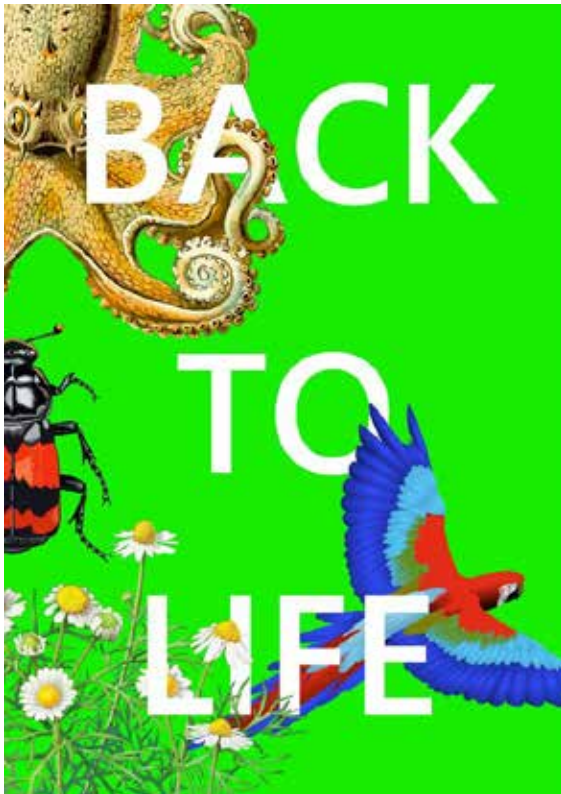


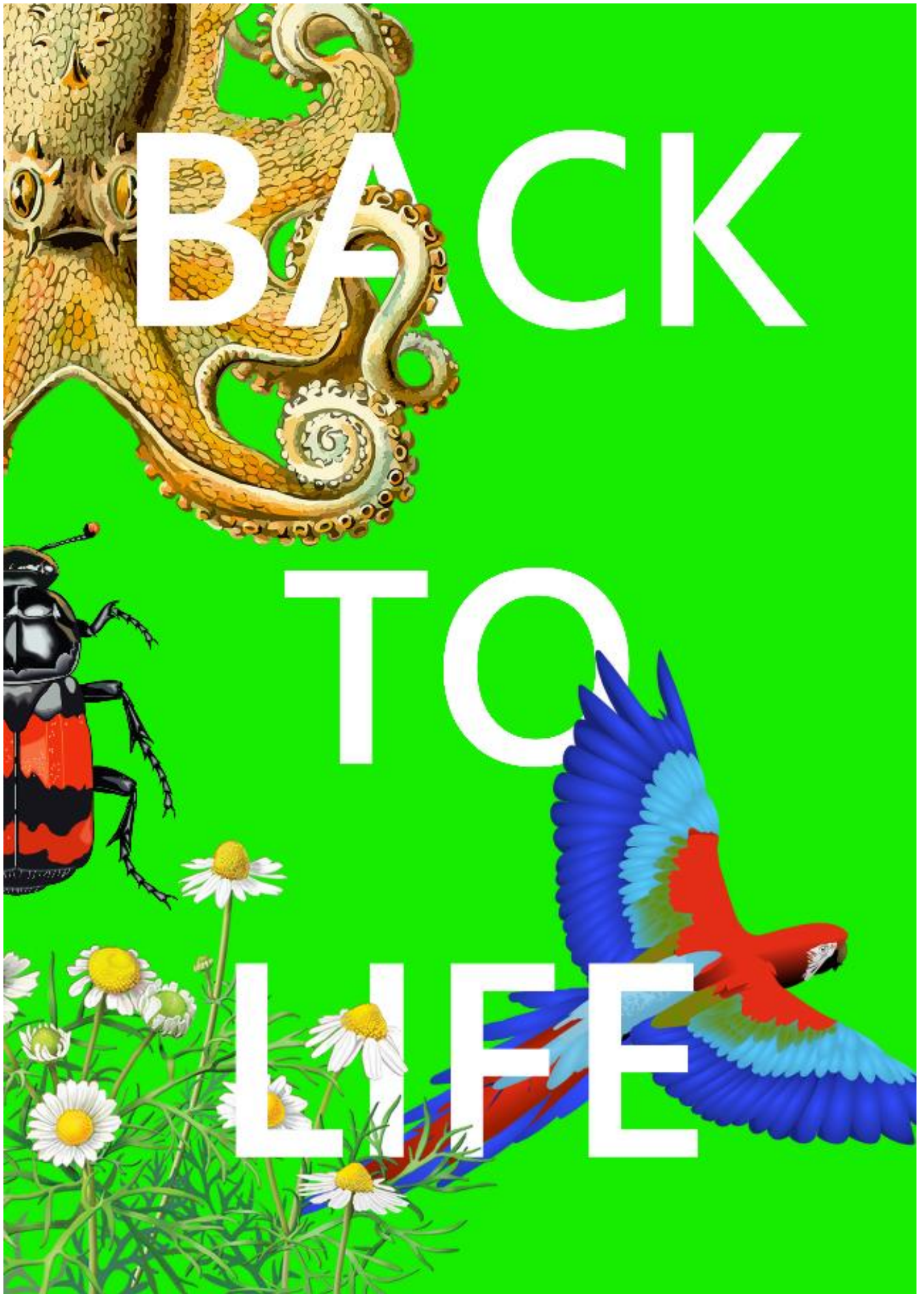


Back to Life / report ©INSTAR

Creative consultation

Project Lab / Nottingham City Museums and Galleries 2017





Artwork designed by INSTAR



Summary

Back to Life was curated by INSTAR (Trish Evans and Nick Humphreys) to fulfil the Project Lab brief to engage visitors to Wollaton Hall, together with participating schools and selected community groups. Helping inform and inspire the development of Nottingham Natural History Museum exhibitions, collections and future public programming through creative consultation was the purpose of the project.

Back to Life vision

As artist-curators, we (INSTAR) designed **Back to Life** as a site specific installation, aiming to transform a section of the museum space into an engaging environment, renovating existing shelving, collecting props, installing a temporary reference library of contemporary and vintage books, exhibit natural science collection specimens (artefact specimens), lighting, microscopic projections and a reconfiguration of the museum room. The vision of this space was to create a temporary museum studio and natural history curiosity space to conduct activity – inviting visitors and participants to join us ‘as valuable members of the museum team’ and to interact with the display.

In preparation for the delivery both public and group sessions, we created 14 x natural history specimen cases each containing (vintage) laminated illustrations covering a wide range of species from botanical to sea mammals, from butterflies to birds. A total of over 300 illustrated specimens were created, selected and carefully cut out, laminated and pinned as if in a collection case/drawer. These 14 cases were the centrepiece to the activity within the installation, with the handling collection and library working as engagement tools to attract interest or further extend participation and discovery.



The activity

