



# Traveling Exhibitions Featuring Live Animals: ARE THEY FOR YOU?

by Mia Schillace-Nelson

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While a temporary living collection can be a great addition to your programming, it pays to evaluate your staff and institution to ensure you're ready to take one on.

Museums and similar institutions everywhere strive to create unique and compelling programming and exhibitions that make a connection with each and every visitor. Success means achieving that “aha” moment where true learning and engagement occur. Cutting edge technology, interactive experiences, and well-written label copy make up the arsenal in this battle for an individual’s attention amid life’s distractions.

Of course many initiatives must also drive visitor attendance in order to support themselves. Sponsoring temporary or special exhibitions is a common way to accomplish this. And temporary exhibitions with live animals are among the choices available today. While a temporary living collection can be a great addition to your programming, it pays to evaluate your staff and institution to ensure you’re ready to take one on. It is also essential to critically assess the organizations that offer such exhibitions.

In the temporary exhibitions marketplace today, there are several rental options available, with the majority offering smaller animals such as birds, invertebrates including insects and other arthropods, or herpetological collections. While each type of collection has unique considerations, they all share similar ramifications for a hosting institution.

## The Impact of Live Animals

Viewing a live animal as a part of a larger exhibition experience adds a whole new level of engagement and learning for visitors of all ages. Research shows that zoos and aquariums have a measureable impact on the conservation attitudes and

understanding of adult visitors, with nearly half surveyed in a recent study able to recall, up to a year later, a particular animal or species that was the highlight of their visit (Falk, et al. 2007).

Certainly, many institutions that are not zoos house their own small living collection that is used in ongoing or special programming. Harnessing the collective power of an entire gallery dedicated to live animals takes it to the next level, however, and provides new opportunities for engaging programming.

In more than ten years developing and touring traveling exhibitions containing living collections of insects and other arthropods, we have witnessed the impact of live animals on a traditional museum audience, and have seen our clients enjoy high attendance figures with the added benefit of a staff that is engaged and inspired by their role in the care and maintenance of the living collection.

“Without a doubt, we see increased visitor engagement, excitement, and more time spent in the temporary exhibit gallery when live animals are a part of the exhibition,” says Mariah Romaninsky, Education Manager at the Delaware Museum of Natural History. “It makes the extra effort on the part of the staff worthwhile.”

## Evaluating a Potential Exhibition: Housing Concerns and Staff Impact Where Will They Live?

### Indoor Exhibitions

Once you’ve established that a certain temporary exhibition fits within your museum’s mission, the next step is to evaluate the housing needs of the living

collection. Almost all will come with their living environments as an integral part of the display, and some will even have temperature and humidity controls built within each exhibit element. But there is still the need to control the temperature and humidity within the gallery, and some animals are sensitive to direct sunlight (or in some instances, the lack thereof). Ensuring that your gallery is suitable is a top consideration. And if it is lacking, do you have the funds and the time to correct any deficiencies? It pays to know how sensitive your temporary charges can be before they arrive on your doorstep.

#### *Outdoor Exhibitions*

While the vast majority of these types of exhibitions will require an indoor, temperature-controlled environment, temporary bird or butterfly exhibitions are most often displayed in an outdoor location on the grounds. A flat surface, electricity and water sources are needed for such exhibitions, and usually temporary or portable sources are acceptable. Special concerns for an outdoor exhibition include the ambient temperatures at certain times of the year in your region. These conditions can affect the health and well-being of butterflies and birds and thus the window of the public viewing venue dates. The bedding and flowering plants included in such an exhibition are also a part of the living collection, and their care and maintenance is also an important consideration.

#### **How Do They Live?**

While the aesthetics of any museum exhibition are important, live animals also require planning for temperature and



*Butterfly exhibitions connect children with nature. Adventure Children's Museum Butterfly Exhibition. Courtesy Outhouse Exhibit Services.*

humidity control as well as accessibility for the keeper. A well-designed exhibition provides a stable and secure living environment for the animals along with easy accessibility that is integrated well into the display.

