

# Effective biological learning in museums: Natural history dioramas – Dusty relics or educational tool?



## Rationale for study

Natural history dioramas were historically designed to evoke feelings and to promote an ethic for the preservation of species and their habitats (Insley, 2007). Nowadays, they are often dismantled, being claimed that they are old-fashioned. We maintain that dioramas have a tremendous educational potential:



They draw attention to both species and habitats and stimulate narratives (Tunnicliffe & Reiss, in press). Dioramas have high intrinsic value (Breslof 2001). They evoke emotions and curiosity about the natural world and thereby provide ideal initial conditions for teaching biological science in an out-of-school-setting.

## Research questions

Which specific features in dioramas draw the attention of visitors and encourage sustained and then focused observations (starting point for inquiry processes)?

How do visitors explain and interpret what they see?

## Methods

Spontaneous conversations of visitors who stopped and commented were recorded (=> attention and catching).

Visitors were interviewed at the dioramas and asked to tell what the diorama was about (=> explain).

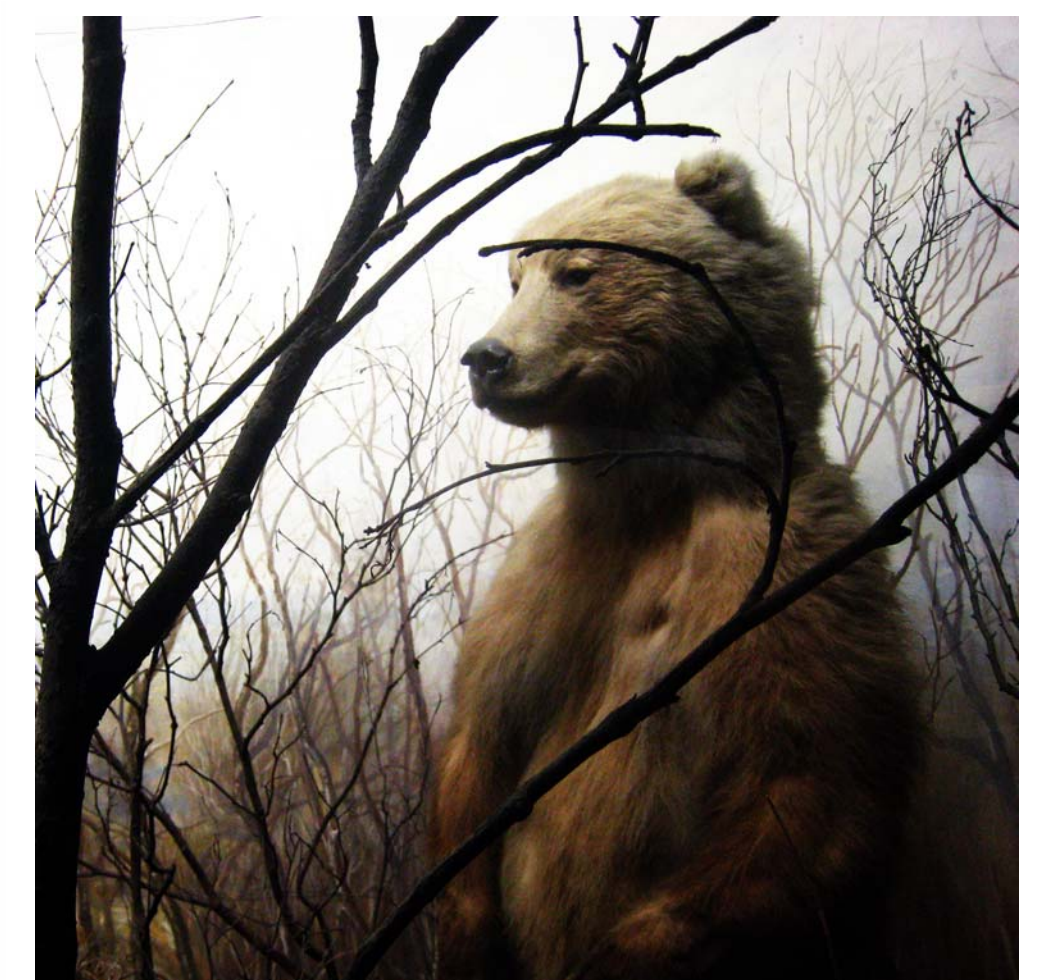
Children were asked to draw their favorite diorama (=> recall).

## Results

Visitors are particularly attracted by young animals, very big or dangerous animals and by unexpected as well as by familiar animals and settings.

Visitors link their experiences to the diorama through their interpretation. They tell stories and comment about artefacts within the diorama to which they can relate.

Visitors explain/interpret using their existing knowledge with little reference to the information given by the museum (texts).



## Conclusion

Natural history dioramas attract visitors, evoke emotions and curiosity. Dioramas provide different anchor points and enable visitors to relate their previous experiences to the scenes presented and thus may facilitate learning. Dioramas can be accessed and interpreted in different ways according to the highly variable scientific knowledge, interests and experiences of the visitors and thereby may be used for developing biological understanding and inquiry processes and skills in an out-of-school setting.

### References:

Breslof, L. (2001): Observing dioramas. Musings, Spring 2001, American Museum of Natural History [http://www.amnh.org/learn/musings/SP01/h\_hw.htm]

Insley, J. (2007): Setting the scene. Museums Journal (2/07), pp. 33-35.

Tunnicliffe, S.D. & Reiss, M. (in press): Dioramas as depictions of reality and opportunities for learning in biology. Curator

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Education, University of London (GB); 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL; s.tunnicliffe@ioe.ac.uk

<sup>2</sup>Didaktik der Biowissenschaften, Goethe University Frankfurt (D); Sophienstr. 1-3, 60487 Frankfurt/Main; a.scheersoi@bio.uni-frankfurt.de