

Inspiring Visitor Action in Museums: Examining the Social Diffusion of Ideas, *COURAGE and Time's Running Out—Act Now*

by Jon Deuel, Jenny Sayre Ramberg, John Fraser, and Tom Hanchett

Jon Deuel is Audience Research Specialist, Monterey Bay Aquarium. He may be contacted at jdeuel@mbayaq.org.

Jenny Sayre Ramberg is Senior Exhibition Developer/Writer, Monterey Bay Aquarium. She may be contacted at jsramberg@mbayaq.org.

John Fraser is Director of Public Research and Evaluation, Wildlife Conservation Society. He may be contacted at jfraser@wcs.org.

Tom Hanchett is Staff Historian, Levine Museum of the New South. He may be contacted at thanchett@museumofthenewsouth.org.

What pictures come into your mind when you think about people taking action for social, environmental or political causes? What if that action takes place in a museum? How does that change your picture?

During the *Inspiring Visitor Action* session at the 2007 AAM Annual Meeting in Chicago, we attempted to shed some light on what visitor action looks like in a museum by sharing examples from our recent work. We hoped to build on Robert Archibald's suggestion that museums have become the new town square: places that foster community conversations (Archibald, 2004). However, our goal was to push that definition of museums to include cultural leadership. Furthermore, we wanted to challenge the presumption that museums are mirrors of our time and propose that museums can become valuable agents of positive social change.

With this article, we offer new scholarship to this ongoing discussion about the role of museums by placing our work in the context of a changing society and systematically measuring our outcomes. Finally, we hope to add to the community discourse by sharing how we promote and recognize visitor action in our museums. To set the theoretical footing in which to think about visitor action in museums, John Fraser, from the Wildlife Conservation Society will provide thoughts about the social diffusion of ideas. Tom Hanchett will discuss the ways history exhibitions at Levine Museum of the New South have contributed to civic dialog on difficult issues, such as race and gender. Finally, Jon Deuel and Jenny Sayre Ramberg will describe the development, design, and evaluation process of an exhibit that was

an experiment in visitor-based action for the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

The Social Diffusion of Ideas By John Fraser

We can offer unique value to humanity by building on the importance of animals in our cultural history, the primordial affection people have for landscapes, and the imminence of the biodiversity crisis. Our mission requires that we find a concept of nature in which the sharp divisions between humans and nature are removed. Steve Sanderson, CEO & President, Wildlife Conservation Society.

At WCS, we believe that our zoos are essential places for people to explore their relationship and responsibilities toward the natural world. Personally, I believe that museums are places where groups develop shared concerns and reveal their motivations to participate in social change. With this talk, I will explore how it is possible to rethink the museum experience based on our work with zoos. I will illustrate where we can find cultural transformation agents within our midst, and I will reflect on how we can, as institutions, empower those agents to be more effective as culture workers.

I will do so through considering four concepts:

- recognizing communities,
- identity work,
- development of social knowledge, and
- the emotional support of activists.

Communities

How do we recognize the communities that are important to causing social change? We, as

... we wanted to challenge the presumption that museums are mirrors of our time and propose that museums can become valuable agents of positive social change.

museum workers, are a knowledge community that plays a critical role in creating the stories that will help to shape the society we wish to inhabit. Inspiring action is a reciprocal exchange between our knowledge communities and those who come to share our concerns through meeting us in our galleries, outreach programs, and exhibits. We take on the role of culture worker when we stage exhibitions or programs that go beyond teaching about things and instead seek to change how people act in society. One of the things we've learned about our core audience at the New York zoos and aquarium is that our audience shares the same values about nature protection as our staff and environmental educators (Fraser, Saunders, and Meyers, in prep), being significantly more concerned about animals and nature rights than an average community member. We've also discovered that while our visitors may not have the practical knowledge of where conservation action is needed, they already know the principles of conservation and how to implement a conservation strategy. This knowledge has led us to conclude that zoo visitors are part of our conservation community, not outsiders to that community. They share our values and aspirations.

