

Evaluating the response of visitors to Natural History Dioramas

Sue Dale Tunncliffe¹ & Annette Scheersoi²

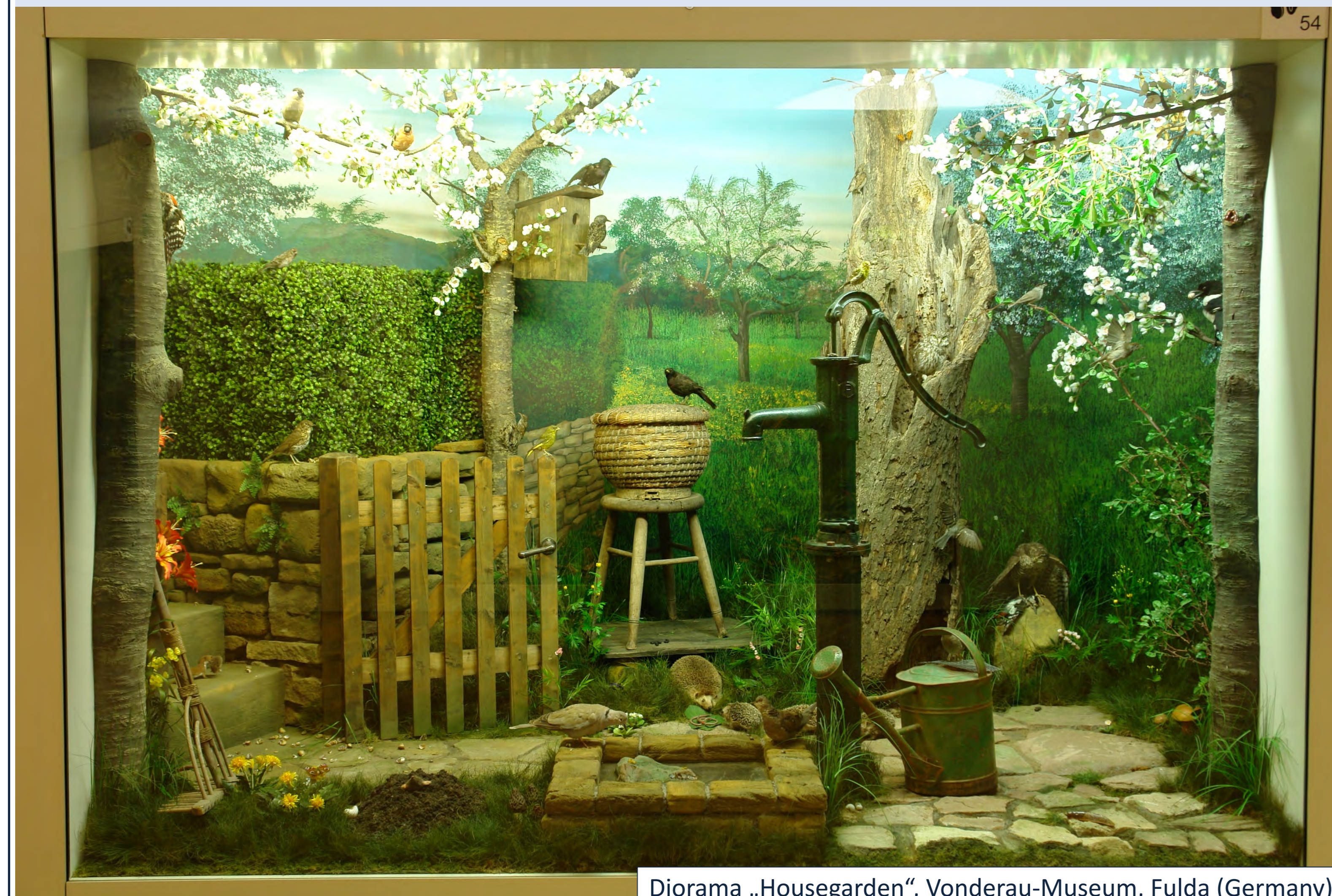
Our focus:

How do children and life learners acquire biological knowledge at Natural History dioramas?

- ⇒ What do they notice and talk about?
- ⇒ How do they interpret the organisms and other aspects of dioramas?
- ⇒ Which narratives ensue?

