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THE FUTURE OF NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUMS

EDITED BY ERIC DORFMAN

The Future of Natural History Museums

Natural history museums are changing, both because of their own internal development and in response to changes in context. *The Future of Natural History Museums* considers these changes and the reasons behind them and begins to develop a cohesive discourse that balances the disparate issues that our institutions will face over the next decades.

Historically, the aim of collecting from nature was to develop encyclopaedic assemblages to satisfy human curiosity and build a basis for taxonomic study. Today, with global biodiversity in rapid decline, new reasons emerge to build and maintain collections, which also need to cater to audiences who are more diverse, numerous, and technically savvy. This book explores key elements of this topic and, through commentary and synthesis, develops a cohesive picture of the trajectory of the natural history museum sector in the next 20 to 50 years. Arguing that institutions must learn to embrace new technology, the book considers how they might retain the authenticity of their stories and the value placed on their objects in the process.

This book contributes to the study of collections, teaching and learning, ethics, and running non-profit businesses and will be of interest to museum and heritage professionals, academics and senior students in Biological Sciences and Museum Studies.

Eric Dorfman is Director of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Natural History and President of the International Council of Museums Committee for Museums and Collections of Natural History (ICOM NATHIST). He is Deputy Chair of the ICOM Ethics Committee (ETHCOM) and co-authored *ICOM Code of Ethics for Natural History Museums*. He is a board member of Visit Pittsburgh, an Adjunct Professor at University of Pittsburgh and on the editorial board of *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*. Prior to his current position, he was Director of Whanganui Regional Museum in New Zealand and lectured in the Museums and Heritage Studies Department of Victoria University of Wellington.



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Edited by
Eric Dorfman

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long part of the museum's research and exploration legacy, including the vast temperate rain forests of western North America where coastal peoples carved the great canoe that adorns the 77th Street entrance to the building. His conservation work has resulted in the establishment of protected areas around the world, driven by partnerships between indigenous peoples, scientists, and public- and private-sector leadership. He currently directs Pacific Programs at the Museum's Center for Biodiversity and Conservation, integrating biodiversity research, mentorship, and direct conservation action to inspire large-landscape and marine conservation across the Pacific region. Dr. Filardi received his PhD in 2003 from the University of Washington, where he studied patterns of speciation and the biogeographic history of tropical Pacific flycatchers.

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the (now more than seventy-thousand-square-meter) Science Centre and Museum, featuring exhibits such as *Science in Al-Andalus*, *The Culture of Prevention*, *Techno-Forum*, *Journey to the Human Body*, *The Loft of the Museum*, and *Darwin Workshop*. He is a consultant to various cultural undertakings and museums.

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Foreword

Natural history museums are the children of the Enlightenment and represent the physical manifestation of our species' attempt to integrate rational thought with the understanding of the natural and cultural worlds. Curiosity about curious objects gave rise to the first collections, and these collections drew audiences. By the mid-nineteenth century, this curiosity had matured into natural history science, whose early practitioners took advantage of increasingly easy travel to begin to sample the entire world and to summarize its contents. Most museums will proudly point to their founding expeditions and their earliest curators.

The end of the nineteenth century saw a surge in transportation and communication technology, a dramatic increase in urbanization, and an emerging recognition that plants, animals, and cultures were endangered by the growth and expansion of the world population's, which had nearly doubled from 1 billion in 1800 to 1.9 billion in 1900. The "new museum men" of the 1870s realized that urban audiences craved knowledge of the natural world and were concerned about its conservation. To meet this need, they built large, cathedral-like museums in a host of cities between 1880 and 1920. These museums explicitly recognized three goals: new knowledge, preservation of heritage, and public education. In a world before television, these institutions brought the broad world to cities and presented it as a series of dioramas, taxidermy mounts, interesting objects, and lantern-slide lectures.

Fast forward to 1960 and the world had accelerated, adding another billion people and launching the space age. In the United States, the Sputnik surprise sent educators scrambling to retool their science game, and they responded with the creation of science centers that were designed to engage young audiences with technology. Many American cities soon had a shiny new science center to compete with their now elderly natural history museum. By the 1980s, many natural history museums had reached their nadir. Some closed their doors, others gave away their collections or decreased their curatorial staff, and still, others simply morphed into science centers.

Fortunately, interest in natural science is resilient, and something wonderful began to happen. Cities began to revitalize and to appreciate the strength of their cultural offerings and diverse audiences. People returned from the

suburbs. Museums began to utilize new technologies to augment communication and to catalogue and analyze their collections. Emerging awareness of pollution, poaching, habitat loss, and global warming began to mobilize citizen-based action. Advances in digital technology and genetics rebirthed the relevance of natural history collections. *Indiana Jones*, *Jurassic Park*, *Planet Earth*, and *Dinosaur Train* fanned the flames. New expeditions to fossil fields yielded amazing new finds and reminded us that the best stuff still awaits discovery. Museums began to renovate their 1920s dinosaur halls with twentieth-century insights from Earth System science, biology, ecology, and astrophysics. Dioramas came to be recognized as much-loved time capsules of lost habitats. Repatriation laws fostered new and genuine collaborations between museums and native communities. The forces that disrupted many industries seemed to strengthen natural history museums.

Now, in the eighteenth year of the twenty-first century, natural history museums find themselves with a powerful mandate to understand the natural world and humanity's place in it. The human population now stands at 7.3 billion and is headed toward a peak of 10 billion by 2050. Curatorial careers are traditionally long, and curators hired today will likely still be at their posts when the world hits "peak human." Most kids born today will live to see the year 2100 and will be citizens of the twenty-second century. Natural history museums were invented to understand the world and now is their moment.

Against all odds, natural history museums are experiencing a revolutionary rebirth in the digital century. Their collections, when seen together, represent what our species has collected to understand the natural and cultural worlds. With a growing focus on the needs of a young and empowered global audience of digital natives, natural history museums have the potential to become a network of fact-based reality in a post-truth world. I have long used the double entendre "Natural history museums save the world." This aspiration will only be achieved if the natural history museum world is populated by visionary leaders.

It is in this light that Eric Dorfman, Director of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History, assembled a talented group of museum practitioners and scholars to assess the future of natural history museums and provide a road map of best practices.

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