



# Hidden Legacies in Traveling Exhibitions

by Vicky Dawson and Allison Hecker

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*When we received proposals for this issue from Vicky Dawson of Taunton, UK, and Allison Hecker of Lincoln, NE, we were struck by the similarities in the descriptions of their work, despite great differences in topic and setting. Each project manager had consciously created structures and processes to ensure that her traveling exhibition had a lasting impact on its host museums and on the communities those museums serve. The authors graciously agreed to collaborate on this article, and we think readers will find that their combined accounts confirm that vision and effort on the part of traveling exhibition organizers can leave a continuing legacy. The Editor*

**T**his article examines the impact a touring exhibition can have on the host museum and on the communities it serves. The project managers of two exhibitions, one in England and one in the United States, conclude that the true value found in hosting a traveling exhibition can remain long after the exhibition's departure.

## The Projects

The Nature Explore traveling exhibition *Exploring Trees Inside and Out* is a collaborative project of the Arbor Day Foundation and Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, both based in Lincoln, NE in the United States. The Arbor Day Foundation is the nation's largest non-profit organization dedicated to tree planting, and Dimensions Foundation provides research-based resources to organizations across the country to help children, families and educators connect more deeply with the natural world. The exhibition was created by these organizations as part of

the Nature Explore program and serves as a vehicle for education and outreach for sharing the important message of connecting children with nature.

Allison Hecker's role as the manager of the traveling exhibition is to serve as the liaison between all parties involved in the loan and make-all arrangements with the hosting venues. She also develops and manages the exhibition budget, working to maximize the outreach of the exhibition and to measure exposure of the associated message. *Exploring Trees Inside and Out* began its tour across the U.S. in 2008 and has visited ten major cities.

*Treasures from the Earth* is a touring exhibition about the archaeology of South West England. Over a period of three years, from February 2009 to February 2012, it traveled to 13 museums in the counties of Devon, Somerset, and Cornwall. The exhibition aims to inspire people to get involved in archaeology in both field and museum contexts: the public through the displays and activities programs, and staff at host museums through working alongside professional archaeologists (curators and excavators) and participating in training events.

Of the 13 museums only three employ trained curators of archaeology. Four of the 13 are run solely by volunteers. As project officer Vicky Dawson is responsible for creating the exhibition, negotiating loans, managing the project designer, arranging and overseeing the tour. She also manages the budget, evaluation, and reporting to the funding bodies.

## Community Involvement

Both of these exhibitions serve as examples of how involvement of the community can be critical to the success of an exhibition project. Through the outreach programs described below, both exhibitions became important catalysts for change.

*Exploring Trees Inside and Out* provides the fundamentals to create an experience children carry with them after they leave the exhibition, taking what they learned and applying it outside in their schoolyards, backyards, playgrounds, and parks. The desire to reach more children, families and educators with the important message of connecting children with nature, and to have greater long-term impact, grew as the exhibition prepared to travel across the country. The developers soon realized that community support and a commitment from the hosting locations would be crucial for this important message to be embraced and shared across the country.

Staff of the Arbor Day Foundation and Dimensions began working with scheduled hosting locations to make arrangements to hold open Community Conversations. This outreach was focused on groups such as educators, parents, community leaders, business leaders, and environmentalists. These interested parties were brought together in an open forum to discuss and create definitive plans to continue the work of connecting children with nature in their communities and cities.

*Treasures from the Earth* involved local communities in both the preparation of a local dimension to the exhibition at



Soaring like birds in the blue screen experience of *Exploring Trees* at the *Imagine It!* Children's Museum in Atlanta. Courtesy of Doubletree Hotels.

each hosting location, and in programs of activities organized by the host museums to add value and engage new audiences. The finds identification days were particularly successful in drawing metal detectorists into the museums. The relationship between professional archaeologists and these amateurs can be difficult, so a change of attitude on both sides is welcome and will continue to reap benefits. Other activities, such as fun days, a flint knapping workshop, a treasure hunt and murder mystery were specifically targeted at children and their families. The intention was to enrich children's lives by helping them to value their heritage, inspiring them to play their part in its discovery and preservation.

### **The Involvement of the Host Museums**

Both traveling exhibitions have also had a lasting impact on the host museums and their workforce. By engaging pro-actively with the traveling shows, staff on both sides of the Atlantic have experienced similar successes and challenges. Three of the successes are described here.

### ***Raising the Profile of the Host Museum in the Community***

These exhibitions have raised the profile of the host museums within their communities. Over 25,000 people have seen *Treasures from the Earth* as it tours small, often volunteer-run, community museums. *Exploring Trees Inside and*

The project managers of two exhibitions, one in England and one in the United States, conclude that the true value found in hosting a traveling exhibition can remain long after the exhibition's departure.



