



IMPACT PLANNING • EVALUATION • AUDIENCE RESEARCH



SUMMATIVE EVALUATION:

UNSHELVED: COOL STUFF FROM STORAGE EXHIBITION

Prepared for
San Diego Natural History Museum
San Diego, CA

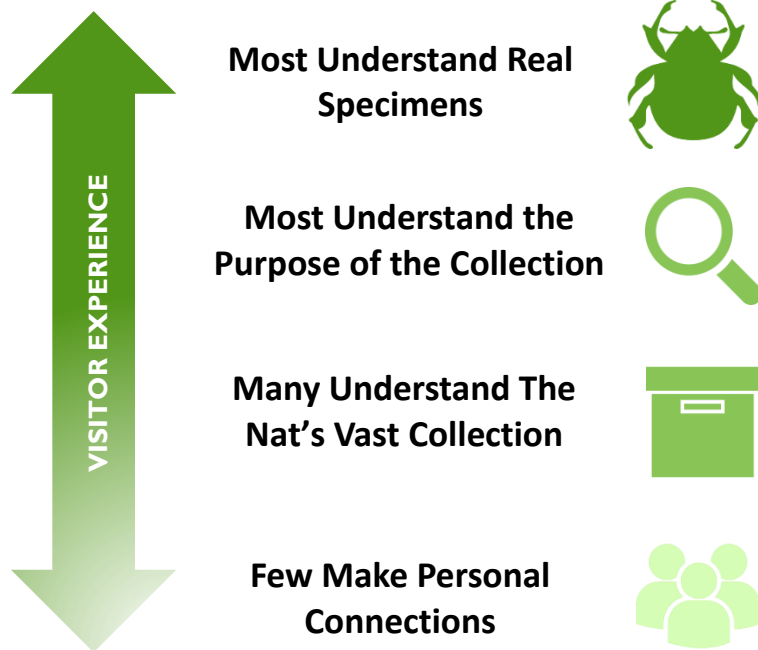
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SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The San Diego Natural History Museum (The Nat) contracted RK&A to conduct a summative evaluation of the *Unshelved: Cool Stuff from Storage* exhibition. The evaluation utilizes exit interviews and a small sample of observations to test the efficacy of the exhibiting strategy undertaken for *Unshelved*. In particular, the evaluation examined: (1) whether the exhibition communicated to visitors that the museum has a vast collection and its purpose; (2) how the low level of interpretation affects visitors' experiences and understanding of the exhibition; and (3) visitors' personal connections and emotional response to the exhibition. Below is a visualization describing the continuum of the visitor experience based on these evaluation questions. The findings presented here are among the most salient. Please read the body of the report for a more comprehensive presentation of results.

Unshelved Visitor Experience Continuum



DO VISITORS UNDERSTAND THE NAT'S COLLECTION?

As described in the 2017 Strategy Roadmap, The Nat aims to achieve mission and impact by focusing on certain key functions of the museum including: as a center for scientific study, as a keeper of the ecological record, and as leaders in educating students and the public about the region's natural resources. In particular, the new *Unshelved: Cool Stuff from Storage* exhibition uses the museum's collection to showcase these functions by inviting visitors to:

COME SEE WHAT'S IN OUR DRAWERS

Have you ever wondered what goes on behind the exhibits in The Nat's building? The building looks bigger from the outside than inside because it holds 8 million specimens—animals, plants, fossils, shells, insects and spiders, minerals, and gems—in storage areas underground and behind gallery walls. We're giving visitors a rare peek behind the scenes in our new exhibition, *Unshelved: Cool Stuff from Storage*. The exhibition is free for members and included with general admission.

- From <http://www.sdnhm.org/exhibitions/unshelved/>

To unpack visitors' understanding of The Nat's collection, we first explored visitor awareness and understanding of the vastness of the museum's collections, which we consider a precursor to understanding of its purpose. Overall, results show that many visitors to *Unshelved* understand that The Nat has a large collection of specimens as a result of visiting. When asked how the exhibition communicated this concept, participants said the size of the collection was explained through various aspects of the exhibition, such as exhibition interpretation, the design of the gallery space with utilitarian shelves and boxes, and the wide variety of specimens on display. Relatedly, when asked what they liked most about *Unshelved*, some said they enjoyed feeling that the exhibition offered them a special "behind the scenes" experience of The Nat. These participants understood that there is a vast collection of specimens in storage and felt intrigued by the opportunity to see more than what it usually on display for the public. On the other hand, some did not grasp that the exhibition displayed specimens from The Nat's vast collection after visiting *Unshelved*, and some expressed confusion about the main message of the exhibition and its organization (for example, why diverse specimens, such as insects and mammals, were

grouped together). It is possible these participants did not read or see any of the interpretative text and images explaining the exhibition during their visit.