Identity

One's identity is comprised of many elements, which include both those aspects developed by the self and those that are socially defined. We understand ourselves, in part, by how other people interact with us. We use these personal and social elements of identity to guide our social actions and interactions with others (Baumeister, 1998). We have come to realize that our zoo exhibitions serve this function by helping people, who generally visit in social groups, to negotiate their individual and shared

concerns related to nature values; to express their concern for protecting nature; and to help develop their expected norms for social action based on those values.

Social Diffusion of Ideas

I believe that the majority of conversations about social change sponsored by museums have been built on a false notion that action is individual, rather than group supported. When we consider democracy as the right to act as an individual, it's the right to contribute to a change that will happen for everyone in the community, a collective act of decision-making that requires group assent. The *I-self* has the ability to relate to others and can understand itself in the context of others. But it is only when the *I-self* joins with others that a *we-self* exists, which can operate within our political economy to promote social change. It is the *we-self* that makes decisions in our society, and it is the *we-self* that people develop when they visit our zoos and aquarium.

Empowering Culture Workers

As I said at the beginning of this talk, WCS has started our work by looking close to our core. We've started to apply collective identity theory to our research in an effort recalibrate how we measure action and impact, thinking beyond the individual to look at the role and influence of larger groups. With every exhibition experience, visitors redefine their *we-self* in terms that are acceptable to their visiting group in relation to the views we present as culture workers.

But I feel that describing this theory would not be adequate without sharing a few examples of how we see this exploration of a *we-identity* happening in a zoo. In my first example, I can

I believe that museums are places where groups develop shared concerns and reveal their motivations to participate in social change.

I believe that the majority of conversations about social change sponsored by museums have been built on a false notion that action is individual, rather than group supported.

(continued from page 21)



A mother promotes her child's exploration of nature within the limits she feels are appropriate. Photo: Julie Larsen Maher ©WCS.

show you a child discovering a living butterfly. The mom in the photo is demonstrating to her child how their family values animals and nature and seeks knowledge about the natural world. Through the family relationship and zoo experience, this represents one way that families instill a sense of concern, wonder, and inquiry that can lead to the values that we believe matter as conservationists.

At the Central Park Zoo (<http://www.imls.gov/profiles/Apr06.shtm>), we explored how exhibit signs can change the way people discuss their experience with the zoo. This project looked to communicate with visitors about the values related to our conservation mission; a moral mission that we hope will inspire action to protect the nature on which we depend. This premise, however, stood in contrast to the traditional portrayal of zoos as science learning sites. We developed a poetry exhibition that used metaphor to present a view about the value of nature, pulling excerpts from the nature poetry canon of the last few millennia to illustrate the way we, the zoo employees, think about and value nature.

Our research examined the effect of this exhibition strategy, and demonstrated that poetry in the zoo changed how people talked about their responsibility to nature. Following the installation, visitors were more likely to situate themselves as “responsible for nature.” Our guests also told us that the reason they came to the zoo was not to gain science information but to explore their internal relationship to and values about nature.

The poetry resonated with them in a meaningful way because it validated and emphasized the values these visitors felt when they saw the living animals in our exhibits. To have concern for another being as if it is your self is perspective-taking, which has been causally linked to the development of the biospheric values found among those who act to protect nature (Schultz, 2000). Therefore, we now conclude from our research that zoo experiences have the potential to promote understanding of what it is to be animal on this planet, the first step toward inspiring conservation action in society.

If we are to consider the museum’s role as a change agent, it is also important to focus on those in the community closest to our core who can take these ideas beyond our walls: our volunteers. I propose that we re-imagine the role of volunteer as a culture worker. Volunteers spend only part of their time in our museums, but they spend full-time in society. Volunteers don’t just deliver free education programs; they interact with their families and friends outside of our parks every day.

