



A review of “Whale and Coral Stories with Us” exhibition at Bunkyo University Shonan Campus: A traveling exhibition and its educational use in higher education

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Abstract

This paper explores the use of a traveling exhibition as part of a curator certificate training program at the higher education level in Japan. In most universities, students registered for the curator practical training module (hakubutsukan-jisshu) are sent to various types of museums for about 5 days. What they do and learn in each museum is totally left to the decision of the curators. Thus, the learning outcome and the quality of the learning vary.

The Faculty of International Studies at Bunkyo University started a new curator certification program in 2008. In 2010, it ran its first curator practical training module, which consisted of the opening and management of a traveling exhibition entitled “Whale and Coral Stories with Us” as the main part of the module. This paper reviews the background of this traveling exhibition and how it functioned as educational material for this particular module.

1 Introduction

The traveling exhibition “Whale Stories with Us” was planned and developed by a research group at User Science Institute, Kyushu University in 2008, and was later revised to become “Whale and Coral Stories with Us” in 2010. Its main purpose is to enhance citizens’ understanding of the ecology of whales and their relationship with human beings and their culture. The exhibition

presents various themes relating to whales such as: the habits of whales; our historical relationship and ethnographic issues (especially those found in Japan); and environmental issues.

There are two special characteristics of the “Whale and Coral Stories with Us” exhibition. First, it is planned and managed as a “traveling exhibition,” which means it can travel anywhere, as

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long as there is enough space, budget and trained facilitators available. It aims to overcome the barriers of accessibility problems for many museums; that is, people living in rural areas often find it impractical to travel to museums and some people feel that they do not share the culture of visiting museums. Instead of keeping exhibition contents inside the walls of museums, traveling exhibitions try to reach out to new audiences. In the past, it has been shown not only in museums and galleries, but also in waiting areas in ports, schools and community centers (refer to section 3). The exhibition at Bunkyo University Shonan Campus in October 2010 (details are in section 4) was its 13th showing.

Second, most of the contents of this exhibition are presented in a hands-on style. This means people can not only read the information and look at the contents, but also to touch, smell, listen, and take action. For example, visitors were able to listen to the squeaking voices of many kinds of whales by pulling the CD-player switch cord. This motion is very easy so that even young children can enjoy pulling the switch by themselves. A hands-on approach promotes “discovery learning,” which encourages the learner to explore and interpret what they see and feel from their experience (Hein, 1998). This is applicable to a wide range of generations, as both children and adults make new meaning out of their direct experience at the exhibition. Thus, the “Whale and Coral Stories with Us” exhibition was made accessible to and enjoyable for a wide audience.

The exhibition shows various aspects related to human beings and to the ecology of whales.

Why do we need to have such an exhibition on whales? Recently, Japanese whaling (whale fishing) for research has been publicized worldwide and Japanese people hear strong opposition from overseas. People can easily access the shocking videos of whaling through TV and other media, and feel sympathy for the killed whales.

However, this is only one aspect of recent whale issues. In fact, most people do not know about the habits of whales and their long relationship with human beings. People hear sensational news on the media, but they tend not to have any concrete information on whales. For this reason, it is very difficult to involve a wider audience to join in the discussion. In order to promote public discussion, more people need to know the facts and details of whales as a starting point. This is true not only for Japanese people, but people worldwide.

The “Whale and Coral Stories with Us” exhibition challenges this situation and promotes further understanding of whales and their relationship with human beings from a neutral viewpoint. This exhibition does not lead the audience to one conclusion, but rather, tries to introduce a wider perspective of whales and to encourage people to raise their awareness of ecological environments.

2 Background of “Whale and Coral Stories with Us”: The Japanese tea chest, kamishibai, and the mosquito net - Transforming the traveling exhibition through the use of traditional objects

Did you know that there are more than 86 species of whales and dolphins? Did you also know that there are more than 100 whale tombs all over

Japan? And you may be amazed at the smell of ambergris (*ryuzenko*), an excretion from sperm whales that has been used in the manufacture of fine perfumes. These are some of the things that visitors can learn about at “Whales with Us,” an innovative traveling exhibition developed by the Kyushu University Museum Lab as part of a project in January 2008.