Bucking our assumption that awareness of The Nat’s collections and its vastness is a precursor to understanding the collection’s purpose, we found that most visitors (more than those aware of The Nat’s collection) have a correct, if narrow, understanding of why The Nat has a collection of specimens and continues to grow that collection. Interview findings show many believed the purpose of the collection to be for scientific research and learning, while some said the collection preserves and cares for specimens. Responses from participants were mostly general; however, a few said preserved specimens can help scientists understand the change in species over time, including in the event of species extinction. Most were not surprised that The Nat continues to collect specimens. In fact, one-half of participants view this task as part of the mission or duty of a natural history museum, and some participants said they saw the benefits of growing the collection for scientists and the public for future scientific research and use in future exhibitions.

Positively, *Unshelved* prompted many questions about the collection and specimens among visitors. Most often, participants’ curiosity focused on where specimens come from, how specimens are collected, who does the collecting, how specimens are preserved, and where they are stored at The Nat. In other words, visitors were curious about relevant specimen facts, some of which are usually addressed through interpretive text but are not present in *Unshelved* as a result of the limited interpretation strategy employed for this exhibition. During the interview, some participants voiced these questions once, while some asked them repeatedly throughout the conversation, suggesting that they are deeply interested in learning more about the collecting and preservation process at The Nat.

Awareness of The Nat’s collections and its purpose is high but understanding could be enhanced by providing more information about the collecting process, which is of great interest to visitors.



DO VISITORS RECOGNIZE SPECIMENS ARE AUTHENTIC?

Results indicate that visitors to *Unshelved* generally recognize that the specimens are authentic or “real.” Participants referenced a few ways they knew the specimens were authentic, including the realistic fur and feathers on the specimens and interpretive text or photographs in the exhibition. Only a few were unsure about the authenticity of the specimens; these participants seemed to understand that most objects in the exhibition were real but wondered whether certain specimens were reproductions. More specifically, a few participants questioned the authenticity of the whale teeth and Opah fish, saying these looked more like reproductions compared to other specimens, due to their color and texture. Interestingly, another participant was unsure if certain specimens were real due to the fact that visitors were allowed to handle them, a usually forbidden museum behavior.

The Nat created *Unshelved* to not only introduce visitors to real specimens from the collection, but also to showcase the weird and beautiful details of the natural world. Interview findings show many responded positively to the use of authentic specimens, remarking on their beauty and valuing the opportunity to see them up close. Specifically, some spoke about the beautiful colors and textures they saw in *Unshelved*, particularly related to the amethyst, shells, and butterflies. Some participants also appreciated that the displays allowed visitors to get very close to the specimens, allowing visitors to see fine details, such as scales and fur, which they do not usually get close enough to see in other exhibitions.

Alternatively, few participants had negative affective responses to the authentic specimens. Results show that some participants made comments regarding the look of the specimens, typically referring to them as either “creepy,” “disturbing,” or “sad.” Most often these comments were related to specimens with stuffing material visible through the eye holes, and specimens preserved in jars. Additionally, a few voiced concerns about how specimens are collected in the wild, specifically why and how animals are killed for collecting purposes. It should be noted that participants who made these comments did not have a negative opinion of the exhibition but were curious to learn more about collecting guidelines and practices.

High awareness and mostly positive reactions that specimens in *Unshelved* are real; more information about collecting practices may help those who had negative reactions.



WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF LOW INTERPRETATION AND INTERACTIVITY?

With *Unshelved*, The Nat is experimenting with an exhibition strategy that provides more limited interpretation and interactivity than is typical for the museum, and thus wanted to explore the efficacy of this practice for the future. Results suggest the limited interpretation strategy used in *Unshelved* did not result in a notably shorter dwell time compared to other, more traditional exhibitions at The Nat. Observations of 25 visitors in *Unshelved* show the time spent in the exhibition is on par with other exhibitions. The median total time spent in *Unshelved* is 7 minutes 10 seconds in the approximately 3,000-square-foot exhibition. For comparison, visitors spent 6 minutes 4 seconds in the 2,300-square-foot *Extraordinary Ideas* exhibition, and 13 minutes 9 seconds in the much larger, 7,500-square-foot *Coast to Cactus* exhibition.