To learn more about how our volunteers spread our mission, we talked to them about their thoughts about nature, their concerns for the future, and the value of their experiences inside and outside of our parks. We found that they were not only concerned with changing how children think about nature, they were also taking that concern well beyond the zoo itself. Our volunteers described changing their behaviors to live a more conservation-minded

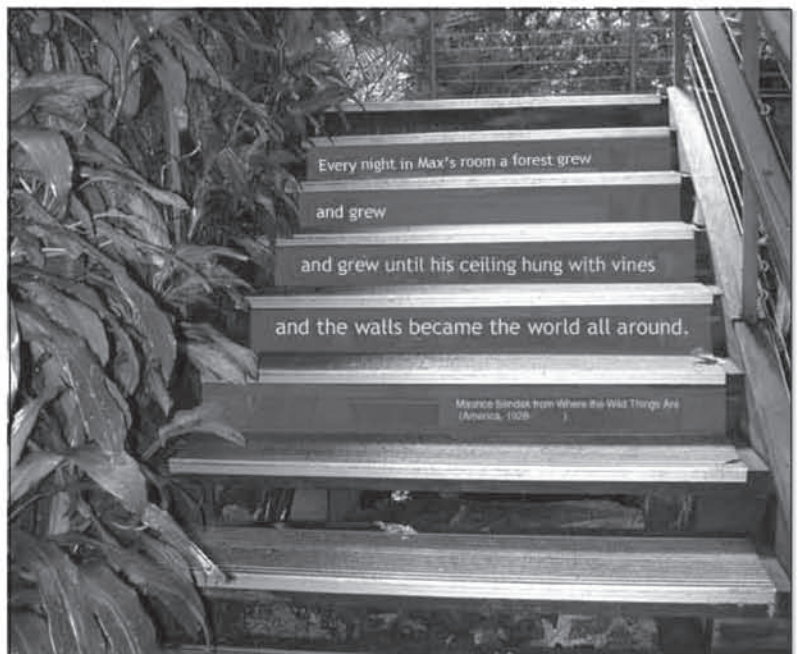
lifestyle, attending more political events than before they joined us; becoming vocal activists for change at their bridge clubs; writing letters to politicians; and even infiltrating the blogosphere with conservation information. While we do not direct them to become activists and advocates outside of the zoo, it has happened. The strong social support network that exists within the volunteers, in addition to their shared values for wildlife and the mission of the zoo, appears to have inspired our volunteers to become activists who carry the values they share with the zoo and each other into society.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with some thoughts about our new research and how we hope to act on the theory I have outlined today. With the help of funding from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, we are in the midst of a three-year assessment of how zoos are valued in our society. We hope to gain new answers about why zoos are valued and how these value sets relate to the zoo community's mission in conservation. We believe this assessment will offer a new roadmap for all cultural institutions to reconsider how to advance healthy new dialogues about the future we wish to have for our democratic society. We believe that by knowing how they are valued in society, zoos will be able to engage more proactively in the political action that our visitors desire. We also believe that zoos can more effectively bring people and nature closer together through understanding how we are situated in the development of nature values in all the communities we touch. As we implement this theory in our programs, we believe we will become more effective culture workers, fostering the protection of the natural world on which we all depend.



Rumi poetry at the entry to the Central Park Zoo as part of the Poets House/Central Park Zoo, **The Language of Conservation** exhibition curated by Sandra Alcosser. Photo: Julie Larsen Maher ©WCS.



Maurice Sendak's poetry installed on stairs at the Central Park Zoo as part of the Poets House/Wildlife Conservation Society, **The Language of Conservation** exhibition curated by Sandra Alcosser. Photo: Julie Larsen Maher ©WCS.

(continued from page 23)

The COURAGE Project— Catalyst for Civic Dialogue by Tom Hanchett, PhD

In 2004 Levine Museum of the New South created “Conversations on **COURAGE**” as the civic dialogue component of its civil rights exhibition **COURAGE: The Carolina Story That Changed America**. The conversations proved extremely popular, sparking an additional six-month program of in-depth discussions. Levine Museum has subsequently made civic dialogues a key component of all of its major exhibition projects.

The **COURAGE** project started as the fiftieth anniversary of the Supreme Court’s famous 1954 **Brown v Board of Education** decision approached. Levine Museum of the New South explores the history of the South since the Civil War, and surely there are few things that have changed the South more than that decision outlawing segregated schools. **Brown** was actually five cases, and the first was filed in Clarendon County, South Carolina. The sons of Rev. J.A. DeLaine, who led in filing that case, now live quietly in Charlotte, North Carolina, barely a mile from our museum. We visited Joseph DeLaine, Jr. and B.B. DeLaine and discovered a trove of family photos plus a handful of evocative artifacts including the gun that Rev. DeLaine fired at Ku Klux Klan attackers before being forced to flee South Carolina.