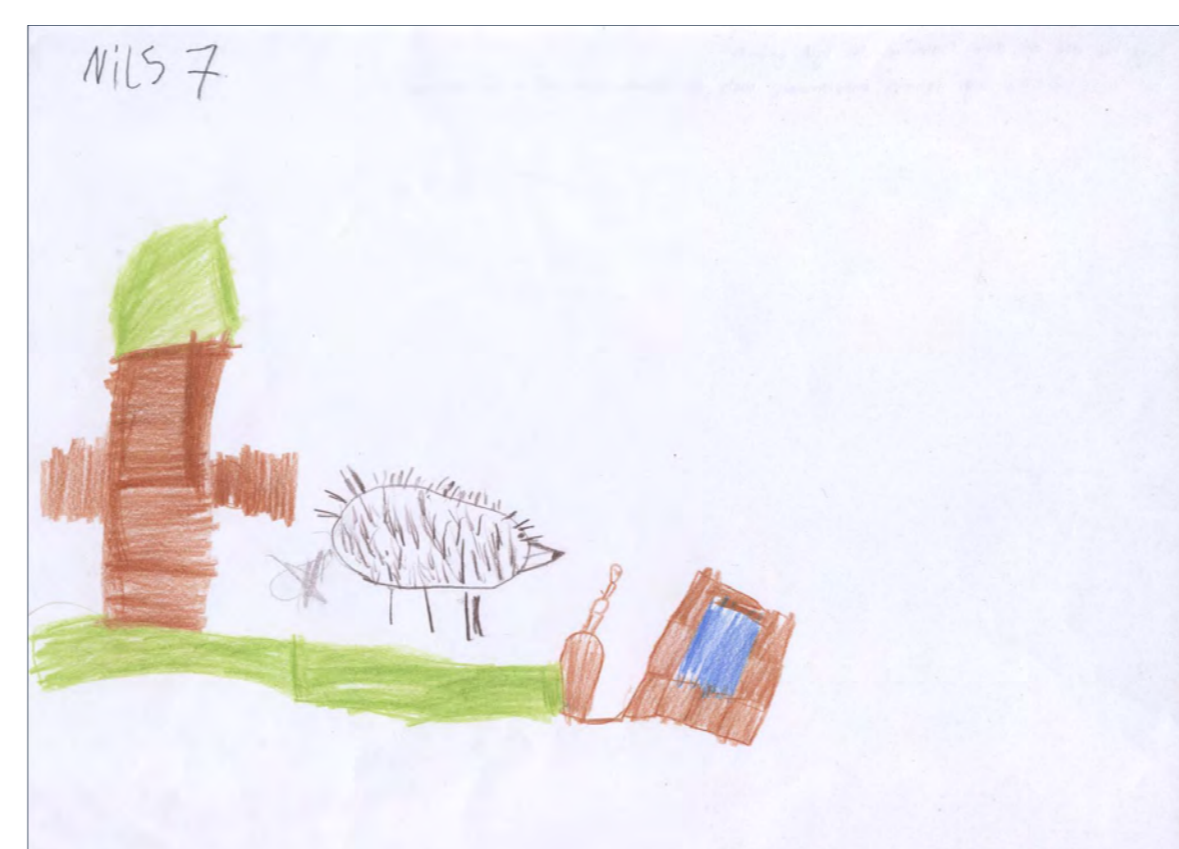
Material: Dioramas in different museums with their educationally valuable aspects:

- Specimens are shown in their natural context
- Dioramas are „snapshots“ of a moment frozen in action
- Different species (animals and plants) are shown together



Diorama „Housegarden“, Vonderau-Museum, Fulda (Germany)

- ⇒ As windows into nature, dioramas fascinate visitors
- ⇒ Visitors can view, ponder and look again
- ⇒ There are many messages for visitors to interpret



Methods:

- **Spontaneous conversations** at dioramas were captured.
- **Interviews** were held at dioramas and after the visit.
- **Drawings** anticipating the diorama content, at the diorama and after viewing were collected.

⇐ Children's drawings

after the visit to a diorama gallery („Please draw your favourite diorama.“)

Results:

The work has enabled us to define four stages in visitor responses once they stop at a diorama (however, the order of these “4 I's” may vary) :

Identify

Interest

Interpret

Investigate

1. Visitors identify the specimens, name them and often comment on a salient feature or structure. They describe behaviours and make affective comments.
2. Their interest is caught by recognising the familiar, seeing young, big or dangerous animals, or by the unexpected (e.g., human traces in the wildlife scenes).
3. They interpret the scenes presented, mostly in anthropomorphic terms, seeking to relate the subject to what they know and understand.
4. They may raise questions about the subject and phenomena that do not fit with their existing ideas and they construct hypotheses.

Conclusion:

Natural history dioramas possess a powerful educational potential. They should be cherished and used to assist in an individual's science education.