Why did we decide to create an exhibition about such a controversial issue? We felt that information and education is the key to a better understanding of any controversy. However, people were afraid to find out more about whales and whaling precisely because it was, and indeed still is, such a contentious issue. The science, culture, and history of whaling is much more meaningful and interesting than what is presented in the media. While we knew the undertaking would be tremendously challenging, we believed that it was our mission to give people access to information about the issue that was not available in the media.

Museums are places of learning that are meant to draw a variety of visitors across all ages, nationalities, education and socio-economic backgrounds. At the same time, universities are places devoted to the pursuit of academic knowledge. Our group, through its association with both institu-

tions, is uniquely positioned to give the general public as comprehensive and balanced of a picture as possible about the issue and its background.

Since 2008, the original “Whales with Us” traveling exhibition has been to more than 10 different cities. Besides providing a learning experience, it also acted as an archive for the stories of the various communities. Contributions from each community resulted in new material for Kamishibai (literally paper drama, or in this case, picture book theater) and new content for the exhibition itself. The paradigm shift central to our traveling exhibition is that an exhibition is not over simply after it has been conceived of and put on display. An exhibition is more than a static entity. It can, and should continue to evolve. In this way, interactive learning goes beyond simply allowing visitors to interact with the exhibits. Rather, visitors of each community became both active participants and contributors to the exhibition itself even as it educated them through the process of self-directed discovery.



Our exhibition continued to grow and evolve as it travelled around the country after its initial realization. It succeeded in drawing a total of 55,945 visitors for 159/365 days. The exhibition

was set up not only at traditional sites (i.e. museums), but also at more unconventional venues, such as a harbor and a department store. It is very important for us to cultivate new sites apart from museums. In this way, we strive towards the ideal that the concept of a museum can exist outside of its physical constraints—that anywhere can be a museum, and indeed, a place of learning, through the implementation of traveling exhibitions.

The “Whales with Us” exhibition incorporated three features: (1) participation through the use of the five senses, (2) intergenerational exchange, and (3) standalone components that were grouped thematically to address specific topics. The contents of the exhibition were transported in packing crates. The materials in each crate stood well on their own since they were grouped thematically, and the various crates could also be integrated into a whole. Hence, exhibitors had the freedom to choose which boxes to use and could customize the exhibition depending on their space and needs. There were interactive hands-on learning stations with materials such as the above-mentioned ambergris or songs of the humpback whale. There were also two spaces, namely Grandpa’s Room and Whale Town, that visitors could enter. All of these features sought to promote a truly interactive experience of “the whale” that was grounded in a cultural and historical context, as well as the exchange of dialogue between generations.

At each exhibition venue, we recruited people from the community who served as communicators for the traveling exhibition. To prepare them

for their role, we provided half-day training programs for the applicants. There are two classes: “Introduction to Communication” and “Explaining the Exhibition—A Practicum.” Through the training programs, we have trained 163 communicators from all walks of life, including high school students, students in diving and dolphin training courses, students in museum studies’ courses, housewives, and retired scholars. These training programs were a powerful way to create reflection and engagement at the grassroots level so that stories continued to be told even after the exhibition had travelled to its subsequent venues.

In addition, we implemented 7 science cafes and 12 original educational programs with the communicators during the exhibition period. The themes of the science cafes and the educational programs were designed to fit the backgrounds and interests of each community. For example, the science cafe in Zamami, Okinawa, one of the most famous whale watching sites in Japan, had “The future, the present and the past of whale watching” as its theme. Children in Zamami created an original song celebrating the new life of a baby whale with the assistance of a professional pianist. Children there still sing the song at their schools, thereby activity incorporating what they had learned and helped to create into their everyday lives. A traveling exhibition may not be permanent, but one of the strengths of “Whale with Us” is that content of the exhibition, such as songs or Kamishibai (*storytelling*), becomes part of the communities.



3 Recent practices

When the original project was terminated at Kyushu University, Museum Lab became an independent NPO so that it can continue to reach out to the public, using the experience its members had acquired so far, along with the knowledge of those who were interested in museum activities. The primary functions of the Museum Lab as a NPO are: (1) to conduct educational and research activities through museums, and (2) to promote environmental education activities.

Based on these functions, the “Whales with Us” exhibition restarted with the following three objectives:

1. Providing a place for education about whales
2. Environmental education: learning from the whale, a great animal that possibly knows the

most about Earth.