Furthermore, the high rate of take-away of key ideas, including awareness of the museum’s collection and purpose, indicates that this exhibition strategy can work well for the types of outcomes the museum aspired to in this exhibition. Moreover, during interviews, some participants said they liked the lack of interpretive text compared to other exhibitions at The Nat because it allowed them to view the specimens “as is” and sparked their curiosity to know more. Specifically, one participant said *Unshelved* “captures your attention” despite the limited use of interactive elements. Further related to interactive components, a few mentioned the stools and magnifying glasses as positive aspects of the exhibition which encouraged them to explore the specimens more closely.

On the other hand, as previously mentioned, many were curious to know more about certain aspects of *Unshelved*. During the interview, participants had questions about the specimens and the process of collecting and storing specimens which were unanswered by the exhibition interpretation. In particular, one participant realized he had not thought about specimens in this way prior to visiting *Unshelved*; he wondered “...how the objects were obtained. I didn’t think about that at all with the other exhibits, but this exhibit focuses on that.” While participants did not voice frustration regarding the lack of interpretation, they certainly expressed interest in learning beyond what was presented in *Unshelved*.

The amount of interpretation and interactivity suited the outcomes the museum hoped to achieve with *Unshelved* but greater emphasis on interpretation could deepen visitor understanding.



DO VISITORS FIND PERSONAL CONNECTIONS?

Personal connections are often considered an essential avenue to visitors having meaningful experiences in exhibitions. This study showed that in general, visitors made very few personal connections to the *Unshelved* content. A few referenced experiences with hunting related to taxidermy specimen, or to scientific research and collecting, but overall participants did not offer many parallels to their personal life. Perhaps this is not surprising, since *Unshelved* is specifically designed to present sparse interpretation, limiting one of the main methods museums use to convey meaning to visitors in an exhibition.

Notably however, the lack of personal connections did not seem to lead to a poor exhibition experience for visitors; rather, visitors were intrigued by seeing unfamiliar specimens and curious to learn more about these new things. Perhaps making a personal connection is not necessarily appropriate in an exhibition such as this. Anecdotally, there were many conversations happening among visitors, and one interviewee observed that they were prompted to converse with their group in *Unshelved* because “it’s not all presented to you” as it is in some other exhibitions. So, while personal connections to the specimens themselves were not frequently made, visitors seemed to be forging connections with their visit group through the experience.

However, if personal connection is important to The Nat, consider that many participants were curious to know more about the individuals who collect specimens in the field. It is possible that this human element might be an avenue for making a stronger connection to visitor’s personal lives. In fact, one participant suggested adding a narrative map or guide through *Unshelved* would be a fun way for children to learn more about the people who collect these specimens.

IMPLICATIONS

Overall, we consider the efficacy of the exhibition strategy to be a good one. As a result of the exhibition, visitors’ awareness of the Nat’s collections and its purpose is high, as is awareness that the specimens are real. However, if the museum hopes to deepen visitors’ understanding of the museum’s collections and utilization, it might consider additional interpretation about the collecting process—who does the collecting, what is collected, how, and where is it kept. This additional interpretation may also help the few visitors who had negative reactions to the specimens feel more comfortable with the exhibition. But, one of the greatest benefits to this exhibition strategy, that has less interpretation and interactivity than in the rest of the museum, is the curiosity it inspired in visitors.

STUDY BACKGROUND

The San Diego Natural History Museum (The Nat) contracted RK&A, Inc. (RK&A) to conduct summative evaluation of the *Unshelved: Cool Stuff from Storage* exhibition. The priorities for the study focused on exploring (1) whether visitors understand that the museum has vast collections (and why) as a result of the exhibition; (2) how the low level of interpretation affects visitors' experiences and understanding of the exhibition; and (3) visitors' personal connections and emotional response to the exhibition. More specifically, the questions below, synthesized from The Nat's brainstorm, led to these priorities:

- ◆ Do visitors know that we have collections and continue to collect? Do they care?
- ◆ Do visitors know why we collect?
- ◆ Do visitors understand that the objects are real? How do they feel about this?
- ◆ What do visitors want to know about the objects? What questions did this exhibition elicit from visitors?
- ◆ There is low interactivity and interpretation – does that impact the visitor experience?
- ◆ What, if any, personal connections do visitors make with the exhibition? If so, what are they?