Darcie Fohrman, an exhibition developer best known for her award winning children’s exhibition **Daniel’s Story** at the U.S. Holocaust Museum in D.C., joined the team on which I served as curator. With the Museum’s



Exhibit developer Darcie Fohrman created this evocative “bar graph” to illustrate black/white school funding disparities in **COURAGE**. By John Hilarides for Levine Museum of the New South.

staff we created what we believe was an emotionally powerful installation that told a story of successful grassroots activism. Visitors moved along a journey from the cotton fields and unpainted wooden schools of rural South Carolina to the triumph before the Supreme Court. Mural size photos, re-created environments, low-tech interactives and five three-minute video interviews with the now-grown DeLaine children helped pull visitors into the story. Where history books often focus on Brown’s legal progress through the Courts, **COURAGE: The Carolina Story That Changed America** offered a “people-story” of local courage, community, and commitment. The exhibition’s final section connected past to present, with information on contemporary movements for social justice that spring in part from **Brown**.

COURAGE succeeded beyond our wildest dreams in connecting with audiences. It was the first major temporary exhibition created by Levine Museum, an institution of 20 employees which began in 1991 and opened its current 40,000 square-foot facility in downtown Charlotte in 2001. Budget was well under \$100 per square foot, including fabrication by Studio Displays of Charlotte, graphic production by Kenny Color Lab, and video by local Wonderworld Productions. The American Association of Museums honored **COURAGE** as one of the year’s two top exhibitions, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services named Levine Museum one of the nation’s best museums for community service in a White House ceremony

COURAGE
succeeded
beyond our
wildest dreams in
connecting with
audiences.

with First Lady Laura Bush. Thanks to Bank of America Foundation, a 4,000 square foot version of the exhibition entitled **COURAGE: The Vision to End Segregation, The Guts to Fight for It** is now booking venues for a national tour that begins at the Atlanta History Center in January 2008.

Levine Museum executive director Emily Zimmern believed that **COURAGE** should be a catalyst for civic dialogue, an extension of the Museum's long-term mission to use history to build community. As 2004 approached, she sat down with local Knight Foundation officer Susan Patterson and with Dianne English and Octavia Seawell of Charlotte's Community Building Initiative. Charlotte has a deep civil rights history, including the national landmark 1971 Supreme Court case that spurred busing for racial integration. But the city is now growing so fast that recent arrivals dominate both civic and corporate leadership and know



Mural size photos plus re-created environments pulled visitors into the story. In an exhibit video, B.B. DeLaine recalled that his school had too few benches, so some students sat on a board propped between two chairs. By John Hilarides for Levine Museum of the New South.

little of this background. Could **COURAGE** use history to help engage current leaders in contemporary issues of race, education, and social justice?

Patterson suggested that the museum focus on engaging "intact management teams"—a corporate leader and her lieutenants, for instance, or a government official and his immediate staff. By creating a shared experience, the dialogue could become a lasting reference point as team members made decisions over months and years to come. Seawell, a skilled organizational consultant, devised the

logistics. Each team of 10 to 15 people would visit the museum for 90 minutes. They would first view the exhibition in silence for 20 minutes, then sit in a circle of chairs for a 60 minute conversation with a professional facilitator. Beginning their discussion with personal reactions to **COURAGE**, the participants would then move toward discussion of current issues in their workplace and community. Dianne English, who has made

The key to making civic dialog possible over the long term is partnership.



A photo of the DeLaine family in the ruins of their house, an image of a burning cross from the collection of South Carolina KKK Grand Dragon Robert Scoggins, and a picture of the DeLaine's arson-destroyed church conveyed the reprisals that the DeLaines and their neighbors experienced. By John Hilarides for Levine Museum of the New South.

(continued from page 25)

Community Building Initiative an active force around issues of inclusion since 1998, rounded up experienced facilitators from local legal, religious and social work circles.