3. Preserving the living history of elders.

In 2009, Museum Lab embarked on the new idea of using traditional Japanese objects as part of the exhibition so that visitors could be engaged beyond the theme of the exhibition. The three objects that were used are the Japanese tea chest, *Kamishibai*, and the mosquito net.

In Japan, tea chests have been used for a long time. These chests are usually made of Japanese cedar and are very suitable for the purpose of preservation. The original crates used by the traveling exhibition were strong as they were designed for shipping aboard, but they were very heavy and hence, expensive to ship. The size of these crates was 100 cm by 100 cm, with a height of 50 cm (5000 cm³). Taking these disadvantages into consideration, traditional Japanese tea chests were introduced as new packing crates. These chests are around the same size as a regular delivery box.

Mosquito nets were common until the prevalence of air conditioners in Japanese homes. Up until the 1980s, one would often see mosquito nets in houses. Similarly, *Kamishibai* was performed in the streets as a way to educate children during the time when Japan was poor. This form of traditional story telling was popular until television became widespread. These objects, once so ubiquitous, have been relegated to the memories of the elderly. The “Whales with Us” exhibition encouraged grandparents to share their stories with the younger generations through the use of such traditional objects, promoting exchange among different people and strengthening their bonds in more

ways than one. In 2009, the new traveling exhibition with the tea chests drew a total of 54,743 visitors over 178 days at 10 different venues.

The following are the five findings of the exhibition so far:

- Traveling exhibitions can be venues to pass on stories and foster culture.
- Traveling exhibitions can result in collaboration between various museums, thus enriching their content.
- Traveling exhibitions can be very costly in terms of budget and human resources, therefore the quality and purpose should be carefully considered and chosen.
- Traveling exhibitions can provide a place for the public to engage with museums.
- Holding traveling exhibitions outside of museums, such as in harbors or department stores, can be a form of outreach for museums, introducing the museum experience to more people who are not familiar with it.

In 2010, the exhibition, in its then manifestation as “Whale and Coral Stories with Us,” was held in two venues: the National Museum of Nature and Science, Tokyo (NMNS) and Bunkyo University. In August, it was exhibited as part of the special exhibition “Mammals-Diversity in Marine Adaptation” at the NMNS for three days. Although it was the first time the tea chests and their contents were set up within a larger special exhibition, our exhibition engaged well with the audiences through the hands-on learning stations. Usually, special exhibitions at large museums feature very few interactive elements as the large number of visitors increases the possibility of

exhibits being broken. Thus, the participatory nature of our exhibition, together with the tea chests and the mosquito net, were a hit with the visitors. NPO staff members also enjoyed the opportunity to be in charge of communicators at the NMNS.

In December, the exhibition was held for three days as a student project at a school festival at Bunkyo University. What made the project really special was that museum studies majors became communicators for the exhibition. Moreover, these students created their own original exhibits and science cafes. The detailed information about this exhibition at Bunkyo University will be addressed in the following section.

In 2011, we will present the “Whale and Coral Stories with Us” in Toyama and Fukuoka. We hope to continue our efforts at engaging the public and bringing the exhibition to a wider audience. We look forward to the exciting changes that the exhibition will undergo as it continues to evolve through the contributions of more and more communities.

4 Opening the exhibition at Bunkyo University as part of curator practical training module

According to the Japanese Museum Act (*Hakubutsukan-ho*), for those who wish to acquire the curator certificate from universities, there are a number of core modules (credits) students must acquire. The curator practical training module (*Hakubutsukan jisshu*) is one of the core modules, which in many universities is open to students who are at the finishing stage of the curatorial certifi-

cate curriculum.

Although the names of modules are addressed in the Japanese Museum Act, the curriculum and the management of modules depends entirely on the faculty in charge of these modules. Therefore, there is a wide gap in the contents of what students learn. Students who belong to the Faculty of Letters are often taught by faculty members who are professionals in archaeology, art history or history. In these cases, the module is strongly influenced by the field of the module leader. For example, when an archaeologist teaches the curator a practical training course, he or she often introduces basic research skills required in archaeology (e.g. cleansing and labeling earthenware, making rubbing copies). Those who belong to the Faculty of Bioscience may learn more about scientific approaches to museums.

