

FOSSIL MYSTERIES

Responds to Public Need Using Primary and Secondary Research

The exhibition design team was active in assessing the need for new exhibitions and public interest in their content. By conducting front-end visitor studies, focus groups, research on how people learn, the needs of special visitors, exhibition design, content delivery and operational issues, the team was able to shape the exhibition philosophy and integrate it into the design of *FOSSIL MYSTERIES*.

Front-end visitor studies focused on interests, learning preferences, and responses to the exhibition plan. Visitors felt that an overview of how this region has changed over time would provide meaningful context for learning about present-day habitats. They expressed interest in gaining more in-depth knowledge in basic natural history subject matter; fossils, geology and evolution ranked highest in terms of visitor interest.

The study revealed visitor preference among a variety of information-delivery formats, including traditional approaches and interactive exhibits and multi-media presentations. Many stated that this is what they expect to find in a natural history museum and that the “kids love it.”

Ten focus groups with a diverse audience yielded specific responses to concepts and activities in *FOSSIL MYSTERIES*. Although each focus group was unique, clear patterns emerged revealing not only what people liked and disliked, but also why. These focus groups provided an internal “checklist” for evaluating proposed exhibits, enabling the team to test the strength of a new idea. The overwhelming request was for hands-on, minds-on, educational experiences.

Research on how people learn led the team to identify qualities that will enhance the learning process. The exhibition will inspire new lectures, classes, scout badge programs, field trips, and long-range expeditions based on exhibit themes.

Accessibility being essential to the success of *FOSSIL MYSTERIES*, the exhibition staff consulted with representatives from the blind and deaf community and with a focus group comprised of the physically disabled and experts in special education to make the exhibition accessible, informative and enjoyable to all visitors.

As part of the NSF planning grant, exhibition team members traveled to view a dozen exhibitions at leading natural history museums and other free-choice learning environments around the country, studying exhibit design, content delivery and operational issues. Findings shaped the team’s exhibit philosophy and have been integrated into the design of *FOSSIL MYSTERIES*.

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