These *“Conversations on COURAGE”* proved extremely popular with Charlotte area decision makers. Levine Museum gingerly promised to bring in 50 management teams—but 111 actually took part, a total of 1,741 people. Among them were local judges, the Superintendent of Schools and his staff, executive teams from financial giants Wachovia and Bank of America, newspaper and cable TV editors and marketers, Charlotte’s police chief and all precinct captains, and many more. Evaluation of the participants by Linda Ketner Associates showed a high degree of satisfaction. Eighty-seven percent called the “Conversations” experience “very” or “extremely” valuable. Asked if there was an issue for which they’d be willing to “rock the boat” within their organization, 38% of participants going into “Conversations” left a blank—but coming out of the experience, 85% of those blanks were filled. Headlined a front page story in the *Charlotte Observer*, *“They’re Opening Up About Race.”*

Indeed some participants did not want the experience to end. After *COURAGE* closed, seven organizations worked with us, the Community Building Initiative, and the Knight Foundation to create a follow-up called “Organizational Courage.” The police department, school administration, District and Superior Courts judges, City of Charlotte officials, Time Warner Cable executives, Arts & Science Council



New dolls directed visitors' attention to the "doll test" conducted by black sociologist Kenneth Clark, which indicated that segregation hurt the self-image of African American children. By John Hilarides for Levine Museum of the New South.

staff, and editors from the *Charlotte Observer* met in discussions over a six month period, with the aim of exploring ways to make their organizations more courageous on social issues, both within their own workplaces and also in the community at large. We worked with facilitator Octavia Seawell and University of North Carolina at Charlotte professor Dr. Rob Smith to provide brief presentations as catalysts; factual description of historical forces shaping Charlotte at points in the past gave participants a “safe place” from which to begin talking about issues today. Evaluation indicated that Seawell’s strategy worked. Before the discussions, only 57% of participants said their organization possessed an internal environment that supported courageous action. By the end of the project, that number rose to 77%.

The success of these two initial projects convinced us that civic dialogue should become standard operating procedure. Coincidentally, the Museum was undertaking branding work at this time thanks to a pro-bono donation by regional advertising agency Luquire George Andrews. The self-study resulted in a new tag-line added to the institution’s logo: “Come to Understand,” and also a new phrase to sum up the museum’s mission: “Using History to Build Community.” These formulations, sparked by the excitement of the civic dialogues, in turn have helped shape the Museum’s wider intellectual identity.



PURSES, on a tighter budget than **COURAGE**, was created entirely in-house at Levine Museum of the New South. Here an evocative environment and a "national icon" photo set the stage for an introductory area. By John Hilarides for Levine Museum of the New South.



Civic dialogue modeled on the **COURAGE** project has become regular practice for subsequent Levine Museum exhibits, including **PURSES, PLATFORMS & POWER: Women Changing Charlotte in the 1970s**. By John Hilarides for Levine Museum of the New South.

The key to making civic dialogue possible over the long term is partnership. Levine Museum of the New South does not possess the staff or finances required to manage and facilitate dialogues, but it turns out that other institutions are eager to join forces. Community Building Initiative, with Knight Foundation dollars, filled that role for the two initial projects. Octavia Seawell herself took the lead, funded by the local Arts & Science Council and Knight Foundation, for a series of dialogues on race sponsored by Levine and other Charlotte cultural institutions as part of a city-wide interchange with South African museums in 2005-2006. More recently, we teamed with Mecklenburg Ministries, the city's interdenominational alliance, which funded and ran dialogues on issues of religious pluralism in conjunction with our exhibition on local Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions called **Families of Abraham**.

For another exhibition, **Purses, Platforms & Power: Women Changing Charlotte in the 1970s**, we pioneered new kinds of partnerships. The

COURAGE dialogues had gotten the attention of Charlotte-based banking giant Wachovia, and when Museum Director Emily Zimmern approached the company for underwriting she was directed away from the philanthropic arm of the corporation and instead sent to Marketing. Wachovia wanted to reach female customers and they saw **Purses** as a useful vehicle. That meant not only cash support, but also exciting in-kind co-marketing help, such as ads for **Purses** displayed on Wachovia ATM monitors throughout the region. And Wachovia also wanted a dialogue component. Company facilitators used the exhibition as a training center for teams of bank personnel, more than 70 in all, around issues of gender. This model caught on with the exhibition's secondary funder, a regional hospital, which created its own similar program. Meanwhile, Levine Museum staff reached out to area women's groups, giving them reduced admission if they wished to use the exhibition for history-based or dialogue-based programs of their own. African American Pride Magazine, for instance, organized a symposium that brought

The Time's Running Out—Act Now exhibit represents a new kind of exhibit for the Aquarium, one designed specifically to promote a time-sensitive campaign to change ocean policy.