METHODOLOGY

RK&A employed interviews to learn how visitors understood and experienced *Unshelved*. In the extra time onsite at the museum, RK&A also conducted some timing and tracking observations as context for visitors' experience.

EXIT INTERVIEWS

RK&A conducted in-depth interviews with visitors over three days in February 2018; individuals and small groups were invited to participate. RK&A followed a continuous random selection method to identify and then invite participants to take part in the study. In accordance with this method, RK&A chose an imaginary line and intercepted the first eligible visitor group to cross that line. All groups were recruited at the exhibition's entrance/exit. Eligible visitors included English-speaking, adult visitors leaving the exhibition; children were invited to participate in the interview with an accompanying adult, however they were not directly recruited. If a visitor declined to participate in the interview, RK&A logged the visitor's gender, estimated age, and reason for refusal. Upon securing agreement, RK&A conducted the interview, asking probing or clarifying questions to better understand visitors' experiences. RK&A took detailed notes to capture participants' responses.

Exit interview data are qualitative, meaning that results are descriptive. In analyzing the data, the evaluator studied the notes for meaningful patterns and grouped similar responses as patterns and trends emerged. The objectives of the study, as well as our professional experience, informed the analysis. Findings are reported in narrative, supplemented with exemplary quotations from participants. Trends and themes in the data are presented from most- to least-frequently occurring to emphasize comments made by many visitors versus those made by a few visitors. Comments made by a small number of visitors have also been included to emphasize insightful or contrasting viewpoints. When describing the findings, this report uses qualitative data terms such as “most” and “several,” as is appropriate for the sample size and the type of data collected. Proportions, such as one-half or one-third are used where suitable. Such descriptive language is intended to provide readers with a sense of the general trends. Readers should regard the trends as general categories rather than rigid numerical counts.

TIMING AND TRACKING

A small sample of timing and tracking observations were collected over two days in February 2018. Observations are unobtrusive, so visitors were not asked to participate but selected randomly upon entering the exhibition. To select visitors, the observer imagined a line just at the exhibition’s entrance and selected the first visitor age 18 years and older to cross this imaginary line. Once the visitor crossed the line, the observer started a stopwatch and unobtrusively observed the movements of the selected visitor through the space, recording the components used, time spent, and some behaviors. When the visitor exited the exhibition, the observer returned to the entrance to await the next eligible visitor to cross the imaginary line.

Timing and tracking data are quantitative and were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics Version 20. Analyses conducted include:

- ◆ Frequency distributions (e.g., number of visitors to stop at an exhibit)
- ◆ Summary statistics (e.g., mean time spent at an exhibit)

Due to small sample size, more extensive statistical analysis is not applicable.

TIMING AND TRACKING FINDINGS

Timing and tracking observations provide an objective and quantitative account of how visitors experience *Unshelved*, including which exhibition areas visitors attended to, for how long, and how they behave. A total of 25 observations were conducted in the afternoon on a Friday and Sunday.

- ◆ About one-half of observed individuals are female, and about one-half are male.
- ◆ Almost one-half visited in a group of adults and children; less than one-half visited in adult-only groups; two visited alone.
- ◆ Adults range in estimated age from 18 to 55+ years, with more than one-half estimated between 35 and 54 years old. More than one-third estimated between 18 and 34 years old and two estimated more than 55 years old.

TIME SPENT

The *Unshelved* exhibition is a medium-sized exhibition at approximately 3,000 square feet. Observed visitors spent between 64 seconds (1:04) and 20 minutes 3 seconds (20:03). The median time spent in exhibition is 7 minutes 10 seconds (7:10).

NUMBER OF STOPS

RK&A identified 17 areas in the exhibition, which were selected because they are distinct and observable sections in the exhibition. Components vary in size; some are small (e.g., singular exhibit case) and some are large (e.g., left shelving unit with multiple specimens). Of the 17 components, observed visitors stopped at between one and 15 areas. The median number of areas stopped at in the exhibition is 8.