Wearing our project lab coats, visitors were invited to join our museum team to curate their very own future museum exhibition, taking inspiration from what is important or of great interest to them about the natural world, natural sciences and the museum. With an introduction to the natural sciences collection and its incredible diversity and volume, participants of all ages were instructed to select illustrated specimens from our project cases to then pin onto their very own collection board. With a choice of colours to choose from, each board was given an individual collection label, with curator details and collection number.

Crucial to our introduction to the activity was to provide a sense of wonder to the collection and the importance of the role in helping us select specimens for the museum, to stimulate personal aspiration and creative vision, therefore we gave great focus to the need to log and record collection specimens and the value of each collection created. We aimed to give great emphasis to the value of the label and the completion of it at the end of the activity, giving each temporary 'curator' a sense of achievement and individuality when themes and collection titles were devised and each collection (with label) photographed and logged.

The library provided additional resources and reference materials to help expand the research of specimens and to respond to the level of interest of participants. The library together with the handling collection of specimens allowed visitors to get up close to the collection and share their ideas, views and interests and for many other visitors to explore and take part in the space even if they were not taking part in the facilitated activity.

The activity was aimed at all ages, and in particular families and school pupils. Additionally a projection of insects under the microscope were also projected onto the wall to help further connect and invite visitors to investigate the space and to consider the challenges and different ways to exhibit the microscopic and tiny specimens within the collection.