(continued from page 27)

Rather than fear controversial topics, the Museum has found that people value having a “neutral place” in which to share and discuss divergent viewpoints.

together African American women with their counterparts in Charlotte’s new Asian and Latino populations for the first time, spurring creation of new non-profit organization called Women’s Intercultural Exchange. As with **COURAGE**, the civic dialogues built strong community enthusiasm for the exhibition. When **Purses** closed, Wachovia would not let it die. The bank provided dollars and a high-traffic downtown space for a permanent version of the exhibition, unveiled for the public in April 2007.

As Levine Museum completes its fourth year of civic dialogue projects, Director Zimmern and our staff reflect on lessons learned.

- Rather than fear controversial topics, the Museum has found that people value having a “neutral place” in which to share and discuss divergent viewpoints.
- Engaging current issues builds support with community and funders. Underwriters are quicker to invest in a project if they see that it holds potential to improve the future, not merely explore the past.
- Each project is a building block for the next one. By making civic dialogue a regular activity, rather than just a one-shot effort around a particular exhibition, Levine Museum has accumulated a coalition of institutional partners, skilled facilitators, and interested audience members.

In January 2006 the Institute for Museum and Library Services invited Zimmern along with staff and board members to a ceremony at the White House. First Lady Laura Bush honored Levine Museum of the New South as one of the nation’s top museums in community service. Today the Museum is busy laying plans for its next major exhibition, an exploration of the native and newcomer cultures that are clashing

in Charlotte as population zooms from half a million in 1990 to nearly a million in 2010. The explicit aim of this **Newcomer Project**: create a springboard for civic dialogue.

Time's Running Out—Act Now at the Monterey Bay Aquarium **by Jon Deuel and Jenny Sayre Ramberg**

Opening in the spring of 2006, the ***Time's Running Out—Act Now*** exhibit was a new collaborative experiment involving staff from the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Exhibits department and the Aquarium’s Center for the Future of the Oceans (CFFO). The CFFO was established in June 2004 to inspire action for conservation of the oceans and is the Aquarium’s conservation research and public policy department. Through the Center, the Aquarium aims to empower individuals, influence policy, and contribute to the protection of the oceans for future generations. The ***Time's Running Out—Act Now*** exhibit represents a new kind of exhibit for the Aquarium, one designed specifically to promote a time-sensitive campaign to change ocean policy.

This relatively small (105-square-foot) stand-alone exhibit received a great deal of staff attention. Several questions were swirling regarding the effectiveness of an exhibit that offered Aquarium visitors a chance to take focused action on a specific environmental issue. So, like many of the elements of the visitor experience at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, this exhibit required evaluation. To begin that process, it was helpful to briefly review the issue that inspired Aquarium



The **Time's Running Out—Act Now** exhibit at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.
©Monterey Bay Aquarium Foundation.

staff to develop and design this exhibit: the establishment of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) on California's Central Coast.

The Issue

Marine Protected Areas function by restricting access to ocean habitats by managing the environment with the goal of conservation. The State of California is using MPAs to enforce the Marine Life Protection Act, which was signed into law by the governor in 1999. In early 2006, the governor-appointed Fish and Game Commission had the responsibility of determining the size and location of a network of MPAs along California's Central Coast. To get started, the Fish and Game Commission held a series of public meetings, scheduled through November 2006, to help them arrange MPAs on California's Central Coast.

