

TELLING SPECIES STORIES: VISUALIZING FUTURES FOR NORTH AMERICAN HABITAT DIORAMAS

SCCS WORKSHOP PROGRAM · WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 9, 2024

Convenors:

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Facilitators:

Sabrina Careri (Workshop Lead)
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WORKSHOP OVERVIEW:

In the last century, thousands of visitors have observed the habitat dioramas within the American Museum of Natural History with intrigue and awe. These illuminated spectacles were so lifelike, depicting actual places in space and time — telling their stories — that viewers were able to experience not only the habitats, but also animal behavior. Their vivid stories influenced public opinion about the value of these places and their need for conservation. To this day, what many viewers do not realize is that the magic of the habitat dioramas, their powerful impact, is enabled through the capacity to visualize them — through the careful construction of spatial illusion produced by a curved background painting, with elements collected from specific sites, and taxidermied specimens from biomes around the world.

More recently, habitat dioramas have been the subject of critiques that challenge the diorama's staged visions and the separation, behind panes of glass, of ourselves from nature. Moreover, the species and habitats depicted are out of sync with the effects of climate change and biodiversity loss. However, these remarkable dioramas have enduring qualities that can further serve to educate and empower the public to (re)consider our changing place in nature and our relationship with other species.

All we need are new stories, and the capacity to visualize them.

This workshop will focus on collaborative and co-creative exercises to develop these science-supported “stories”— scenarios based on current conservation science and speculation — for four selected habitat dioramas. These future “scenarios” will imagine changes to these diorama habitats, for example, considering their environmental stressors, along with adaptations under climate change and biodiversity loss, and importantly, will speculate on their futures through new concepts, for example, design interventions and conservation efforts, some of which are being initiated and realized today. In this way, the workshop aims to contemplate new stories which might shape public discourse, and inspire visitors as they leave the museum with more than empathy, but also agency and renewed empowerment to engage with new natures, through changing stories of our time.

Purpose:

Dioramas are illusive, spatial devices that “transport” viewers to another space, and possible time. The purpose of this workshop is to collectively visualize new stories and to develop possible future scenarios for the species and the landscapes presented in the selected dioramas. These speculative futures can serve as the basis for public education programming, and potentially, through the development of technology-supported projections that foster civic discourse on and public engagement in conservation science.

Goal:

Based on current conservation science and practices of visualization, we are asking workshop participants to speculate and experiment with conceptual futures to present a single compelling narrative for one of the selected dioramas. (Participants will be assigned to a team on arrival; each team will be working with one of the four selected dioramas.)

Prompt:

Take a moment to observe the diorama before you. Consider not only what is being shown but also how it is being presented. Every choice — what to include, what to leave out, how to arrange elements — tells a story. As you move through the following questions, consider how these (design) decisions shape the story being told. Keep in mind that a diorama is not a neutral depiction of nature or history; it’s a constructed representation that carries implicit narratives.

Jot down your interpretation, feelings and initial impressions, and be prepared to share!

Whose story is currently depicted? Whose stories are missing? (WHAT)

What assumptions, and cultural and historic contexts are being depicted? (WHY)

What visual elements are being used to tell the story? (HOW) (e.g., color palettes, symbols, hierarchies, plants, contrasts, geographic features, etc.)

How can new stories inspire and engage visitors in the context of a changing climate, in the future? (SO, WHAT)

Workshop Location:

Studio #3, Richard Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation

WORKSHOP SCHEDULE:

10:00 AM: On-site participant check-in

10:05 AM - 10:50 AM: Workshop Dioramas Tour: *Hall of North American Mammals*

11:00 AM - 12:00 PM: Museum Collection Tours (separate SCCS event)

12:00 PM - 1:00 PM: Lunch Break

1:00 PM - 3:00 PM: On-site Workshop Session 1 (*Meet at Linder Theater at 12:45 pm*)

Workshop Introduction by Julia Czerniak and Nina-Marie Lister (1:00 pm - 1:30 pm)

Team Working Session (1:30 pm - 3:00 pm)

3:00 PM - 3:15 PM: Break

3:15 - 5:30 PM: On-site Workshop Session 2

Team Working Session Con’t (3:15 pm - 4:30 pm)

Team Presentations (4:30 pm - 5:10 pm)

Wrap-up Discussion and Next Steps (5:10 pm - 5:30 pm)