

## **Dive In!**

### **Creating interpretation with intent**

**Some thoughts on how museums can create exhibitions about climate change that seek to shift visitor behaviour**

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On behalf of University of St Andrews Libraries and Museums



Image by Gayle E McIntyre © The University of St Andrews.



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This resource has been prepared following the University of St Andrews' exhibition [Dive In! Protecting Our Ocean](#), held at the Wardlaw Museum (October 2021 – January 2022).

The exhibition was something of an experiment. We attempted to influence not only what visitors think about the ocean and climate change, but also what they might do as a result of visiting. The Museum intended for visitors to consider how their actions impact what happens in the ocean, and to appreciate that what happens in the ocean affects us all. Ultimately, the project aimed to create behaviour change in visitors.

We completed some audience research with visitors to the exhibition and also reflected ourselves on the process of creating the exhibition.

We offer these thoughts as our learning from the project, and as a means of positive encouragement to other museum teams making exhibitions that seek to provoke behaviour change in their visitors, especially in relation to climate change and other environmental campaigns. Use these notes as prompts, as provocations, as discussion starters for your interpretive endeavours.

*Our advice is to...*

**Collaborate** – work with non-museum people, especially climate change specialists. The *Dive In!* project team found discussions with a climate communication expert provided welcome new perspectives and took us to places we didn't expect to go.

**Listen and respond** – to what audiences know and feel. In formative testing, people told us that plastics were the biggest threat to the ocean. We took the decision to try and take them beyond that topic and introduce ideas around deep-sea mining, overfishing, marine noise and more..

**Make it relevant** – grounding content in things people understand and do will mean it's all the more relevant to peoples' lived experiences. The 'menu interactive', which prompted visitors to consider the environmental cost of their seafood choices, was one of the most popular elements in *Dive In!*, and also the simplest. But our concept of matching visitors with an environmental 'persona' at the start of the exhibit, which acted as a means of tailoring behavioural asks to a visitors' experiences, didn't land as effectively as we'd hoped – finding the right way for people to 'see themselves' in exhibitions with active 'asks' is a tough nut to crack.

**Make it timely** – the story of climate change will always be subtly shifting and it makes sense to ground your communication in what's happening right now. For example, *Dive In!* was open to public during the COP26 international climate change conference. If we made the exhibition a year later, we'd do it differently.

**Be bold** – audiences told us *Dive In!* could have gone further in our messaging, and the same could be said of our persona matching exercise too. We had discussions about not wanting to rock the boat too much (this was supposed to be an authentically positive exhibition), but now understand

we could have been more provocative or disruptive if we wanted to be. Some of our early bold and creative exhibit ideas didn't appear in the exhibition and those that did may have got watered down over time. Some ideas can be discussed too much and it's possible to talk yourself out of a great idea.

**Be positive** – in a time of increasing concern about the planet's future, there's nothing wrong with telling an authentically positive story. Indeed, by being upbeat and confident in our interpretive tone, we are more likely to engage audiences than if we tell stories that are always full of doom and dread. The nature of the threat can't be underestimated, but neither can our appetite for a story that leaves us feeling energised rather than deflated.

**Be creative** – the science of the climate emergency or threats to our environment doesn't need to be dry. After exploring a range of issues related to the ocean and finding ourselves a little overwhelmed by the enormity of the subject, we opted to give our science story a creative narrative – that of a reverse depth chart, journeying from the deep ocean to the shallows, to the coast, to dry land. The exhibition designer then covered the walls of the exhibition in swathes of colour from black, to blues, to greens.

