heart of an exhibition. This was a new step for a new team at the museum. Prior to the arrival of the Head of Education, learning at the museum had taken a traditional approach using a mix of trails, workshops and talks to share the messages of the history, geography,

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science and art of the diorama and other collections. Continuous development of the schools' programme between 2006 and 2014 increased the use of theatre and performance as the primary means of engagement (Dunmall 2015). This was still supported by the more traditional methods to enable students with a broader range of learning styles (Hawk and Shah 2007) to access the messages of the museum in a cross curricular approach (Barnes 2011). The benefits of a cross-curricular approach was a modular dynamic session structure that allowed students to direct the learning through questions, or through the spaces they choose to occupy in the museum acting as the stimulus for the content of the session.

12.2 Procedure

This approach, though effective and extremely student centred, requires knowledgeable staff and their presence during a session to enable the optimum benefit to be gained from the experience. In order to build upon the self-directed approach, a gallery was developed that housed collections, handling objects and the tools – computers, microscopes, measuring instruments and artistic resources – to enable any visitor to take on the role of researcher through self led or staff led sessions. This development however did not directly address the experience of learning in the dioramas.

Through self directed learning in the diorama galleries students would be able to choose their own interpretive pathway through the museum and, importantly, provide their own narrative for the diorama experience that was novel and relevant to their own learning. A direct intervention would provide the hook for the learning (Scheersoi 2015).

The initial suggestion was the complete covering or removal of the subject animals and in the case of removal, replacing them with cut out silhouettes to identify where they had been. In this way the intervention acts as the means of communicating the message – absence or absence from sight and in turn supported by supplementary rather than explanatory interpretation. Implementation drew on a team from four disciplines within the museum, each team member bringing different skills, insights, expectations and concerns. The team members were the Head of Collections, Head of Education, the Front of House Manager and the Marketing Officer.

The idea of working within the dioramas was not new to the museum. There had been previous interventions undertaken by staff and students from the Kent Institute for Art and Design during the curatorship of John Harrison (1997–2005). These were by and large artistic responses to the diorama and the museum in general.

From the collections perspective there was, as one would expect, a focus on the safety of the dioramas and the physical impact of the intervention. Being inside the dioramas and the associated risks and hazards both to the team and the exhibits shaped her contribution. Munsch et al. (2015) provide a detailed examination of the range of conservation concerns in Natural History Dioramas.

The Front of House Manager was an experienced biologist, conservationist and lecturer on environmental issues. His interest was both in the current taxonomy of the species represented and the hazards currently faced by these animals. He was also keen to develop a led walk through the museum for visitors to provide more information about the animals in the exhibition.

The Marketing Officer was eager that the exhibition was well advertised and hard hitting in order to draw the interest of the press. As the director of a conservation charity she was keen to focus on the impact of hunting. Beyond this she saw an opportunity to link the museum with the conservation charities working with the species in the collection, in particular to work alongside the Born Free Foundation to talk to a wider audience about conservation.

In order to provide a framework for the content of the exhibition the team quickly agreed that the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species™ would be used to identify the status of the specimens in the collection (International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources 2015).

The IUCN red list has a graded structure from those species of *Least Concern* to those that have become *Extinct*. Initially there was an expectation that due to Powell-Cotton's prolific collecting there would be many animals on display that were either Critically Endangered, Extinct in the Wild or Extinct. After an audit though there were surprisingly few that were listed as such and in order to have sufficient numbers to create an impact the criteria was extended to include those described as being Endangered and Vulnerable. The inclusion of the Vulnerable category was instigated by the Marketing Officer in order that the African Elephant could be included in the exhibition and use its status as charismatic megafauna to make the whole exhibition more appealing.

Beyond this there were many areas of discussion of the development of the exhibition that were not so easily resolved. The discussions and their influence on one another was subtle and in retrospect a difficult chronology to retrace. To that end this section will deal with each separately without noting these interactions unless they are of particular significance.

There is an interesting debate to be had about the effectiveness of bringing together diverse species to promote conservation messages through diorama that is not within the scope of this study. However to get that started consider both the conservation argument against it (Leader-Williams 2000) and the complexity of what holds peoples interest within a diorama (Scheersoi 2015).

During the team discussions it is possibly of interest the ideas rejected along the way to the exhibition. The subject that required most thought was how to indicate within the diorama that a specimen was on the list. Removing the specimen and replacing it with a black cardboard cut-out was quickly rejected, as was the idea to cover the specimen inspired by the Lionaid shroud campaign (LionAid 2015). It was then decided that a ribbon tied around the animals neck would work well. Discussions about a bow or not and then the possibility of it being knotted like a tie or a noose all led to the conclusion that there was an anthropomorphic element to these ideas that didn't quite work. Added to this there were some specimens where this would not be the most visible way of indicating their inclusion in the exhibition.



