Are We Museums Too?

by Jenny-Sayre Ramberg with Sonal Bhatt and Kitty Connolly

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At zoos, aquariums and botanic gardens, we have some mixed opinions about identifying ourselves as museums. On the one hand, ICOM and the American Association of Museums (AAM) embrace zoos, aquariums and botanic gardens as museums, and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) defines us as "gateways through which millions of people learn about and value the rich diversity of life that is humankind's wildlife heritage." However, the public seems a bit confused. Are we museums? Conservation organizations? Entertainment venues? In fact, Congress was sufficiently concerned about the cultural value of zoos and aquariums to exclude them specifically in 2009 from receiving stimulus funding, along with other settings where Americans have "fun," such as casinos and public swimming pools (Public Law 111-5).

In addition, in recent years, more and more museums, botanic gardens and zoos have engaged in multidisciplinary and collaborative projects that have blurred the once-distinct lines between "museums with artifacts" and museums with living collections. The Huntington Garden's *Plants are up to Something*, Monterey Bay Aquarium's *Jellies: Living Art*, Brooklyn Botanic Gardens' and Brooklyn Children's Museum's *Plants and People* and other exhibitions curate across disciplines of living collections, children's and art museums. All these projects have been well received by the public and have received accolades from the museum community.

So are we museums? And why does it matter? Following are three perspectives from staff at living collections institutions. These personal reflections look at staff identities, visitor perceptions and changing missions and roles.

Brooklyn Botanic Garden "Do Not" signage. Signs like these are placed near select, important trees in the collection. Courtesy of Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Please Don't Climb the Collection *by Sonal Bhatt*

At Brooklyn Botanic Garden, visitor evaluation indicates that our visitors fall into two categories. The first is those who are extremely knowledgeable about plants and horticulture. For this audience, learning about plants rates high in importance. This audience recognizes that our garden is a curated botanic collection. For another audience group (the majority), the primary reasons for visiting include being in a peaceful place, being outdoors in nature, beauty, and spending social time with friends and family. Plants are hardly mentioned and are often perceived as scenery.

Both types of visitor have entirely valid and acceptable reasons for visiting. However, it is of the utmost importance that we indoctrinate

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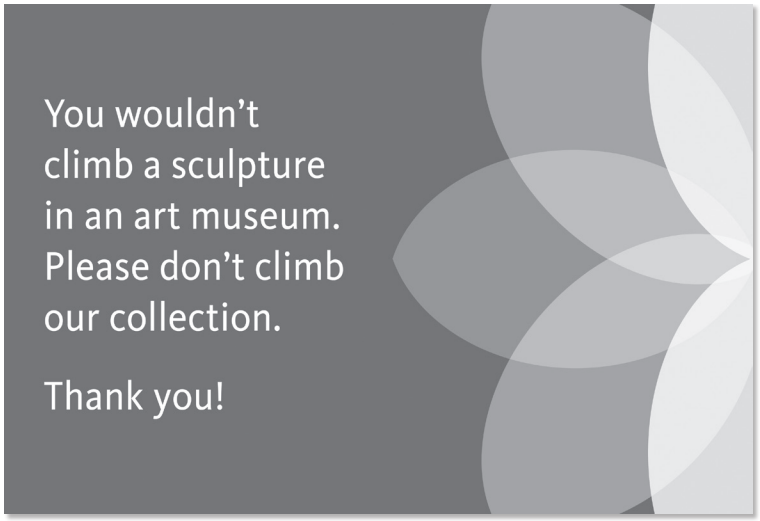

We are trying to teach our visitors that our plants are part of a living collection in a living museum. Courtesy of Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

this second audience with the concept that we are, in fact, a living museum with a specialty in plants. Why? Let me recount a story. It's a sunny day at Brooklyn Botanic Garden. I see a family of four in the Plant Family Collection. They are obviously glad to be outside in a beautiful, natural place as they laugh and play. They are enjoying one of the oldest and most important trees in our collection. One child clings to a gnarled branch, and one is picking at the bark of this fragile weeping beech, which is more than 75 years old.

I realize I should immediately step in and remedy this situation, yet I feel a twinge of regret. This family is engaged in a rich, multisensory experience in nature. In urban New York, this isn't entirely common.

When I approach the family to explain the rules of the Botanic Garden, they look completely perplexed and unaware and say, "We are sorry; we didn't realize we couldn't do that here."

In a traditional museum, this would never be unclear. At Brooklyn Botanic Garden, this distinction—that this is a botanic garden, not a park—is the number one message staff members wish visitors to understand. Why do we care about this distinction? Being recognized as a curated collection indicates that the garden is different from other green spaces. It invokes respect and careful treatment of the collection. It signals there is something to be learned and something of special value in this place. It signifies a level of expertise and encourages a level of appreciation for the planning that goes into creating the garden experience.