ADDITIONAL BEHAVIORS

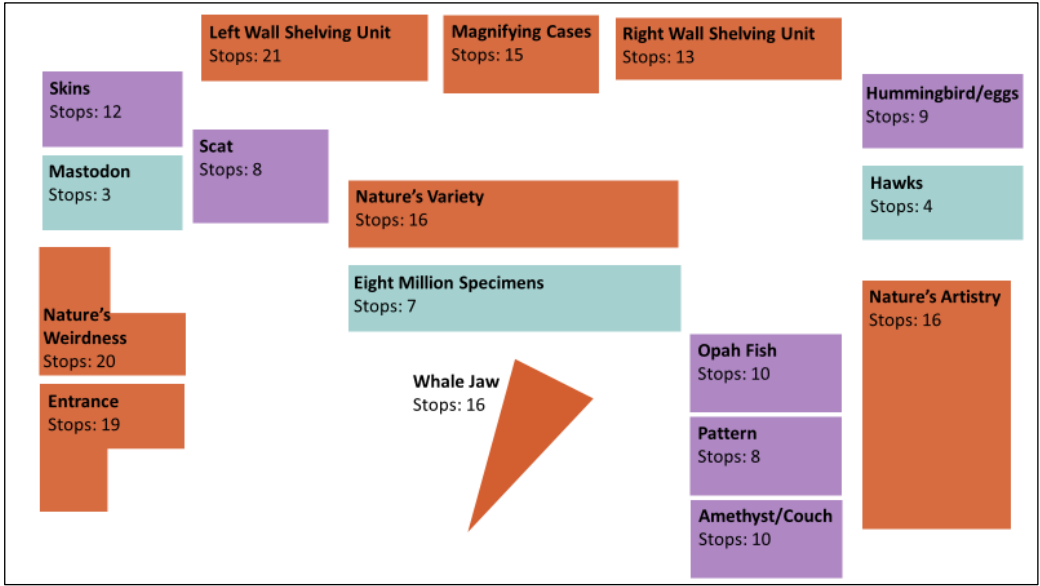
Observations of groups in the exhibition recorded details about visitor behaviors in the exhibition. In addition to areas attended to during the visit, other behaviors observed include:

- ◆ Three groups spoke with a volunteer docent or museum staff member during their visit.
- ◆ Three visitors took photos of exhibition elements or specimens.
- ◆ Two visitors sat on stools.
- ◆ One visitor opened a drawer.

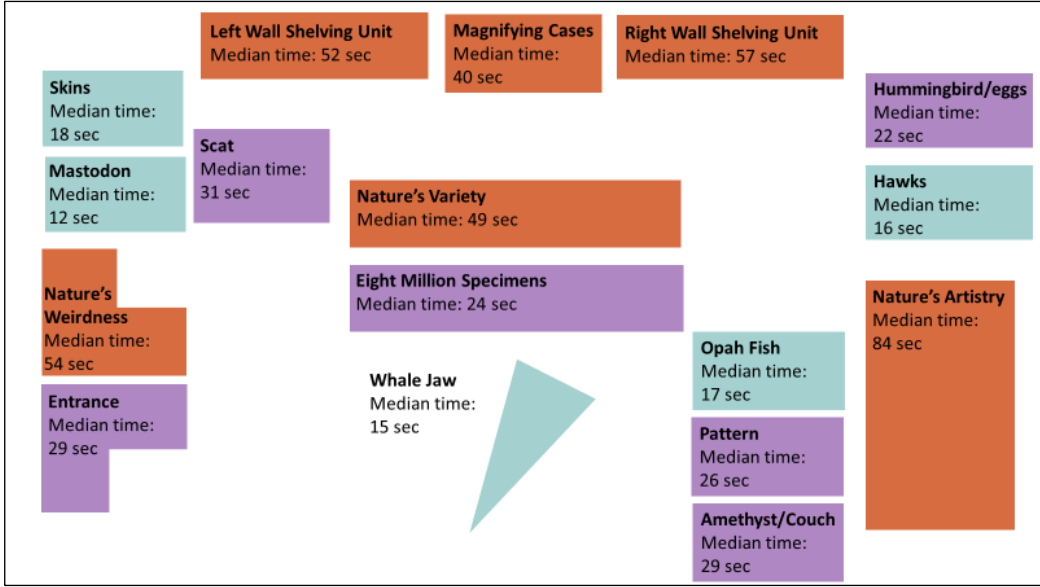
Below are two maps visualizing the *Unshelved* exhibit areas with corresponding number of stops and median time spent at each area. The areas are organized by color according to their visitation on the gradient key:



NUMBER OF STOPS



MEDIAN TIME SPENT



EXIT INTERVIEW FINDINGS

In-depth interviews are exploratory, producing detailed information about the nuances of participants' thoughts and opinions. Interviewees are encouraged to express their opinions and feelings and to share with the interviewer the meaning they associate with the exhibition's content and design. A total of 44 visitor groups were recruited and 30 agreed to participate, for a 68 percent participation rate. A total of 61 individuals participated in the 30 interviews.