Due to the successful engagement of this particular activity, the level of visitor numbers and the limitations of the space, our microscopic and originally proposed **back to life drawing** activities (originally planned for) were not delivered. This was a joint decision made by INSTAR and the Engagement and Collections Manager as it was agreed that this activity was the best suited to the space and fully met the brief.



BACK
TO
LIFE

Statistics



People involved:

Artist activity curators and lead facilitators: Trish Evans and Nick Humphreys (INSTAR)

Nottingham City Museums and Galleries Staff: Sue Mallander facilitated a number of Back to Life school sessions.

Nottingham City Museums and Galleries Volunteers: A total of 6 volunteers supported sessions. Usually 1 volunteer per session but sometimes no volunteer support was possible.

Participation numbers

616 people directly participated in the Back to Life activity

390 additional visitors participated in the Back to Life space, display and handling collection.

369 individuals directly took part in the Back to Life natural sciences 'curator' activity with a further 195 parents/guardians and 52 supportive siblings/friends taking part as families, teachers or visitor groups.

324 titled collections were curated, logged and photographed.

154 hours of visitor and pupil time, based on each participant taking 15 minutes engaged in the activity, was given to the project.

Approximate demographics:

55% female / 44% male

64% white British / 36% BME /International

70% under 10yrs / 25% 11 – 16yrs / 5% adults (based on collection labels)



Activity star rating

73% ★★★★★

20% ★★★★

6% ★★★

1% ★★

*132 feedback cards completed by participants

Sessions delivered:

16 sessions (32 hours) were delivered by INSTAR*:

1 x volunteer session

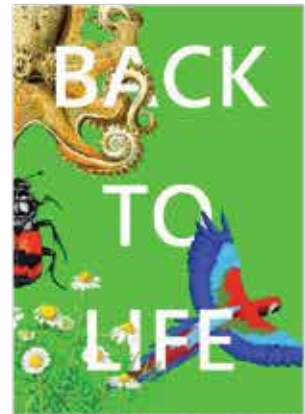
13 x public sessions

2 x school sessions

**additional school sessions were delivered by Sue Mallander*



INSTAR



Collection titles



Bright. In the pink. Woodlands. Wollaton Wildlife. Water tusky. The unknown. **Nature's imagination**. Storia's collection. The orange collection. The drizzle room. Pretty things. Land, sea and air. Sattis. **The amazing animal family**. The animal farm. **Spider room**. Favourites. The batman bat. Poppy's collection. The dead dead animals. Sky. Maya's animal chart. **Animal palace**. Minibeast paradise. **The growth of nature**. Saturn. Mr Collection. Animal life. Dangerous animals. Attractive animals. Nice animals. Interesting species. Wild wonderful things. Scary. Alexa's favourite animals. Crabby crab. Animal friends. Shell animals. Orange creatures. Elizabeth's collection. Black. Circle of life. Feathers. The danger circle. **Mini marathon**. Butterflies. **Wonderful girls**. A1 collection. Special collection. Bat. Seal room. The special colours. Interesting animals. Pink species. Lady bird room. World species. Simply animals. Cute. Outdoor. **Cool species**. Pretty. Animals. Wildlife. **UK wildlife**. Wildlife. A random. A collection of stripes. Scary. Orange. **Amazing winged wonders**. Fantastic flying animals. Sea animals. **Intricate patterns**. Camouflaged animals. Woodland wildlife. Colourful collection. Interesting things. Collection of life. Yellow. The natural world. Deadly animals. My favourites. Leah's collection. **Killer room**. Colourful room. **Black blood**. Harry's creatures. Arctic life. Cool collection. **Things that fly and what they eat**. Beaks. **Before our time**. Sea life. Family. Adventurous animals. Butterflies. Pets. My random animals. Pretty things. Nature fun. Snakes. **Shapes**. Sea stuff. Bugs. The worldwide. British Isles. Mammals. Cool. Crazy insects. Scary. Bugs of the world. Super. Name of each animal in collection. **Spider stars**. Things that fly. Things we have seen. Insects small and pretty. The best sweets. **Happy thoughts**. Dada. Wiggly. The interesting. Pretty room. The animals. The birds. Scary. Spiderman. Cat. Scary. Cute. **Because they are dark**. **Epic collection**. Mini beasts. Animal collection. **Nocturnal world**. **Stars**. Wonders of life. Wonders of nature. Kashish collection. Starfish. Sea creatures. Yellow. Scary. Colourful. Cute animals. Flying animals. Colourful. Flying things. Colour. Cute animals. **Colour code**. Pretty. Colour. Collection. Scary animals. Fat things. **Killer creatures**. The flyers. Sea creatures. The aquatic bunch. Killer creatures. Nice birds. Favourite things. The collection. Bat. My favourites. Fish. Fishes. Mammals. Bats. Things I like. **Scaly and soft**. Animals that live in the sea. Land and flying. Friendly bugs. **Flying honey**. **The wolf**. Ice age large animals. Rabbit. **Strong legs**. Big and little. Colours. **Scales and poison**. Lotties adventure. Orangey world. Sea world. **Food chain**. **Paradise**. **My friends**. Days. Special room. My favourites. **Hatched**. **Spikey things**. Dragonfly. **Long legged creatures**. Colours. Dark themed room. Outdoors. Slime. Ocean. Water animals. **Winged life**. Ocean mammals. Beautiful brilliant birds. Underwater life. Dark creatures. **Moth tree**. The black room. The things that fly. Skeletons. **Wet room**. Things that bite. **Legendary hunters**. The killer crew. Nocturnal. **Eggs and flying**. **Things that have wings**. Pretty things. Favourite animals. Animals I like best. Bat. Butterfly room. The J Collection. My favourites. Living animals. Bugs life. Tropical creatures. Things that fly. **Large and larger**. **Adventure room**. Birdy. Sea animals. Scary animals. Cute creatures. Flying animals. Scary animals. **Bird barn**. Peachy pink. Reptiles. 2upcrimals. Wonderful species. In the garden. Life under the sea. Super. Blue life. Life under the sea. Hide and seek. **The room of exploring**. Ocean life. Night life. Orange sea life. **Invisible world**. 252 collection. **Forest**. **Wild and weird**. Animal collection. Random vibrant creatures that interest us. **Animal mash-up**. **Wild and weird**. Butterflies. Fish pie. Toms pressing moments. Ellie's unicorn collection. Rainbow unicorn. **Colourful clan**. Orange things. Flying animals. Vertebrates. Flying things. Bird room. Colony hardy and friends. Favourite collection. Wildlife and nature. **Nature's gifts**. Thing life. The grassy boscus. Snakes. Yellow. **Sunshine Room**. Under the sea. Bugs life. Cycle of life. Things found in the garden. Small mammals and a bee. **Flying collection**. A nice collection of butterflies. **What bites**. Favourites. **My walk**. Objects of the field. Air land and sea. The great wonder of animals. Lexi's Legs. Rylie's beasts. Harvey's wings. Facts I know. Yellow. Spotty patterns. Nocturnal wildlife. Nocturnal animals. Flying. Flying. Beautiful. Wollaton Hall Collection. Green room. Fred's collection. Colourful. Patterns. Bugs and stuff. Nocturnal. Random (bugs, plants, sea creatures, birds, bats). **The herbivores**. Predators. Big animals. **Night insects**. Woodland creatures. Insect room. Pink sunset. Colourful collection. Mixup No 1. Mix up No 2. **Predator prey**. **The mystery room**. Juni. Yellow and orange. **Big and small**.



Collection titles – what do they reveal?

Popular choices...

Colours in nature, colour codes, bright and dark, colourful clan, sunshine room, green room

Killer creatures, poison, scary, what bites, legendary hunters

Mysterious collections, dark and nocturnal, night insects, invisible, before our time, because they are dark, the black room, the mystery room

Personalisation, naming collections after people or themselves, sense of ownership is important, Lottie's adventure, Maya's animal chart

Uniting features, long legs, scaly, spotted, strong legs, winged

Collective collections forest, large and larger, nocturnal, flying things, UK wildlife, moth tree

Natures offer, Nature's gift, the room of exploring, hatched, super.