On one hand, as a positive aspect, this current curatorial certificate system allows a wide variety of approaches to museum studies and students can study from different perspectives. On the other hand, as a negative aspect, there are no acknowledged criteria or standards as to the extent of what students are required to know and which skills they are required to master. This point is waiting for further discussion.

In the case of Bunkyo University, the curatorial certificate curriculum started in spring 2008. Thus, all of the third year students who participated in the “Whale and Coral Stories with Us” exhibition in 2010 were the first group to experience this module. There were 15 students from the Faculty of International Studies.

The curriculum of curatorial certificate modules at the Faculty of International Studies differs from other traditional curriculums found in other universities. Since the curatorial certificate course belongs to the Department of International Tourism and Hospitality, students only briefly study a basic level of art, culture and history. Their major does not match with the academic fields found in most museums. However, this is not a negative point, but rather, a challenge to create a new type of curatorial module that focuses on management, policy, communication skills and tourism. These approaches have not been emphasized in traditional modules in other universities. Part of the reason is that most modules leaders are not professionals in museum studies and there are only a few faculty members who can teach these subjects.

Since Bunkyo students are already trained in the fields of tourism and hospitality, the module needed to link with knowledge and skills they have acquired so far. For this reason, it was better to run the entire training practice inside the campus, rather than sending students to different museums and being trained there. I happened to hear about the “Whale and Coral Stories with Us” exhibition a few years ago as one of the main members was a research partner in another project. I came up with the idea of bringing this traveling exhibition to the campus and presenting to the public during the university festival in late October. From this idea, I applied to Bunkyo University Director Subsidy for developing educational programs for fiscal year 2010 (Gakucho Choseikin) for financial support in February 2010, and successfully received funding from the university.

<Curriculum>

Next, I will briefly introduce the curriculum of the curatorial practical training course for the autumn semester of 2010 at the Faculty of International Studies. Officially, the module started from the autumn semester in late September, but I was aware that students needed enough time to study and acquire good training experience in order to become hosts of the “Whales and Coral Stories with Us” exhibition.

Before opening the exhibition in October, the following summer assignments were given to the students.

- Students were required to visit “The Great Mammals Exhibition ? Creatures from the Sea” at the National Museum of Nature and Science, Tokyo (July 10th to September, 26th 2010)

One part of the “Whale Stories With Us” exhibition was also held from August 1st to 3rd at the above museum. Students had a chance to see the content and speak with the founder of this traveling exhibition. Students were required to write a report of this visit, focusing on their expression from the entire exhibition and how this experience can contribute to the exhibition on campus.

- Students were also required to write a review on one book and two or more newspaper articles related to whales. Their own views were to be included.

- Group Project- Create your own exhibition contents concerning whales Students were separated into 3 groups. Each group was asked to prepare an original exhibition on whales, which

were in addition to the “Whale and Coral Stories with Us” exhibition. This group project aimed to encourage students to learn more about whales according to their interests and to try developing one small part of a museum exhibition. Research and presentation of findings through an exhibition is one of a curator’s initial tasks. This group project aimed to train students as curators through direct experience.

- After the university festival in late October, students were given further reading assignments which aimed to further understanding of broader aspects of museum studies, which included management, museums and tourism, issues related to curators and exhibition development.

<The exhibition>

“Whale and Coral Stories with Us” at Bunkyo University, Shonan Campus
(October 22nd to 24th, 2010)



The entrance to the exhibition



Students preparing the boxes

(all photographs taken by author on October 24th, 2010)

The “Whale and Coral Stories with Us” exhibition kit was first sent from the Ehime branch of the NPO Museum Lab. Students first checked the contents and recorded what was missing or broken. During the classes before the exhibition, students studied the contents and practiced how to communicate with the audience. They also designed and ordered original banners and staff jackets. As a result, this helped promoting this exhibition during the festival.



Ochabako (tea box) contents



Sango Hotel (coral hotel)

Next, I will report on the outcomes of the three group projects.

Group Project–The Relationship between Kanagawa Prefecture and Whales-

This group focused on the historical relationship between Kanagawa Prefecture and whales. During their research, they came to know that Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States arrived in Uraga (present Yokosuka City, Kanagawa) in 1853. One of the main reasons for Perry to discuss opening the ports of Japan was that American whaling ships needed ports to use as supply bases. Students conducted research on these historical issues and presented the findings as above.