Fig. 12.1 The Jungle Diorama (left side), Gallery 3. Copyright Sarah Craske

Eventually with some continuing disagreement the decision was made to put the ribbon around the muzzle of the animals and hide the closure from public view. The ribbons were colour coded as follows to indicate the status of the animal on the IUCN Red List (Fig. 12.1).

Black	Extinct	EX
Purple	Extinct in the wild	EW
Red	Critically endangered	CE
Orange	Endangered	EN
Yellow	Vulnerable	VU

Once the physical intervention had been decided the next phase was to determine how to interpret the information we wanted to present. At the museum there are low level barriers/child height drawing ledges across the front of the dioramas with drawings and taxonomic and common name labels for each of the specimens in the dioramas. It was decided that alongside each of the animal names we would include a symbol to represent which of the eight key causes were a factor in the animal's status. These were:

- Climate Change
- Competition with Livestock
- Deforestation
- Disease
- Habitat Loss
- Human Encroachment
- Hunting
- Poaching



Fig. 12.2 Museum welcome space interpretation. Copyright Sarah Craske

The final symbol on the interpretation panels alongside these would be a two letter and colour coded square that repeated the colour coding of the muzzle ribbon that indicated the status of the animal.

A key at the entrance to the gallery was devised to draw attention to the whole exhibition and draw it to the attention of the general visitor. At over two metres wide and three metres high it dominated the entrance space to the museum (Fig. 12.2).

Taxonomy proved to be problematic as both the common names and scientific names for the specimens in the collection had changed since the time of their collection. This provided almost endless fun for the Front of House Manager as he worked through the 500 specimens on display.

Whether or not to produce a hand-out to navigate the six dioramas which held the interventions was a question that went back and forth within the group. In the end it was determined that we had put enough in place and should anything more be needed we would create it at that point. Once the exhibition was opened we quickly found that this was a necessary addition to the interpretation, and it took the form of a repeat of the large yet frequently overlooked information panel in the welcome space.

The press reception to the exhibition was boosted through a celebrity launch event. The museum Marketing Officer through her conservation work was in contact with Will Travers, Director of the Born Free Foundation, who opened the exhibition at the launch event and spoke on local radio and television about the exhibition.

Alongside him were students from a local secondary school who had previewed the exhibition and then also spoke on their findings. The transcripts of these talks are available through the Powell-Cotton Museum. This was a group who were frequent visitors to the museum and had previously discussed topics such as adaptation, camouflage and natural selection. In response to the installation the students spoke about their concerns for endangered species and the effects of climate change.

12.3 Results and Discussion

The 14 schools that visited during the exhibition also demonstrated a changed perspective through the intervention. The museum provided free introductory talks to every visiting school before during and after the exhibition. The questions asked and often answered by students before and after the exhibition tend towards the following:

- “Are they real?”
- “No, they are stuffed.”
- “They were, but now they are dead”
- “They are hairy statues”
- Why are they here?
- “For us to look at”
- “Because they were shot”
- What is that in the tree?
- “It’s a basket”
- “It’s a fruit”
- “It’s a bird’s nest”

During the period of the exhibition:

- “Why have they got the thing on their faces?”
- “it shows they are endangered”
- “it’s where they were shot”
- “It means they are extinct”



Fig. 12.3 The Desert Diorama, Gallery One. Copyright Sarah Craske

“Red ones (ribbons) mean endangered, are there any extinct ones?”

“Yes, that one (points to the Scimitar Horned Oryx) with the purple band (Fig. 12.3).

Our visitor who were not part of a formal educational visit frequently expressed surprise at the number of causes of extinction. There was also surprise on examining the causes of the endangerment how little of it was due to hunting or poaching (including among some of the staff). There were even exclamations at some of the animals included as Critically Endangered. For instance, the African Wild Ass (Moehlman et al. 2015) drew particular attention as it was ‘just a donkey’. The family group of Northern White Rhino proved a poignant display for some visitors (Fig. 12.4). Others didn’t understand what the exhibition was about and were either redirected to the entrance of the gallery or brought one of the interpretation sheets created while the exhibition was running. Still others complained that the exhibition ‘spoil’ the display.

This last comment also appeared in the museum visitor book which prompted an interesting response from another visitor. The second correspondent with an arrow to the first comment explained how important it was to show people about extinction.

The direct intervention had achieved the hoped for result by bringing a different set of discussions and conversations to the diorama galleries than those more typically observed (Tunncliffe 2015).



Fig. 12.4 The Jungle Diorama (middle), Gallery Three. Copyright Sarah Craske

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