Qualitative summary of findings

Observations

Interaction with Project lab installation space

Setting up

From the moment we went about setting up the space for each session, from wheeling the specimens into the museum to revealing them from their box, visitors were instantly engaged. Wearing the white project lab coat with stickers, together with the wooden boxes instantly invited 'comment', 'question' or simply an audience of all ages watching. Additionally children were keen to help out with the setting up (we did not restrict this but actively encouraged it) and if anyone asked questions about specimens either on the trolley or whilst setting up we would stop to talk, invite questions and encourage visitors to have a closer look.

Recommendation based on observation

portable exhibits – roving the floor inviting participation, identifiable and public facing scientists or museum staff, inviting and welcoming approach (for example wearing a badge saying 'ask me about natural history', pop up exhibition space (but not essential) with facilitator, handling collection sessions. Revealing something from a box offers a sense of discovery for visitors and the use of handling collection boxes could be utilised within an exhibition space.

The storage of materials and resources was adequate, however a recommendation for a more joined up approach with museum staff and engagement team would have made a big difference. The majority of museum staff were sadly not encouraging of the project as they were not informed about it, so their assistance when setting up was limiting and basic. On a positive note, when the project got underway and became 'regular' the staff warmed up and showed improved support and interest demonstrating the potential for a more integrated and more involved





Reference library

The use of books opened up interest from all ages which we believe is partially due the choice for display. The library of books were not specifically focused on a family or child audience but for adults and enthusiasts of all levels as well as a range of subjects covered, including museum design, identification, illustration which resulted in broadening of participation. This also opened up family sharing of knowledge about specimens. Some of the vintage books enabled visitors to reflect on their memory of reading them when they were young and our contemporary books opened up new perspectives and were noted and photographed for reference by visitors. The books were also used to identify specimens from our collection boxes to further research and discover more facts – particularly for school sessions but also for families who were very 'involved' in learning and confident at engagement. Additionally these books offered an aesthetic to help create an atmosphere of heritage and contemporary environments coming together. Sometimes visitors needed encouragement to pick up a book (feeling they were not allowed) and when encouraged to pick up a book, shared their sense of surprise and appreciation. The library allowed for visitors to take their time in the space, not just passing through but to stop and discover more. On reflection an sign inviting visitors to explore, read, discover would have been a great addition.

Recommendation based on observation

Not to focus on just children's books, storytelling, etc. for younger audience of families. All ages are interested in information and the level of information can be academic and science focussed too. Many visitors to the museum are adult groups. To support more prolonged engagement with reference materials a seating and reading area could be considered, a space for adults with adults sized seating as well as children's to improve access. A need for seating was often expressed by visitors, particularly those who wanted to stay for prolonged period.





Handling collection

The following specimens/displays were shown on the shelving unit: Barn owl skeleton, snake skeleton, red squirrel, squirrel monkey, underwater scene, mole, stoat, hedgehog, beetles, butterflies, rabbit skeleton. We planned to hire more specimens, but due to the set up and available space (and managing specimens particularly) this did not happen. The handling collection was greatly received by visitors, with all ages interested in 'getting up close'. Not everyone wanted to touch them, with regular displays of fear or concern about the texture of specimens. Once interest was triggered visitors were keen to find out as much about the specimens as possible. It was great to bring the specimens to the level of the individual – for example onto a lower table and visitors felt privileged to get so close to them and not feel they would be asked to 'not touch'. The common questions were:

Is it real? (Many visitors demonstrated confusion about taxidermy and if the animals were once alive, a small few visitors also showed concern and upset for the animal (this opened up discussion about endangered and protected animals now and the importance of the collection for the future).

General questions about the animal such as where is it from? How old is it? Are they from the UK? (This opened up discussion about wildlife, habitat, ecology and demonstrated a passionate interest in the collection)

How did it die? (This opened up discussion about museum collections and collectors, science and research, natural death and hunted specimens, life before photography and the internet and different ways to learn about the natural world.