Group Project –Whales as Food Resource-

The second group focused on whale meat as a food resource. Today, a small amount of whales are sold by fish mongers in Japan as all whale meat comes from research whaling. Although the consumption of whale meat has declined during the past 50 years in Japan, recently it has been reassessed as allergy free and nutritious. Students showed recent dishes and pictures of school meals in Yokohama which served whale meat.

The above picture shows their “eating section” which let the audience try canned whale meat (*Kujira no tuskudani*). There was a very good reaction to this hands-on exhibition from children to adults. Using canned food was a new idea created by the students.



Group Project –Whale Strandings-

This group focused on mass whales strandings. Stranding is a mysterious phenomenon which occurs in some parts of the world. A large number of so-called “beached whales” are found every year. Those whales, dolphins cannot return to the ocean by themselves. But there is no clear explanation to why cetaceans strand and how to prevent this phenomena.

Students came to know about this issue during their visit to the National Museum of Nature and Science in August and they conducted research afterwards. They tried to present this issue using a hands-on approach by creating colourful quiz sheets from which guests could reveal the answers by flapping up the cover.

In addition to the exhibition, students ran two science cafe programs. The first program on October 23rd was run by Team Ship-Kujira, (*Chimu Kujirago*), which consisted of a biologist and a musician. They ran a storytelling show with music, songs and moving pictures of living creatures in the deep sea. The story was based on a picture book called “*Discovery Adventure into the Sea with the Vehicle Whale ~ Life of the deep sea.*” They led two 45 minute sessions and received many guests including children.

The second program was held on the 24th. We invited two whale professionals, Mr. Murata Shouzou (owner of Okinawa Resort) and Dr. Kyoichi Mori (associate professor at Teikyo Kagaku University). Mr. Murata has been running whale watching programs for tourists in the Zamami Islands, Okinawa, for more than 25 years. Dr. Mori has conducted biological research on

whales in Tokyo's Ogasawara Islands for many years. Both had strong relations with whales but from different approaches. Their discussions on whales from different perspectives were very inspiring. Most guests who turned up to this event happened to be adults who had experienced whale watching. In fact, we found it extremely difficult to invite other students and general visitors to this program. Promotion of the events to a wider audience became a subject for consideration.

5 Discussion

This new practice of running a traveling exhibition as part of a curator training module has been a successful one for the following reasons. We hosted over 540 visitors during the three days of the exhibition and we received many positive visitor comments regarding the exhibition. It is worth noting that the exhibition received a special award called the *Kyoshitsu Taisho Tokubestu Sho* (special award for events using classrooms) from the Shotosai Committee (university festival committee). The important point is that this award was based on the number of votes from general visitors. The students were very surprised to hear this result, as no members were aware that there was such an award. Thus, we can see that this exhibition was well received by general visitors including students, faculty and the general public.

Next, I would like to quote some comments from the visitors:

"I learned a lot about whales and enjoyed the exhibition very much. Keep up your good work."

"There were lots of recipes for cooking whale meat and I wanted to try some of them. Booths

where I could touch and listen were really fun."

"I regularly play tennis. In the past, the strings of tennis rackets were made from whalebone. Seeing these objects of whales, I was impressed and it made me feel nostalgic, too."

"The songs of whales are beautiful. Whales seemed to me animals that exist somewhere on earth, but they were not something close to myself. But there are issues such as whaling. I want to learn more about them. My children enjoyed the contents very much. Thank you."

These comments were left by the visitors at the feedback section of the exhibition. We can see that visitors not only enjoyed touching, listening and eating here, but they also reflected on their previous knowledge and views towards whales and how they can progress from this experience. These comments suggest that the aims of this exhibition (refer to section 3) have been met.

According to students' end of term reports for this module, most of them not only enjoyed the experience, but they came to realise the importance of learning in depth about the exhibition theme in advance. They also learned the various roles and requirements of facilitators in museum settings. Their interactive experience with real visitors using real objects and contents made this training process very realistic and practical.

Due to budget restrictions, this exhibition cannot be held at Bunkyo University every year. However, this style of inviting a traveling exhibition created by professionals has a strong impact on students' learning of exhibition management

and museum education. All faculty members who are in charge of curator training courses need to become aware of such new practices and further develop their programs. We hope that this report will become a stepping stone for training good curators in Japanese universities.

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Reference

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