New recruits to the Roman army are drilled by a centurion at a Treasures from the Earth activity day at Wells and Mendip Museum. ©Wells and Mendip Museum.

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*Out* has welcomed over 1 million visitors in the ten cities it has visited. Many of the host museums have recorded increased visitation as a result of hosting these exhibitions.

The Community Conversations inspired by *Exploring Trees Inside and Out* have brought the host museums to the attention of more diverse and new audiences. They present the museums as active participants in topical debates and as channels for change within their cities.

Museums hosting *Treasures from the Earth* have gained kudos and publicity from the loan of archaeological finds, some of national significance, some on display to the public for the first time. The most spectacular of these were the four thousand year old Penwith gold lunula lent from the British Museum to Penlee House Gallery and Museum in Penzance and the 13th century enamelled glass beaker lent from the Victoria & Albert Museum to Lawrence House Museum, Launceston.

#### **Forging New Community Partnerships**

Both programs have forged new partnerships between the host museums and a range of organizations within their communities and the wider regions. Karen Kelly, Director of

Exhibits and Programming of Imagine It! Children's Museum of Atlanta, commented on the experience of hosting *Exploring Trees Inside and Out*. "This wonderful exhibition gave the Museum the opportunity to create fabulous partnerships with the Georgia Forestry Commission, Centennial Olympic Park, Trees Atlanta, and others who care about the environment and its careful stewardship and management."

Nearly 50 organizations, ranging from museums to local archaeological societies, local authority historic environment services, universities and metal detectorists have contributed to *Treasures from the Earth*. Many of these have not worked together previously.

#### **Providing Professional Development for Museum Staff**

Participation in the associated programs has raised the skill level and knowledge of the workforce at host museums in both countries. Hosting staff have had opportunities to work alongside colleagues from different disciplines, seeing firsthand the practice and ethics of a range of professions.

Volunteers and staff at each museum hosting *Treasures from the Earth* have worked alongside the project team to manage the loan of exhibits. They have been through the process of facilities checking, insurance, condition reports and inspection, packing objects for transport and loan documentation, many for the first time. The detail involved in the loan of exhibits from the two national museums was particularly instructive.

The opportunity for museum staff to

attend the Community Conversations surrounding *Exploring Trees Inside and Out* has allowed them to witness the impact of their work. Museum directors have reported that their staffs' personal involvement in community change, due to this exhibition, has led to new excitement and confirmation of their contributions through a career in the museum field.

### Challenges

As well as successes, hosting a major traveling exhibition brought challenges to the host venues. In addition to serving as the hosting location, the hosts also committed to participating in the associated public programs. Hosts of *Treasures from the Earth* had to further commit themselves to researching, scripting, and displaying an exhibition on an archaeological activity/event local to them.

Budget restrictions, not only for traveling exhibitions, but for any associated programmatic support, present an ongoing challenge. One solution is to be able to provide a high value resource with traveling exhibitions. Often hosting organizations are highly motivated to forge partnerships with specific individuals and organizations, and the outreach created with programs such as Community Conversations and internal industry training can be leveraged, greatly increasing the return on investment.

One difficulty for the archaeology project was the disappointingly low take up of the offer of tailor-made training workshops by host museums: only five of the 13 venues requested a session. Investigation revealed that this is not because there is no desire to learn but rather because of a

lack of capacity in the host museums to release staff and volunteers to attend. This is an aspect of the project that we will probe further during the final evaluation.



School classes arrive to visit the exhibit at Imagine It! Children's Museum in Atlanta. Courtesy of Doubletree Hotels.