Of the individual participants:

- ◆ More than one-half are visiting The Nat for the first time; less than one-half have visited before.
- ◆ Most are not members of The Nat; a few are members.
- ◆ Most do not have an Explorer Pass; a few have the pass.
- ◆ Most visited during a time when a museum staff member or volunteer was not present in the exhibition; a few visited when a staff member or volunteer was in the exhibition.
- ◆ One-half visited in adult-only groups; less than one-half visited in groups of adults and children; a few visited alone.
- ◆ Adults range in age from 18 to 78 years, with a median age of 38 years. A few children participated in the interview and ranged in age from 8 to 15.
- ◆ Most are U.S. residents; more than one-half reside in the San Diego County, while less than one-half live outside of the local area. Two are foreign residents from Canada.

MOTIVATIONS FOR VISITING

When asked what made them decide to visit The Nat:

- ◆ **See something specific:** One-quarter described wanting to see something specific at The Nat, such as dinosaurs. Three specifically came to see the *Unshelved* exhibition.
- ◆ **In the area:** One-quarter said they were exploring Balboa Park.
- ◆ **A San Diego attraction:** Almost one-quarter came to The Nat because they were visiting from out of town or had never been before.
- ◆ **Spend time with friends/family:** A few wanted to spend time with friends or family.
- ◆ **Enjoy museums:** A few said they generally enjoy visiting museums.

MOST ENJOYABLE ASPECTS OF THE EXHIBITION

When asked what they liked most about *Unshelved*:

- ◆ **Specific specimen:** More than one-half recalled a specific specimen they saw in the exhibition that they enjoyed. For example, participants mentioned the amethyst, birds, butterflies, snake skin, and reptiles in jars.
- ◆ **Behind the scenes experience:** Almost one-third enjoyed feeling that the exhibition offered them a special “behind the scenes” experience. These participants were excited about seeing specimens not usually on display or “from the archives.”
- ◆ **Close-up view of the specimens:** Almost one-third said they enjoyed the opportunity to be close to the specimens, which helped them see the specimen better. A few participants said this type of display was different from other exhibitions at The Nat specifically because they could get a close-up view.
- ◆ **Variety of specimens:** Almost one-third enjoyed the variety of specimens on display in *Unshelved*.
- ◆ **Gallery design:** A few said the design aesthetic of the exhibition was appealing to them. Specifically, participants appreciated the use of color and storage materials which gave the exhibition a unique look.
- ◆ **Fun for kids:** A few said *Unshelved* was appealing to the children in their group. One participant said the microscopes contributed to a sense of “discovery” in the exhibition.

LEAST ENJOYABLE ASPECTS

When asked what, if anything, did not work well about the exhibition:

- ◆ **Nothing:** More than one-half said there was nothing about *Unshelved* that did not work well for them.
- ◆ **Negative feelings about the display of specimens:** Almost one-quarter reported negative feelings about how certain specimens were displayed. For example, one participant described the specimens with white stuffing material in their eyes as “disturbing,” and another the things in jars “creepy.” One participant said the penguin looked “sad,” and still another said “poor penguin.”
- ◆ **Confusion about the purpose of the exhibition:** Two participants were unsure about the main theme connecting the variety of specimens in *Unshelved*. One participant described the exhibition as “a mishmash of things.”
- ◆ **Questions about collecting:** Two participants wanted more information about the specimens and how they were collected, one wanted to know where the specimens were collected.
- ◆ **Common specimens:** Two participants felt the specimens on display in *Unshelved* were too common to be considered “cool stuff from storage.” One suggested more “oddball stuff” than local geese, for instance.