#### **Who Will Take Care of Them?**

While some of these traveling exhibitions require specially trained staff provided by the lending organization to accompany and routinely maintain the animals, in most instances it falls to the hosting institution to perform the daily care and feeding. The dedicated staff at most institutions are already overtaxed, and there is no denying that having a living collection, even temporarily, can affect their workload. In some instances, temporary staff members dedicated to the care and maintenance of the exhibition may be necessary, and we've found that butterfly exhibitions benefit greatly from a strong staff or volunteer presence in the gardens. Anticipating the amount of time needed on a daily basis to care for the collection allows your staff to prepare and better accommodate their special needs and requirements. For our insect and arthropod exhibitions, we purposely select animals that are not only unique and interesting, but also hardy and docile. The best display animals are the ones that

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Living exhibitions encourage multi-generational learning. Tarantulas: Alive and Up Close traveling exhibition. Courtesy Outhouse Exhibit Services.

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have that magical mix of showy good looks and a tractable nature.

Aside from the time involved, one must also consider the psychological ability of the staff to maintain the exhibition. On one occasion, we had an institution that was very interested in hosting our exhibition, but whose staff members were too squeamish to fulfill the obligation of daily livestock maintenance. Since the support of one or two staff members is needed to maintain our animals, the museum was unable to bring our exhibition to their institution. Be sure to discuss all of the ins and outs of caring for any living collection, and listen to

your staff if they feel they aren't up to the challenge.

Some lending organizations take care of the staffing issue by providing a specially trained technician, someone who is involved in the daily care of the animals throughout the run of the exhibition. The tradeoff between in-house staff caring for the collection and a technician provided by the lending organization may fall along financial lines. Generally, the more exotic and high-maintenance the animal collection, the higher the cost of the exhibition and the greater the need for an on-site, specially trained technician.

### Selecting a Reputable Organization *Where Do The Animals Come From?*

Any organization that offers exhibitions for rent featuring a living collection should responsibly implement best practices in the procurement, care, and lending of the living collection. Some animals, such as butterflies, require special permitting through the USDA,



Peeling productions' exhibitions are modularly designed. Geckos traveling exhibition. Courtesy Peeling Productions at Clyde Peeling's Reptiland.



A young visitor illuminates a scorpion with UV light. Dr. Entomo's Palace of Exotic Wonders traveling exhibition. Courtesy Outhouse Exhibit Services.

which also implies a longer lead time before you can open an exhibition to the public. It pays to do your homework and make sure that the lending organization has all the necessary paperwork in good order. Check references, and if possible visit the exhibition beforehand to be sure that the animals are kept and displayed in a manner befitting your institution's level of professionalism.

#### **Who Owns the Animals?**

Unless you're looking to add to your own living collection, chances are you're not interested in acquiring the animals for the display. Be sure it is clear to both organizations who provides the animals up front, who owns them, and who is responsible for them at the end of the venue. And there is also the matter of illness or death during your venue; be sure the lending organization has the ability to assist you in dealing with this situation,

and is prepared to replace an animal on short notice.

#### **Care and Feeding**

Remember that animals need to be fed frequently, and the groceries purchased routinely during their stay will most likely be your cost to bear. While most of the time this cost is minimal and easy to quantify, again it pays to ask questions and be prepared.

#### **Powerful Lessons**

Bringing a living, breathing piece of the natural world into a static museum environment can be exciting for your visitors and provide powerful learning opportunities. With the right preparation and dedication, living collections can greatly enhance any museum visit, providing that special moment of engagement that can bring a smile to your visitor's face. ✨

#### **Reference:**

Falk, J.H., Reinhard, E.M., Vernon, C.L., Bronnenkant, K., Deans, N.L.; Heimlich, J. E., (2007). *Why zoos and aquariums matter: Assessing the impact of a visit*. Silver Spring, MD: Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

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