

Brad Irwin

Reframing the Natural History Museum in the context of a planetary crisis

Keynote presentation by Brad Irwin

Text based on the script of the presentation by Brad Irwin, edited by Stéphanie Wintzerith

The Natural History Museum in London is a museum with a very long tradition. Nevertheless, it is undergoing a thorough process of change and reframed itself in the context of a planetary crisis. This contribution presents how the museum reforms itself towards sustainability, advocacy for the planet and an urgent need for visitors to change their behaviour.

Context

Let us first start with some background and context about the museum: the Natural History Museum in London first opened its doors in 1881. It was very much framed as:

- a cathedral to nature,
- a place to house collections,
- a place to do research, and

- a place to inspire audiences about the awe and wonder of the natural world.

In more than 140 years, some things have changed. The Museum soon became an iconic place, both nationally and internationally. Its collection has grown manifold to hold now over 80 million items from all over the world. As a place of research, the science that is conducted both within its walls and in partnership with other institutions and scientists has led to countless discoveries and new ways of thinking. The Natural History Museum holds a really special place in a lot of people's hearts – it's the place people go to as children, and the place they go back to as adults to show it to their own children.

It has become a place that is incredibly popular. In 2019, we reached approximately 21 million people through our onsite, online, national and international programmes. Indeed, it is the most visited science attraction in the UK and the most visited natural history museum in Europe. The family audience is huge, amounting to around 2.7 million a year. The international visitorship has grown massively: up to 70% of the museum's audiences come from outside the UK.

Whilst those changes are pretty significant, the original framing has proved to be long-lasting. It is still a place to house and care for the collections, a place to do research and a place to inspire audiences about the awe and wonder of the natural world. The core of the museum remains unchanged, but the world around it has changed dramatically, though.

We are now living in a critical time of biodiversity loss, habitat destruction, climate breakdown and disease outbreak – this will be no news to you. Humans have become the most dominant species on the planet, disrupting the balance of Earth's natural systems on which we and all other species depend. The crises we face are global in scale and require an immediate, collective response.

If we are to contain these threats, we need the knowledge and understanding that emerges from scientific discovery. While this knowledge is necessary, it isn't sufficient. We also need to ensure it

reaches decision-makers and it informs and engages large public audiences, so that they demand and support change and adapt their own behaviour.

We know that: extraordinary change requires extraordinary engagement and action. However, the public often feels overwhelmed by negative messages on climate and the environment and feels powerless to be part of the solution. This really limits the impact of scientific knowledge and ideas that could be the drive for change.

This is where the Natural History Museum or other trusted institutions must be bolder and louder to talk about the planet. It is both needed and expected: our audiences absolutely demand it, as we know from internal research carried out with our visitors. We've found out that the audiences trust us, but they want greater relevance and innovation. We've also found out – and this is key – that younger generations absolutely expect us to have a broader role in society and most of all expect us to tackle global planetary issues.

We also know that our visitors, when leaving the museum, have appreciated the things they've seen as well as the natural world, but they don't feel empowered to act for it. Taking this into account, at the beginning of 2020, we declared a "Planetary Emergency" and revealed¹ a new *Vision and Strategy to 2031*.

A new strategy for taking action

This new strategy marks an important shift in emphasis, from a museum which reports on the world to one that actively participates in shaping solutions to global challenges. It includes a renewed focus on the impact we have, through our public engagement and science activities, in raising awareness of, and finding solutions to, the biggest

¹ Available at: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/content/dam/nhmwww/about-us/our-vision/strategy-to-2031.pdf>

"The future of the natural world,
on which we all depend, is in your hands."
Sir David Attenborough



Fig. 1: Cover page of the new *Vision and Strategy 2031* and its symbol, the blue whale called Hope to embody the new strategy. Source: NHM.

challenges facing humanity and the planet. We want to do more than to be an observer and commentator on the natural world. We have to be more proactive and inspire action.

Our new vision is a future where both people and planet thrive. For us, this is a vision which is really different from the vision we had in the past, it makes a big and wonderful change. We are no longer just talking about ourselves, our collections, our science: we

are placing what we do in the context of the world and of what’s happening today.