The Exhibit

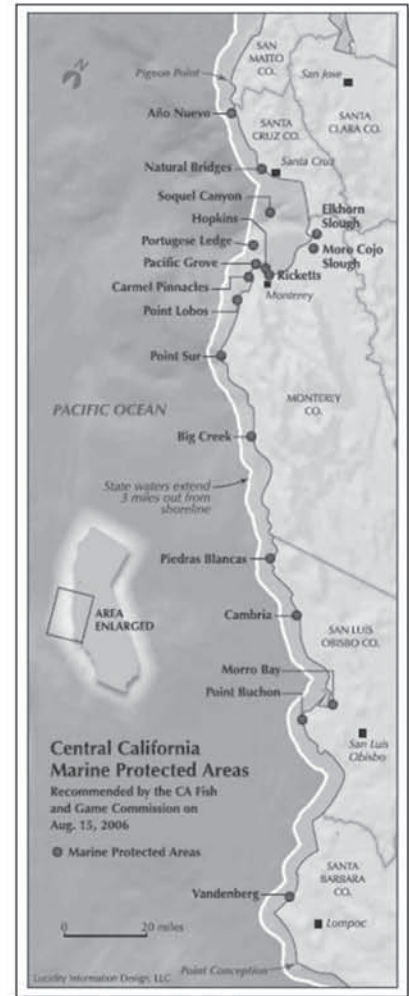
The Time's Running Out—Act Now exhibit was developed to raise visitors' awareness of MPAs and to give visitors an opportunity to support MPAs in a specific, concrete and immediate way. Beautiful photographs, stirring language, eye-catching headers and a countdown clock invited visitors over to explore the issue of MPAs. Brief labels explained the importance of creating MPAs to keep fish populations and habitats healthy for the future. However, we wanted to go beyond simply communicating to visitors that their voices mattered on this

issue and offer them a chance to take—what we hoped would be—a meaningful action.

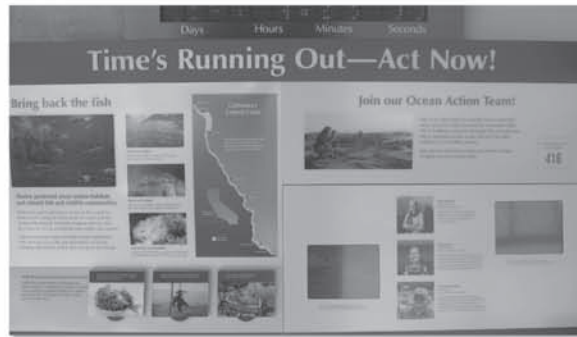
In this exhibit, visitors could take two distinct actions: writing to California's governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and joining the Aquarium's Ocean Action Team. By writing a postcard at the exhibit, visitors could ask Governor Schwarzenegger for the greatest protection possible for California's Central Coast. We chose to direct postcards to Governor Schwarzenegger because he is a recognizable figure and has influence over the Fish and Game Commission, which was ultimately responsible for making the decision about MPAs. Representatives from the CFFO keep Ocean Action Team members updated on ocean conservation issues by email, including updates on the MPA issue. To sign up, visitors entered their email addresses on touch screens at the exhibit. With these opportunities to take action in place and the clock counting down to the day of the decision, Aquarium staff were eager to find out how visitors would react to this exhibit.

The Evaluation

While the Aquarium develops, designs, and evaluates many exhibits, special attention was paid to this single stand-alone exhibit



Map of California's Central Coast including Monterey Bay. Dots along coast represent Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). ©Monterey Bay Aquarium Foundation.



Front panel of **Time's Running Out—Act Now.**
©Monterey Bay Aquarium Foundation.

(continued from page 29)

...we wanted to go beyond simply communicating to visitors that their voices mattered on this issue and offer them a chance to take—what we hoped would be—a meaningful action.

because we had not developed anything quite like it before—an exhibit focused on a specific issue asking for directed action toward a specific outcome. Also, because the Central Coast was just the first area to establish MPAs, and we knew that the Northern and Southern California coastlines would be next, we anticipated future exhibits like this one. So we wanted to establish a set of baseline expectations for future action-based exhibits by considering a few questions:

- How long would visitors spend at an exhibit without an animal?
- Would they write postcards and sign up for the Ocean Action Team?
- Would visitors' experience at the exhibit increase their awareness about MPAs even after they left the Aquarium?

