

# THE MUSEUM: A PARTNER IN ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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Museum resources are generally underutilised by educational establishments, not least of all by environmental educators. Some museum activities are explained and ways of employing the museum resources in environmental education programmes are explored.

There are many environmental educators who are not convinced that a museum is a suitable venue to conduct worthwhile environmental educational activities. The prospect of teaching with 'animal stiffness' is not particularly enticing and moving around public galleries with a group makes most people feel like intruders and generally ill at ease. There are perhaps prejudices or fears that have been created by earlier experiences and will no doubt affect the individual's future involvement with museums.

Prejudices and negative feelings towards something are very often based on bad experiences, ignorance and misinformation. This is usually the case with people's attitudes towards snakes, spiders and sharks and environmental educationists have a job in changing these attitudes. Similarly, museums have an unfavourable reputation to overcome. There is a great deal of misunderstanding, conjecture and prejudice about museums and their role in society. This article will therefore attempt to explain the concept of museum education in the context of environmental education and also provide guidelines for the practical use of museum resources.

Museums in South Africa are predominantly government or quasi-government institutions. Each province has at least one national museum, some also have one or more provincial museums, and there are a great many local and site museums scattered throughout the country. The large national and provincial museums have developed along the lines of the great European institutions and some have been in existence since the middle of the last century.

Are museums research institutions or educational institutions? What is their true mission in society? There are many descriptions of the purpose of museums and the one below serves best the direction of this article.

"The furtherance of man's understanding of himself, his society and the natural world of which he is a part."

(Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Canada).

Quite clearly no one museum can achieve this entirely, but each can contribute in a meaningful way within the scope of its resources.

In working towards its ultimate goal, the museum must achieve a series of objectives, which build upon each other. The first of these is building up *collections*. Museum collections and the process of collections management is perhaps the main element which makes museums different from other research and educational institutions. Most museums in South Africa have a number of themes around which their collections are centred. Port Elizabeth Museum has for example, marine biology, herpetology and the history of Algoa Bay as its main themes. The collections will then determine many of the subsequent activities of the museum.

It therefore follows that *research* is the second main objective of the museum, the direction of which is guided by the nature of its collections.

The next objective then is *interpretation* of the collections and research findings through exhibits, publications, special programmes and various other media. It is in this area where the environmental educator will most easily find a working niche. The example below illustrates that in addition both museum research and collections can be harnessed for the benefit of environmental education.

The foregoing has illustrated that museums have collections of specimens of animals, plants and other natural phenomena as well as examples of man's material culture. It also has scientific expertise and knowledge; produces written materials and exhibitions and offers programmes for public participation. In order to explain how these resources can be mobilised for the benefit of environmental education it may be useful to follow through a hypothetical example.

The topic *Seabirds of Algoa Bay* is chosen as part of an environmental education programme for a primary school class/a wildlife club/a Girl Guide group. Contact the Education Officer at the Port Elizabeth Museum and ask for guidance and assistance with the following:

- *a visit to the Bird Exhibits at the museum:*  
Activities:  
list the seabirds of Algoa Bay in the exhibit  
describe any visible physical adaptations  
compare their sizes and shapes  
compare them with other birds in the display area.
- *a visit to the sea birds enclosure at the Port Elizabeth Oceanarium:*  
Activities:  
list the birds in the enclosure  
take notes from the information panels  
observe how the birds respond to each other  
observe differences between the live bird and the museum exhibit.
- *an interview with the marine bird researcher (by appointment):* Questions are prepared in advance and if possible sent ahead before the interview.
- *arrange to see the bird study collection.*  
The study collection usually consists of many examples of the same bird species. However the information which has been recorded for each specimen will show birds at different stages of maturity, both sexes and in different states of plumage.

Although some of the information obtained in this way may duplicate what is obtained from books, films and fieldtrips, such duplication serves as valid reinforcement which is based on personal close-up observation. Besides this there remain a few aspects of the museum experience that are special:

- a. Opportunity to study individual birds at close quarters (without danger or disruption).
- b. Opportunity to make different comparisons between birds.

c. Opportunity to have questions answered by specialists.

Museum visits also have the advantage that unlike other fieldtrips, weather does not prevent the programme from proceeding as planned.

The museum experience therefore does not replace or compete with the other approaches to environmental education, but rather complements it rather well. Observations that are made in the field can often be disappointing and unyielding, as the educator cannot arrange for nature to perform by appointment. The field trip is however very important in that it provides the learner with the stage setting against which his or her understanding of the actor's behaviour and survival problems will develop (even when the actors don't show up). If a teacher is following a theme on seabirds and arranges a visit to the coast to observe the birdlife, the pupils will at worst experience some aspects of the environment that seabirds live in. Under favourable conditions they will most likely be able to watch seagulls and oyster catchers and if they're very lucky they may even see gannets diving for fish at sea. This is a valuable experience in observing behaviour and habitat, but the picture is incomplete.

The museum experience may help to fill in some of the gaps left open by the field experiences. At the museum it will be possible to see all the seabirds of Algoa Bay, including the penguins that live on islands in the bay. Close-up and even hands-on observations may be possible. The sizes and shapes of beaks, feet and bodies can be recorded.

It is important to note that the use of a museum component for environmental education is not only for school teachers but for all environmental educators. If a conservation agency is operating environmental education programmes at a nature reserve, the museum component can be included in different ways:

- By establishing their own collections and displays

in a central venue in the nature reserve. This is in fact what the National Parks Board is doing at their Information Centres. If specimens are insufficient the agency could borrow material from a nearby museum for an agreed period. Many museums operate loan services of this nature. If long-term exhibitions are envisaged it would be wise to bring museum workers in to advise on display techniques, budgeting, taxidermy and other related matters.

- By negotiating with a nearby museum to prepare and present an appropriate museum-based programme to tie in with the programme offered at the nature reserve. Groups who then book to participate in the nature reserve programme may be encouraged to include the museum programme in their schedule, either before or after their fieldtrip.

Museums in general are willing to collaborate and co-operate with other organisations and interest groups in the overall effort towards environmental literacy. There is however strong emphasis on the words *collaborate* and *co-operate*. Although many museums offer independent programmes in the field of environmental education, they can only operate within the limits of their meagre budgets and existing manpower. For the full educational potential of museums to be fulfilled, outside agencies, schools, clubs, societies and conservation groups must each work towards manipulating and mobilising the resources of museums within their reach.

The museum is an institution which is backed by tax-payers's money. It therefore has a strong obligation to serve the public in whatever way is appropriate. It follows then that teachers and students are entitled to ask for assistance and to make full use of the museum's resources. Nobody should therefore ever feel uncomfortable about using a museum exhibit as part of a lesson or to ask for information or access to collections, although it will be expected that arrangements be made in advance to preclude clashes with other groups or events in the museum or to prevent annoying interruptions in scientific programmes.

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