I don't think we need to bemoan the reasons our visitors decide to visit the garden. Being in a peaceful place to socialize with your family is important. Instead, if we can supplement our visitors' understanding of why we value every plant in the garden as a "work of art," we can help them understand its importance, as well as the importance of plant ecosystems. Then we can discuss beauty, art, conservation, and the cultural history of plants in a more meaningful way and better achieve our mission.

We are trying to accomplish this in our messaging. The most direct approach is creating signs that simply address "What is a botanic garden?" and "Why is a botanic garden different from a park?" In addition, we are trying to teach our visitors that our plants are part of a living collection in a living museum. This is an ongoing challenge, but we think it is important to engage our audience in this discussion.

The Challenge of Internal Perceptions and Multiple Identities
by Kitty Connolly

In many respects, gardens see themselves as museums and follow accepted museum practices. The American Public Gardens Association (APGA, 2011) suggests that minimum requirements for a public garden are:

- The garden is open to the public, at least on a part-time basis. The garden functions as an aesthetic display, educational display and/or site

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for research.

- The garden maintains plant records.
- The garden has at least one professional staff member (paid or unpaid).
- Garden visitors can identify plants through labels, guide maps or other interpretive materials.

Gardens also have collections policies. They identify, document, track, and care for their specimens, and they welcome visitors. In all of these ways gardens seem to fall within the accepted definition of "museum."

But in the realm of interpretation, many gardens place a stronger emphasis on display—even spectacle—than on education. Miniature trains and seasonal flowerbeds are often held up as exhibits with superior merit. A recent issue of *Public Garden* (Stauffer, 2009) showed greater interest in interpretive exhibitions, although that goal was not uniformly embraced. Featured exhibitions combined elements of living and non-living collections, drawing on rare books, photographs, sculptures, and seasonal displays to attract new and repeat visitors.

Unfortunately, all too often the gardens seem to be merely the setting for these exhibitions rather than their subject.

In addition to an ambivalence regarding interpretive exhibitions, another issue facing gardens as they strive to be museums is the perception of other collections-based organizations. At The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, we have extensive living and non-living collections. The library and art collections hold more than 8 million manuscripts, books, photographs, prints, pieces of ephemera, paintings, sculptures, decorative art objects, and drawings. The botanical collections consist of at least 25,000 living and preserved specimens in 120 acres of landscaped gardens. While the Huntington is clearly collections centered, its primary identity is as a research institution, rather than a museum. The volume and perception of non-living, cultural artifacts as the "real collections" creates certain challenges for interpreting the plants. For example, the Huntington lists two art and two library galleries among its exhibitions but does not promote its own permanent exhibition with living collections. This science-themed exhibition, *Plants Are up to Something,* is housed in a working greenhouse and was the Huntington's first winner of NAME's

Visitors investigating plants in the exhibition Plants Are up to Something**.** *Courtesy of The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanic Gardens.*

In Hot Pink Flamingos: Stories of Hope in a Changing Sea *visitors meet playful Magellanic penguins and learn about how climate change is making it harder for these penguins to find food. Courtesy of Monterey Bay Aquarium.*

Excellence in Exhibitions award. Yet it is not perceived even by the Huntington itself as a museum exhibition, possibly because of its unconventional subject and setting. To further emphasize the distinction between museum practice and the interpretation of living collections, the 2009 mission statement for the Education Department states that staff "… utilize best practices in museum and garden education." A clear and purposeful distinction was made between practices employed in museums and those employed in gardens out of concern that techniques used with living collections could be subsumed into museum education as a whole.

Of the more than 500 gardens that are members of APGA, fewer than five percent are accredited by AAM. While accreditation is a serious commitment that most gardens can't afford, perhaps the botanical world suffers because it excludes itself from the larger category of "museum." With these sorts of internal distinctions and the evident hesitation of gardens to throw themselves wholeheartedly into the wider community of museums, gardens may be losing the benefit of the experience and best practices of our museum colleagues, especially in the areas of interpretative display.

Of Service to Society and its Development
by Jenny-Sayre Ramberg

Zoos and aquariums may have begun as collections of curiosities, but in the last 20 years, all AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums have taken on conservation missions. We don't stop at the purposes of education, study and enjoyment, but also see ourselves as advocates for the conservation of our natural heritage—nature and wildlife. The 2007 AZA study "Why Zoos and Aquariums Matter" helped us understand the impact of these changes on the visitor experience.