The skeletons were a fantastic resource and engagement tool as many visitors were surprised for example by the barn owl and also the Rabbit. With a regular reference from children that they were dinosaurs.

The specimens were sometimes opened and brought to the centre of the space for visitors to enjoy. Additionally they were great for visitors (not engaging in the activity to participate (with the support of volunteers).

Lighting was crucial in our display of specimens, with spot lights focussing on the exhibition case, to help draw the eye. Many visitors commented on the poor lighting in the museum, and this was also picked up during the volunteer induction.

Recommendation based on observation

The handling collection can offer a fantastic resource for engagement and opportunities for learning at the museum. All ages are interested in getting up close, and not feeling the barrier between themselves and the exhibit. Specimens displayed at different levels for a wide range of visitors could be considered. The mix of specimens on display next to reference books and other props such as feathers can offer a sense of curiosity and discovery. Better lighting in the whole of the museum and also for individual displays is necessary.

Pop up handling collection opportunities help enliven and refresh the permanent exhibits.



Facilitated engagement

Volunteers

An introductory volunteer session was delivered to demonstrate the activity and to share ideas and experiences, a total of 8 volunteers attended. All volunteers who attended originally signed up to support project lab before 'back to life' and were familiar with the museum. The introductory session was valuable and volunteers contributed ideas and gave feedback, many also shared their relief and excitement about the activity as they felt it would be a valuable engagement opportunity for visitors and groups and they all stated they felt it was a high quality offer. A total of 6 volunteers were able to support the delivery (2 regularly), not all could offer support due to limited availability as many activities were planned during holidays and weekends within a tight timeframe. They all had a go at the activity so they understood it well from a visitor's perspective.

Recommendation based on observation

Volunteers can advise on project plans during training. Their experience with the museum and engaging visitors can offer insightful recommendations and they also feel more involved and valued.

All volunteers reflected their need to be 'active' and feel 'useful'. Volunteers shared how they would not enjoy being a museum invigilator and much prefer engaging visitors with collection specimens and the museum exhibits. This identifies opportunities for new volunteer roles at Wollaton Hall, giving ownership to volunteers as collection 'invigorators' to approach visitors, invite their questions about what is being shown and take part in activities which they devise based on their knowledge and skills.

Volunteers were originally tasked to 'observe' activity and complete a post activity form for Project Lab. In reflection, the expectation for volunteers to collate data and observations was too great, this was due to the popularity of the sessions and for many volunteers a miss match of skills as they were naturally more interested in engaging and supporting activity rather than being an observer 'looking in'. Understandably the concept of a creative consultation is unusual and new for most people, so more lead up training would help grow skills and awareness and could be advantageous for the museum.





Family engagement



Visitor/public engagement

The 'Back to Life' activity invited visitors to be a 'curator' with us at the museum and to create their very own natural history collection. The activity was very popular, and if there was a moment of slight calm, the handling collection provided the perfect invitation to encourage visitor involvement. Interestingly whilst this project was geared towards all ages, only a few participating adults (with no children) took part, in the main this was a family activity.

A successful element of the activity was giving visitors a sense of 'trust' and 'responsibility' together with our encouragement of listening to views and contributions which were visibly valued. Any questions were answered, any requests were considered, and the sense of giving everyone time to experience and take part meant that the activity gave everyone a voice and equality between participant and ourselves. Instructed to 'take time' to think and gain clarity about selection and ideas was an important plan, as was the sense of trust in using sharp pins, with no discouragement or sense of fear of any potential misuse or danger.

Instinctively the majority of parents/carers were keen to get involved and this activity opened up opportunities for shared dialogue and family learning, with many adults (through their children) contributing their ideas, knowledge and thoughts about the museum and the natural sciences collections and displays.

Providing a sticker and photo opportunity at the end of each completed collection was important. Each participant left with a sense of achievement and contribution. A photograph was taken of each collection, with each label also being logged. Instinctively families photographed their children holding up their collections with some families helping return illustrated specimens back into their boxes.