GENERAL CURIOSITIES ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

When asked what questions or curiosities came to mind while visiting the exhibition:

- ◆ **Content about specimens:** More than one-third had questions about specimens. For example, some participants specifically wanted to know more about the ages and habitats of specimens, while a few asked for general “context” about the objects on display.
- ◆ **Fascination with collecting:** More than one-third were curious about how specimens are collected and who collects them. One participant wanted to read biographies of the people who collect specimens “in the field.”
- ◆ **Questions about storage:** A few wondered about where The Nat stores all of these specimens, and how they preserve the specimens.
- ◆ **Confusion about the purpose of the exhibition:** A few were unclear about the main message of the exhibition, and reasons why such a large variety of specimens were displayed together.
- ◆ **Authenticity of specimens:** A few were unsure if all of the specimens in *Unshelved* were “real.”

WHAT CURIOSITIES CAME TO MIND?



“When I saw the skulls I was curious about them before I saw the tags. Where do they come from? How do you collect the big animals? Do you kill them?”

“I was fascinated with how things are stored. How do they keep it all? Where is it stored? At most museums you only see a fraction of the collection.”

UNDERSTANDING THE EXHIBITION'S MAIN IDEA

When asked what the museum wants to communicate through the exhibition:

- ◆ **Collection:** More than one-half said the exhibition communicated information about The Nat's collection of specimens. For instance, a few participants said the exhibition showed that the museum has a vast collection beyond what is displayed. And a few said it presented unique specimens that are not usually displayed.
- ◆ **Variety:** One-third said the exhibition showed the variety of specimens, both in nature and in the museum's collection. More specifically, one participant spoke about the variety of colors displayed together, while another participant mentioned the yellow scallop, a specimen she had never seen before.
- ◆ **Foster curiosity/learning:** A few said the exhibition fostered an atmosphere of curiosity and learning for visitors. For example, one participant attributed this atmosphere to the minimal interpretation in *Unshelved*, while another suggested it was related to the variety of specimens on display.
- ◆ **Authentic specimens:** A few thought the exhibition highlighted "real" specimens. Two of these participants referenced the taxidermy specimens in *Unshelved*.
- ◆ **Uncertain:** A few participants said they did not know what the museum was trying to communicate through *Unshelved*.

WHAT DOES THE MUSEUM WANT TO COMMUNICATE?

"There's a lot of stuff you can't always have out for people to see. The name of it is 'Unshelved.' I'm a yard sale enthusiast so I'm curious about what's hiding back there. There's so much more behind the scenes. It would be nice to have room to show everything."

"Curiosity. Other [exhibitions] have plaques. But not here. My curiosity takes me there to learn more. And you end up having more discussions with the people you're with. It's not all presented for you."



UNDERSTANDING AUTHENTIC SPECIMENS

When asked whether the exhibition communicated that all of the specimens were real:

- ◆ **Yes:** Almost all said the exhibition communicated to them that the specimens were real. When asked how the exhibition succeeded in communicating this message, participants gave various examples:
 - **Specimens look real:** Almost two-thirds said they understood the specimens were real because they “look real” and described a few reasons behind this understanding. A few said the fur, feathers, or scales of the specimens looked authentic. A few said they were familiar with hunting or museums and understand specimen preservation. And a few said the way the specimens were preserved, either in jars or a life-like pose, indicated that it was real.
 - **Exhibition interpretation:** Almost one-quarter cited seeing or reading something in the exhibition that told them the specimens were real. Specifically, one mentioned the large photograph of the scientist in the storage room with preserved bird specimens in drawers.
 - **Assumed:** Two participants said they assumed all the specimens were real but did not give specific reason for how they knew this.
 - **Gallery design:** One participant said the decoration of the exhibition, including boxes and wrappings for specimens, made it clear that the specimens were real.
- ◆ **No:** A few were not sure if all of the specimens in *Unshelved* were real. For example, one participant said he questioned whether certain specimens were real, while another participant assumed that specimens were real but did not receive any confirmation that this was true through exhibition messaging.

HOW DID YOU KNOW THEY WERE REAL SPECIMENS?

“In some of the cases, because things were preserved in jars. I don't know if it's also because I've seen taxidermy in museums since I was a kid. And the colors of the animals are more natural and kind of faded.”

“I saw it somewhere on the wall. But I never questioned it; I knew these things were real.”

WHY WERE YOU UNSURE IF THEY WERE REAL?

“There were a couple things I questioned [whether they were real]. The Opah- it was cool but I wasn't sure it was real. The amethyst was real. It should be more clear. I didn't know.”