Our mission is to “create advocates for the planet”. Here again, our mission is no longer about preserving the collection or “inspiring people”. It is 100% about action!

As part of this strategic review, it was crucial for us to figure out what these advocates for the planet might be. Here’s our answer: an advocate for the planet is someone who speaks up on behalf of nature, and ultimately will take action to prevent damaging it, respectively to protect it. It is so fundamental that we really need to weave this into everything we do. In order to achieve this, we have used psychological and sociological insights to create an “advocate engagement model” that will direct all of our public programming.

In order to create an advocate for the planet,

- we need to inspire a connection with nature, so we must create memorable and emotional experiences;
- we need to inform audiences about the natural world, so we will share stories that help people place themselves in the narrative of our planet;
- we need to get our audiences to act for the natural world, thus we will empower people so they can make informed decisions about their own behaviour and actions.

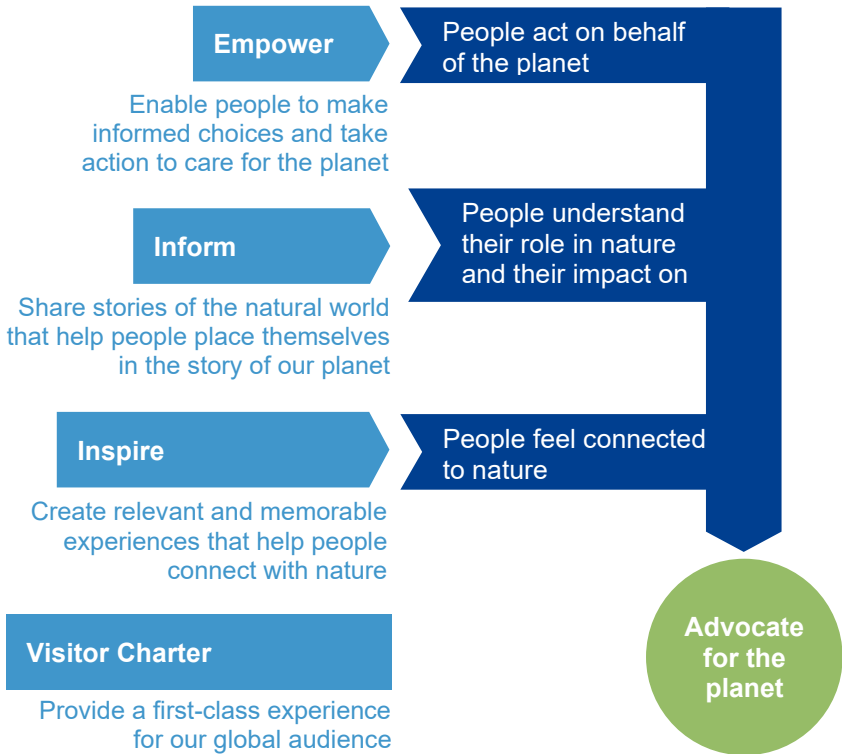


Fig. 2: Advocate engagement framework, chart: adapted from NHM/Brad Irwin

We identified five key priorities to drive our activity for the next 12 years:

1) Engage and involve the widest possible audience

This means reaching out nationally and globally, onsite and online, to create advocates for the planet.

2) Develop our gardens and galleries

This is an urgent requirement for us. We need to create new spaces that speak to that narrative, inside and out, combining heritage and experience to connect to nature.

3) Secure the future of our collection

We still have much work to do to ensure our collection is safe, accessible and – really quite importantly – digitally available, for future innovations and generations.

4) Transform the study of natural history

We want to apply technological innovations to our collections, collecting and science, bringing benefits to people and planet. We also acknowledge the need to think about training of the future generations of scientists.

5) Create a resilient and sustainable organisation

We definitely need to invest in people, in technology and in our estate. We also need to be striving towards financial and environmental sustainability.

This last point has become incredibly important, particularly now. It is crucial that we live what we profess and take action to become a sustainable organisation ourselves. How to turn those words into reality then? Formulating nice sentences is easy, but implementing those changes and holding on to these concepts is a much harder task. Experience showed over the years that other attempts to reform the Museum, other exciting words which sounded wonderful and raised enthusiasm, brought little change to the institution itself. Taking a radically different direction was never going to be easy.