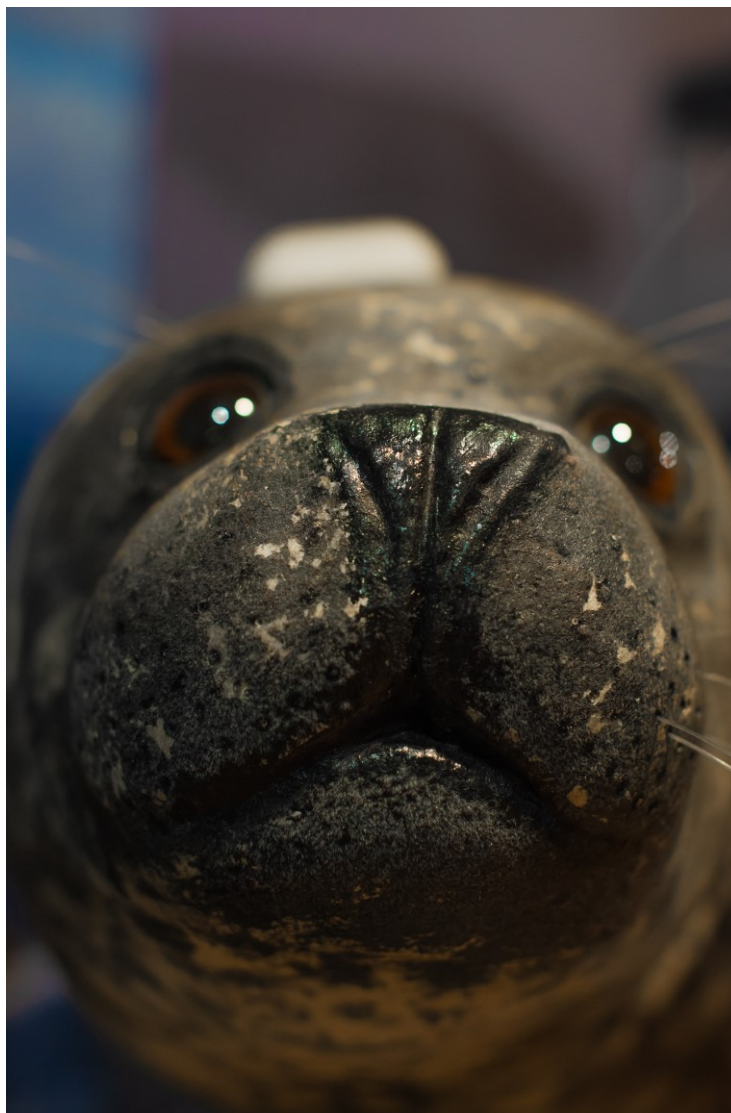


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**Adapt to increasing levels of public engagement with climate change –**

Climate change communication is all around us. We didn't need to spoon-feed our visitors the basics of climate change – they told us that they already knew quite a bit about the subject. They'd chosen to visit the exhibition, so there was little point in us going over old ground. But even then, visitors sometimes told us that we were telling them things they already knew. Being bolder in our key messages might have meant we were bolder in our 'asks'.

**Acknowledge audiences' different levels of appetite for behaviour change** – a one-size-fits all approach to making behavioural asks of visitors probably won't work. Some visitors will already recycle, not fly and eat a vegan diet, while others may be earlier in their journey. Our exhibition attempted to offer visitors a series of ways into the subject intended to tailor the behavioural asks

at different levels for different people, but our evaluation concluded that we didn't manage to crack the best way to do this. Let the experimentation of how to dial up a range of asks in exhibition form continue.

**Check in with yourselves** – the *Dive In!* team found it useful to reflect on our own experiences as the project progressed. Creating an exhibition that seeks to shift behaviour in visitors can have an effect on museum staff too. We monitored this through a couple of teamwide surveys, but also by checking in with each other during the collaborative planning process.

**Look to others** – there are plenty of examples of museums taking a lead on communicating messages of climate change with direct appeals to action. Some browsing and reading suggestions are offered below.

### Some suggested museum projects

- [Dive In! Protecting our Ocean](#) at The Wardlaw Museum, University of St Andrews
- [Our Broken Planet](#) at the Natural History Museum, London
- [Climate Museum UK](#), an experimental museum that curates and gathers responses to the Earth crisis
- [Dynamic Earth](#), Edinburgh
- [Manchester Museum](#), Manchester

### Some suggested reading

- Fiona R. Cameron and Brett Neilson (eds) *Climate Change and Museum Futures*, 2015
- Graham Black *Museums and the Challenge of Change: Old Institutions in a New World*, 2021
- Chasna Harper *Environmental Literacy – Lessons from Museums, Galleries and Heritage Sites* *Journal of Education in Museums* (Vol 41, pp 17–22)
- Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell (eds) *Museum Activism*, 2019  
In particular ...
  - Sandra L. Rodegher and Stacey Vicario Freeman *Advocacy and activism: a framework for sustainability science in museums* (pp 337–47)
  - Steve Lyons and Kai Bosworth *Museums in the climate emergency* (pp 174–85)
  - Victoria Hollows *The activist role of museum staff* (pp 80–90)

- Nordic Council of Ministers [Nature interpretation in the Nordic countries](#) (online) 2020



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