- Visits to accredited zoos and aquariums prompt individuals to reconsider their role in environmental problems and conservation action, and see themselves as part of the solution.
- Visitors believe zoos and aquariums play an important role in conservation education and animal care.
- Visitors believe they experience a stronger connection to nature as a result of their visit.

At the Monterey Bay Aquarium, it was our visitors who first pointed out that the aquarium was about more than revealing the extraordinary wonders of Monterey Bay.

After seeing how climate change is affecting amazing animals like the flamingos, corals, and penguins in the exhibition, Hot Pink Flamingos*, signage invites visitors to make a pledge to do one more thing to slow climate change and help these animals. Courtesy of Monterey Bay Aquarium*

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Aquariums and zoos have moved away from the earlier definitions of museums as holders of collections and purposefully toward the current idea of museums as engaged with their community and actively preserving natural heritage. These findings reveal that aquariums and zoos are succeeding in communicating value and care for our natural heritage (AZA, 2007).

At the Monterey Bay Aquarium, it was our visitors who first pointed out that the aquarium was about more than revealing the extraordinary wonders of Monterey Bay. In 1991, we asked visitors what they thought the aquarium was about. They told us it was about taking care of the oceans—even though that message was never explicitly stated. In 1996, we changed the mission of the aquarium from "stimulate interest, increase knowledge and promote stewardship of the world's ocean environment through innovative exhibits, public education and scientific research" to "inspire the conservation of the oceans." We opened new exhibits addressing conservation issues, from pollution to fishing, developed new programs and continued to talk to visitors to learn what impact this new mission had on their visit. Visitors reported they wanted us to help them understand what they could do to help protect the oceans. They wanted to be able to take positive, constructive actions that would make a difference.

In 1997, an exhibition on the then little-known problems facing fisheries revealed a need for information about making sound seafood choices. This need sparked the internationally recognized program Seafood Watch, which helps people make sustainable seafood choices and support more sustainable fishing practices. The positive response and success of this program demonstrated that people were hungry for trustworthy information about choices that support their values—and they trusted us to provide that information.

However, more recently, visitors have been less certain about the aquarium taking on current issues that affect society, like the impacts of climate change on the oceans and the ways we can work together to slow climate change. While a majority of our visitors express support for the aquarium addressing the issue, a significant number question why an aquarium is talking about climate change, and some absolutely object. This raises a number of questions about institutional identity and the

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role of an aquarium, or museum, in society. When a museum takes on a controversial or politically charged subject, are we creating a "safe place to talk about dangerous ideas" to borrow from Elaine Gurian, or are we spoiling the experience for people who are coming for "education, study and enjoyment"? Can the definition of "museum" grow to include social advocacy, or will that mean we're becoming something else? As museums grow into their aspirational definition of being "in the service of society and its development" or socially responsible, will that affect our currently high credibility?

Conclusion

So why does it matter that zoos, aquariums, and botanic gardens are museums? The three perspectives represented here illustrate some of the questions that come up when discussing the question "what is a museum?" at living collections institutions, like zoos, aquariums and botanic gardens. A desire for the public respect attributed to museums and their collections is in some tension with fierce independent identities and some fears about being lost in the sea of larger, seemingly more important institutions whose non-living, cultural heritage collections are perceived to have more value than our living, natural heritage collections. On the other hand we feel we're trailblazers in developing ways to be "in the service of society and its development," developing new models and strategies for "appropriate" social advocacy.

Professionally, being identified as museums makes us part of a larger group of institutions in service to society and its development. We have important roles in honoring the value of humanity's natural heritage. Having professional acknowledgment from our museum peers as important social and cultural institutions supports our authority in our missions to inspire protection of humanity's natural heritage, nature and wildlife. For staff, it seems that identifying with a larger museum community offers access to a broader range of expertise in interpretation and all aspects of our business. Witness the success of "hybrid" exhibitions that bring together the interpretive approaches and collections of art, children's and natural history museums with living collections. We succeed when we learn from each other. And beyond exhibitions, new approaches to visitor services, programs, financial models, and more are available from diverse museum colleagues. But isn't it curious that even though zoos, aquariums, and botanic gardens have been included in the official description of museums for over 55 years (see the 1946 ICOM definition elsewhere in this issue) we're still talking about it?

Recognition from our visitors, from elected officials to toddlers, is the most complex. It would be easier to say public recognition would be great: zoos, aquariums and botanic gardens would be the first on the stimulus bills and visitors would admire each plant, fish and animal as a work of art. But what about our unique identities, conservation advocacy and generally more broad appeal to the public? Can we maintain what makes us different and take on the identity of museum? Or is the identity of museum getting large enough to take us in just as we are?

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