And yet this time, change happens and we have made some huge strides forward.

Reframing the museum: concrete changes, collaborations and future plans

The first reshape was made in the area of the digital platforms. That was the easiest to start with, a place where we could see the change immediately. We think of our website in two ways. On the one hand, it plays a key role in helping (potential) visitors to understand what's on in the museum etc. On the other hand, it is also a news hub for our science: our "Discover Hub" shows daily news and articles that unlock and share our scientific research. You'll also find on our website a huge section dedicated to the Anthropocene – with loads of articles that explain the issues, how our science is becoming more solutions focused, as well as ideas for the public to take action in their daily lives.

The second concrete step was to set a focus on biodiversity. Biodiversity is often seen as something found in rainforests or African savannahs. Urban biodiversity in the UK is particularly unrecognised and undervalued. With more and more people living in towns and cities, this means we risk an even greater disconnect with the nature on our doorstep.

To combat this, we've announced a big flagship initiative, the "Urban Nature Project". This project will transform the Museum's five-acre outdoor space into an exemplar of urban wildlife research, conservation and awareness. The aim is to help engaging the nation with urban biodiversity. The ambitious project also convenes a UK-wide partnership which will tackle challenges facing urban natural heritage and hopefully reconnect people to nature across the country. Comprising a coalition of museums and wildlife organisations, it will develop the tools and skills urgently needed to understand urban nature and inspire diverse audiences to make a lifelong connection with the natural world, learn about its value, and take action to protect it.



Fig. 3: Urban Nature Project: a vision to reshape the outdoor space of the museum. Source: NHM.

We made changes to existing exhibitions, like the “Wildlife Photographer of the year” to address the narrative around people and planet and the Anthropocene. In many ways, it is not about making everything new. Actually, we rather take existing assets and turn them to make sure they are addressing our overarching strategic narrative.

Apart from what visitors might see in the museum, we are also broadening our partnership work. This year, we have created a new network called “The Global Alliance: For People and Planet”. It gathers many “science in culture” organisations which are implementing similar approaches around the planetary crisis, but which up to now have rarely talked to one another or worked together in a collaborative, coordinated and mission-led way. About 35 museums, science centres and organisations all over the world have now convened to

work together. The premise of the group is to learn from one another and be a support network. The most exciting part of this network is to find projects that all partners could collaborate on with the view that, if we can work together and amplify ideas that are important to us, then the global reach and impact of that activity would be huge.

We are also working hard to have an influence on policy and decision making. For example, we had a presence at the World Economic Forum's Annual Meeting 2020 in Davos, as odd as it may seem for a museum to be there. We took our collections, our scientists and some Wildlife Photography images there to spark conversations with world leaders who make decisions about the state of the planet. It gave us a great opportunity to do what we do best, which is to use objects, use stories, and use an informal approach to influence people understand the planet today.

And there will be much more of such actions. 2020 was going to be a huge year for us – but Covid-19 has obviously affected so many of our plans. On the other hand, it has also fired us up. 2021 and the following years will be even bigger and better: very soon we will announce a year-long season of work that will weave all this together in a way that will be another big step change for the organisation. That season 2021 will have physical components, digital components, a massive international events programme and will tap into some of the big things that are happening during the year, global events like COP15 on biodiversity in China and COP26 on climate change in the UK.

The process of creating the new Strategy 2031

At this point, it may be useful to mention a few notions about the process of creating a new strategy. The following list sums up five different aspects and thoughts I have about the process held in the Natural History Museum. Even though they might seem independent

from one another at first sight, they nevertheless are important factors for the development of our new *Vision and Strategy 2031*.

First of all, the strategic process took a really long time. I think we started this process at the end of 2018 – it took about a year of thinking, discussing, sharing, writing, redrafting, checking, peer reviewing etc. It was a long process in itself. As a reminder: the new Strategy was revealed at the beginning of 2020.

Second: it came – and this is crucial – at a time of significant leadership change in the museum. I don't think you can understate what a new voice and new perspective on the Executive Board can do to an organisation.