Most importantly, however, we wanted to know if visitors felt the actions we were asking them to take were worthwhile. Our evaluation approach consisted of collecting data in multiple phases, both at the Aquarium and after visitors had left the Aquarium. We wanted to track changes in visitors' behaviors and perceptions of the MPA issue as we approached the deadline for the Fish and Game Commission's decision. Then in August, a few months into the study, an announcement came from the governor's office that the Fish and Game Commission had made its decision on how MPAs would be laid out on the Central Coast--this decision came earlier than the expected November date. Typically, when the pace of government is faster than one expects, it can be seen as positive. However, the early decision forced us to adjust the design and content of the exhibit to reflect the new developments. As a result, we had to cancel the remainder of the evaluation study because the

exhibit changed. So we analyzed the data we had already collected and found the following:

- During the first four months that the exhibit was open (May-August 2006), Aquarium visitors sent over 10,000 postcards to the governor and nearly 1,000 visitors signed up for the Aquarium's Ocean Action Team.
- Visitors who stopped at the exhibit spent a relatively long time (between one and five minutes, depending on behavior). Average time spent at this exhibit was comparable to those at the Aquarium's animal exhibits.
- Half of the visitors who stopped at the exhibit completed at least one of the actions we asked them to do--writing the governor or joining the Ocean Action Team; many visitors did both.
- A vast majority of visitors, regardless of where they lived, said that this issue of establishing MPAs for California's Central Coast was personally relevant.

Exhibit Ingredients that Inspire Visitor Action

Based on these evaluation results, we put together a short list of ingredients that would be helpful to include when developing and designing exhibits that inspire visitor action.

- Have a relevant topic: **Time's Running Out—Act Now** focused on a current campaign about a regionally important issue.
- Provide visitors with a time deadline for action: This gave the exhibit a specific focus and resulted in a larger response from visitors than the previous exhibit in the same area with no specific action or time deadline.
- Offer visitors meaningful actions: We used the real-time deadline of the Fish and Game Commission's November meeting where we thought they were going to decide on this

issue. This helped make the actions something worth the visitors' time.

- Provide a variety of exhibit experiences: The design of this exhibit offered a variety of experiences with different media.

We used photos, moving images, text, and interactive elements, and we posted cards on a bulletin board before they were mailed. We found that different visitors used different experiences—some were interested in looking at the information, some read other visitors' postcards, some took immediate actions (like writing postcards) and some signed up for the Ocean Action Team, which was a longer-term commitment.

Evaluation Reminders

From the evaluation perspective, we were reminded of a couple of research design issues that surfaced during the course of this study. We planned on contacting visitors several months after their visit to find out if and how they were engaging with the issue. However, since the MPA decision had already been made, our primary reason for contact was irrelevant. So we decided not to follow up with visitors. Fortunately, we collected our data in phases—completing two of three onsite phases—so we were able to evaluate the visitor experience at the Aquarium. Unfortunately, we were not able to collect post-visit data to evaluate this exhibit once visitors left the Aquarium.

Also, when we evaluate an exhibit like this again, we will have a better understanding of our research scope. Initially, this study was going to measure the impact of the exhibit on the visitors, through examining their onsite experience, and assess the impact of this exhibit on the entire statewide issue of establishing



Updated version of **Time's Running Out—Act Now.**
©Monterey Bay Aquarium Foundation.

MPAs on the Central Coast. Our intention was to measure both, but we were left uncertain about the impact this exhibit made on the Fish and Game Commission's decision.

From this process, we learned about the need to be flexible and ready to respond to unforeseen events when we develop, design, and evaluate future exhibits that inspire visitor action. We are currently planning new approaches and considering ways to study the long-term impacts of this type of exhibit on Aquarium visitors. The 2007 version of this visitor action exhibit is open, and we're happy to report that many Aquarium visitors continue to join the Ocean Action Team and write to Governor Schwarzenegger asking him to support strong ocean protection. ☀



Write to Governor Schwarzenegger at **Time's Running Out—Act Now.** ©Monterey Bay Aquarium Foundation.

References Cited:

Archibald, R. (2004). *The new town square: museums and communities in transition*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.

Baumeister, R. F. (1998). The self. In D. Gilbert, S. Fiske & G. Lindzey (Eds.). *The handbook of social psychology* (pp. 690-740). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Fraser, J., Saunders, C., & Meyers, R. (in prep). Exploring a range of environmental ethical beliefs held by zoo visitors.

Schultz, W. (2000). Empathizing with nature, the effects of perspective taking on concern for environmental issues. *Journal of Social Issues*, 56(3) 391-406.