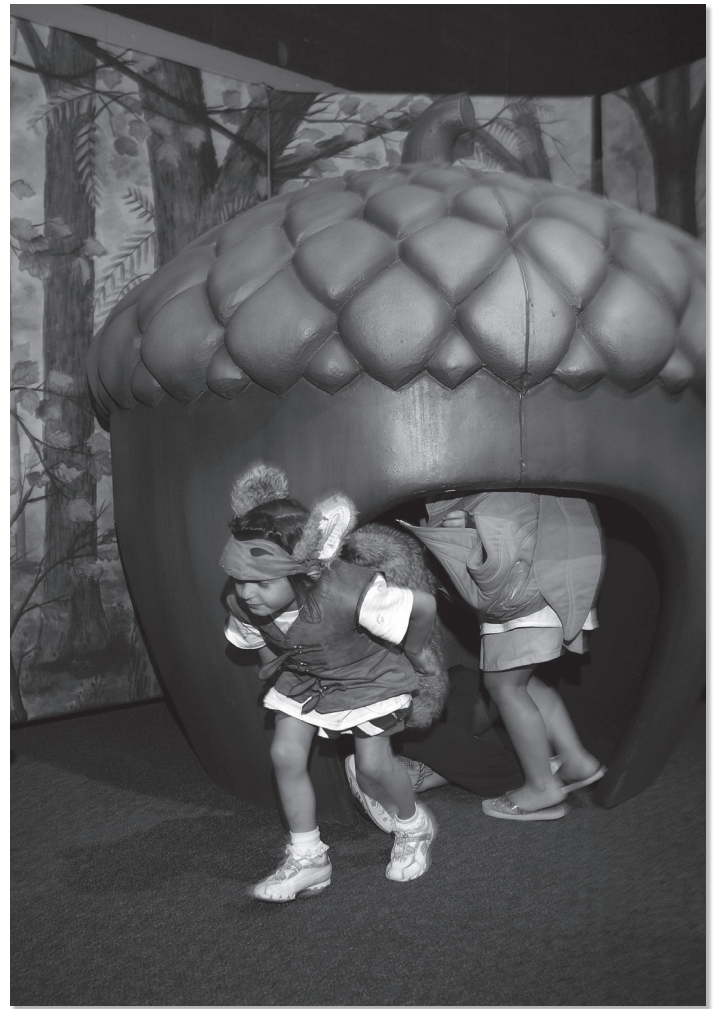
### Lasting legacies

#### *Exploring Trees Inside and Out*

- While the exhibition was visiting the California Science Center, the Los Angeles Community Conversation hosted representatives from the National Park Service, museums, church preschools, colleges and universities. They have continued to conduct workshops since the initial forum.
- The associated Community Conversation held in St. Louis during the exhibition's visit to Missouri Botanical Garden was attended by 50 individuals representing 31 organizations with an interest in



David Packer of the Victoria & Albert Museum checks the condition of a 13th century enamelled glass beaker on its arrival at Lawrence House Museum, Launceston. ©Fiona Pitt.



In full squirrel costume, children enjoy the Giant Acorn at the Imagine It! Children's Museum in Atlanta. Courtesy of Doubletree Hotels.

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connecting children with nature. As a result of that forum, a core group of participants from diverse backgrounds formed the St. Louis Action Collaboration for Children. This group has continued to grow and now provides leadership across the state of Missouri as the Gateway Children's Nature Connection.

- As *Exploring Trees Inside and Out* has traveled across the United States we have witnessed small groups of individuals make a difference in their communities by maximizing the message of a traveling exhibition. Their actions have created a blueprint for change that can be implemented by hosting facilities in other communities.

### *Treasures from the Earth*

- The partnership formed between Wells & Mendip Museum in Somerset and the Mendip Area of Outstanding National Beauty (ANOB) to finance an exhibition on the work of local archaeological research groups to accompany *Treasures from the Earth* while it was at this small independent museum in February 2010 has continued to reap benefits. A festival of geology—Mendip Rocks—was jointly mounted at the museum in summer 2011, and the conversation continues as the museum develops its strategy for a complete redisplay of its internationally important collection of speleological material.



A visitor at Penlee House Gallery & Museum views a case of objects that toured with the show and one of the graphic panels. ©Vince Bevan.

- Inspired by their success, Penlee Art Gallery & Museum in Penzance, Cornwall, has added the archaeological workshops it developed for *Treasures from the Earth* to their ongoing educational programme for schools.
- Members of the local archaeological societies who attended the pottery identification training session at Weston-super-Mare Museum in Somerset continue to apply the skills and knowledge they gained to the fieldwork they have undertaken in 2011. The groups, including the Yatton, Congressbury, Claverham and Cleeve Research Team, Clevedon Archaeological Society and Charterhouse Environs Research Team, have carried out a range of surveys of their local areas during the year.

Clearly both projects have achieved considerable lasting benefits for the institutions, individuals, and communities they have touched. Host museums are already building on the partnerships forged to create other innovative and inspiring projects, sharing costs and drawing on a wider range of skills and knowledge. They are capitalizing on the raised profile of their museum to attract new and repeat visitors, thus embedding themselves more deeply as a vital community asset. In today's market the significant value in hosting a traveling exhibition goes beyond gate numbers, tour dates, and partnerships. The true value is found in the legacies left in the host museums and in their communities. ✨

Exploring *Trees Inside and Out* website address:  
<http://www.arborday.org/explore/travelingexhibit/>

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