Third: the process that we went through was incredibly open, transparent and collaborative with all staff. It felt like the organisation as such was truly embraced throughout this process – which has really helped to turn those words into reality. There were so many different meetings, so many opportunities to reflect, critique, discuss, share, etc. and I feel that, as an organisation, we actually really committed for this going on.

Fourth: there were also a lot of bumps along the way. There were times I thought the Trustees were not going to sign off that new direction, because they felt it too different from what we had done in the past. The overwhelming support of staff really helped to push it through.

Fifth: I think we were really aware that this was happening at a time where organisations like ICOM for instance were also wrangling with their purpose and the much-contested definition of what a museum is. For us, the peer review process of sharing our vision with other organisations and getting feedback was really important. It gave us the confidence to move forward as it was unanimously supported. In fact, if anything, our peer review group wanted us to be even bolder.

Finally, I'd like to finish with a quote that has driven this strategic thinking. Here are the words of the legendary Sir David Attenborough:

“The future of the natural world, on which we all depend, is in your hands.” This is a powerful reminder that it will require everyone to work together to create a sustainable future, both for the planet and human civilisation.

Three questions answered after the presentation

Question

How do you, as an institution, reflect on your own carbon footprint? What tools can be used to analyse a museum’s resource and energy accounts?

Brad Irwin’s answer

This is something we have talked about for quite a while during the process. We created a whole new internal sustainability framework to think about how we use energy, how we fly around the world etc. We wanted to make sure that, as an institution, we are really living the values that we’re talking about. Historically, we’re an institution that has toured many exhibitions, that has travelled a lot both for scientific research and for partnership building. This new sustainability framework will make us think about it *really* differently. Having a close look at all our supply chains is one of the big changes we make: we want to make sure where we source food for our café from, we want to make sure we source products of our shop from a sustainable supply chain. We now closely look at things like heating and energy use within the building, and we’re also thinking about new travel policies so that we really reduce that.

Question

How do you think museums are themselves part of a global structure which contributed to the crisis in the first place?

Brad Irwin's answer

That question is a tricky one... The Natural History Museum is in a very privileged position considering the huge number of scientists who have used or can use our collections to research the natural world. Therefore, we have many scientists doing research on the world and about the world. It is an important source of knowledge. So much of that research is now being used on global studies and reports. Thus, we have this background, this kind of fundamental underpinning that gives us, I think, a huge amount of credibility to launch off from.

But how do museums create the crisis itself? That might sound a little controversial, but I think museums have been pretty complacent for a long time. Museums, and particularly natural history museums, are just waking up to this type of thinking, and I think it's a shame. For such a long time, we've been so used to just presenting objects or creating conversations about objects, but we have somehow forgotten the bigger global picture. In my eyes, it is this complacency – if anything – that has been slightly problematic.

The whole world around museology has sifted, over a really long period of time and in many ways. Museums started off as “places to put stuff”. They were places where you could come to look at things. Maybe you learned something, maybe you didn't, they were very didactic. A paradigm shift occurred which is much more oriented around engagement, learning, inclusion, discussion, etc. in a much more two ways conversation. That great paradigm shift has been important for us, I think, as a collective, to be more connected to society, more relevant, more interesting. But I see another paradigm shift coming, i.e. that we absolutely have to engage with the big critical issues. This engagement has to feel authentic to you institutionally. For us at the Museum, it absolutely does, because we have the science, we have the collections, we're building from a base where it's all underpinned by authenticity, science etc. So, I think yes, a big paradigm shift is coming for us at the Natural History Museum.

Question

How do you think museums can foster behaviour change in our visitors?

Brad Irwin's answer

This is something that we are still trying to figure out ourselves. The key here is that we find a sort of behavioural change scientist to help us, an expert who would really understand the move from just inspiring people towards getting them to act. I hope that the model that I shared briefly [advocates for the planet] is a step in that right direction. That model is to help us think of how to build up with the visitors so that they can act. For us, it's about inspiring, informing and then getting them to act. The great thing is that this is a topic that more and more institutions are really trying to grapple with. I am convinced that this is the very issue we need to focus on, and share that learning as soon as possible, because it really is all about getting people to change behaviour and I don't think we're quite there yet.