Participants took away only their memories and photographs from the activity and not what they had curated. When asked why, this opened up the opportunity to talk about museum collections and the need for them to be enjoyed by other visitors and that they are precious and remain in the museum for safe keeping, public display and restoration. An additional learning outcome.



Images of both parents involved in activity

Recommendation based on observation

Adults often engage via their children, enabling them to gauge their own level of participation and confidence. This project was intergenerational and resulted in children not being left to take part on their own whilst parents watched on. It is important to programme activities which invite all levels of interest not just aiming for a young audience.

Using formal language and materials requires older children and/or adults to explain, this can aid engagement and family learning.

The tactile nature of pinning the boards and selecting specimens resulted in positive engagement of adults. The preparation and attention to detail of the resources (for example choosing which coloured board to use and the quality of the cases) resulted in a quality experience and end result, which encouraged a keen participation from adults.

Signing up participants to be part of the museum team was impactful and valuable. Giving ownership and a position of importance to make personal decisions was positively received and by listening and hearing individual ideas and enjoying their contribution (however small) made a big difference. Lab coats, stickers, photographs and labels all contributed to this. Removing the barriers between visitor and staff is important, removing the rules and actively responding to questions and queries will result in positive actions and responses.

The handling collection alongside a facilitated activity is a formula which works. Visitors appreciated the sense of trust in touching something which is usefully not allowed, however a standalone 'touch and feel' exhibit is not as successful as a facilitator inviting visitors to get up close to a specimen and ask questions about it. Calling the project 'back to life' was representative of bring life back into and enlivening an exhibit, sometimes it's an enthusiastic volunteer or invigilator who can make this happen.

Visitors were genuinely fascinated to discover the sheer volume of the collection. Information about specific specimens for example eggs and how many there are in the collection fascinated visitors.



School and pupil engagement

School programmes were scheduled to involve both a 'back to life' activity together with an interactive tour of the natural sciences displays across the museum. This summary focusses specifically on the back to life activity.

Activity plan

- Welcome as new members of the museum team. Who works at the museum?
- Introduction to the collection and who we are. Pupils and teachers invited to guess how many specimens there are in the collection together with the variety and diversity of natural sciences specimens. This introduction also included information about who works at the museum and the importance of the collection, its scientific and learning value and the importance of the curator.
- Instilling a sense of responsibility, pupils (in groups of two) selected their collection board and collection theme and reminded about their new roles as 'curators' and how important their role of logging specimens and reporting details was.
- Pupils selected their collections, titled them and completed their collection labels
- Group presentations to share their collection, their inspiration and specimens of special interest.
- Get up close to the collection, handling collection time
- Photographic logging and stickers.

Recommendations based on observations

Pupils fully participated in the activity but it did feel rushed, and the sessions could have done with being longer than 40 minutes. Saying that they all completed the activities successfully and group discussion and reflection took place.

Discussion and feedback activities were just as valuable during the sessions as the specimen selection. Pupils and teachers fully engaged and excellent learning took place at these points, as pupil reflected well and shared their ideas.

Pupils and teachers had all visited the museum previously but they shared little if any knowledge of the collection and mainly associated their link to the museum via their family visits to the park.

Pupils shared their confusion over the life of the collection animals and if they were dead or once alive. This detail is very important for them to digest and connect with what they are seeing. More openness about the collection and how it was made, the life story of particular specimens and how they arrived in Nottingham is important.

Pupils were very keen to share their feelings about endangered species and the need to look after the planet. Therefore themes about endangered species (local and global) are welcomed themes and learning packs could further extend this fascination and knowledge for pupils and teachers.

Getting close to specimens for many pupils was a memorable and beneficial experience. The encouragement to touch and look up close was initially met with trepidation but once their peers took part they soon all followed and were eager to experience more and more. Handling collection experience provides strong learning outcomes.

Multiple pupils shared that they would really like to work at the museum in the future, so there is scope to programme special 'behind the scenes' school and pupil experiences and provide more career information.

Teachers reported back that the session was inspirational with one head teacher stating he was going to replicate the activity back at school. All Teachers and TA's expanded on lots of the themes throughout each session so there is great scope to develop cross curriculum resources.





Schools



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