UNDERSTANDING THE COLLECTION

When asked whether the exhibition communicated that The Nat has a collection of specimens:

- ◆ **Yes:** Two-thirds said the exhibition communicated that The Nat has a large collection of specimens beyond what is on display. When asked how the exhibition succeeded in communicating this message, participants gave various examples:
 - **Exhibition interpretation:** One-third read or saw messages about The Nat’s vast collection through exhibition panels or images. A few participants specifically referenced the large photograph of the scientist in the storage room with preserved bird specimens in drawers.
 - **Gallery design:** Almost one-quarter said the decoration of the exhibition space helped communicate this message, including the unique “rustic” look of the open shelving units and boxes.
 - **Variety of specimens:** A few said the variety of specimens displayed in the exhibition helped them understand the vast collection preserved at The Nat.
 - **Familiar with museum practice:** A few said they were familiar with natural history museums in general and already understood that they preserve and collect specimens.
- ◆ **No:** One-third said they did not think about or understand that The Nat has a large collection of specimens during their experience in *Unshelved*.

HOW DID YOU KNOW ABOUT THE COLLECTION?



“This was kind of a peek in the backdoor, behind the curtain. The presentation with the crates, the boxes. It looks like it's in the middle of preservation.”

“It seemed like a little bit of everything. It's more than just dinosaurs. There's a variety of things.”

UNDERSTANDING WHY THE NAT COLLECTS

When asked why the museum collects specimens and so many of them:

- ◆ **Education/scientific study:** More than two-thirds thought The Nat collects specimens for education and scientific study. For instance, a few participants made general comments about how there “is always something new” to learn or discover through researching specimens. And two participants said specimens can help those who live in the city learn about animals they may never see in their daily life.
- ◆ **Preservation:** More than one-third said the museum collects specimens to preserve them and care for them, and participants suggested a few reasons for preservation. For example, a few participants suggested that preserving specimens now would help us in the event an animal becomes extinct in the future.
- ◆ **New exhibitions:** A few said the museum collects specimens in order to create new exhibitions for visitors to see.

When asked what other questions or curiosities they had about the collection at The Nat:

- ◆ **None:** More than one-third did not have any additional questions about the collection. Interestingly, one participant said she enjoyed the low level of interpretation in the exhibition, saying the museum was keeping “it really simple” and showing “the specimens as is.”
- ◆ **Questions about collecting and storage:** More than one-third had questions about how and why specimens are collected, and who does the collecting. Interestingly, one participant realized he had not thought about specimens in this way prior to visiting *Unshelved*; he wondered “...how the objects were obtained. I didn’t think about that at all with the other exhibits, but this exhibit focuses on that.”
- ◆ **Content about specimens:** A few wanted to know more information about specific specimens in the exhibition. For example, one participant wanted to know whether the species of whale whose jaw is on display was extinct.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTINUATION OF COLLECTING

When asked whether it was surprising to know that The Nat continues to collect specimens:

- ◆ **No:** Almost all said they were not surprised that The Nat continues to collect specimens. Interestingly, more than one-half said they expected the museum to continue to collect specimens. A few participants said this practice was part of the museum’s mission or “duty.”
- ◆ **Yes:** Three participants said they were surprised that The Nat continued to collect specimens. One participant said he had never thought about how often the museum would collect specimens before his experience in *Unshelved*. Another participant wondered why The Nat needed to continue collecting, and why they did not have “enough” specimens now.

When asked why the museum continues to collect specimens:

- ◆ **New knowledge:** One-half said The Nat continues to collect specimens for scientific study. For example, a few participants made comments about “active” or “ongoing” research that is conducted by scientists and curators. And one participant spoke about using new technology to discover previously unknown facts about animals.
- ◆ **Study change over time:** One-quarter described how continuing to collect specimens helps us document and understand the change in species over time. A few participants referenced specific specimens in the exhibition that made them think about this topic, such as bird beaks and pelicans.
- ◆ **Environmental impacts:** A few spoke about how collecting specimens records environmental impacts which can be studied. Three participants specifically said scientists can learn about climate change by studying specimens.
- ◆ **New exhibitions:** A few said the museum continues to collect specimens in order to create new exhibitions for visitors to see.
- ◆ **New varieties:** Two participants believed the museum should collect many varieties of specimens, and perhaps they had not yet collected everything they needed.

OTHER FEEDBACK

When asked what other feedback participants had about *Unshelved*:

- ◆ **General enjoyment:** More than one-half said they generally enjoyed the exhibition. A few of these participants said they specifically appreciated the unique look and feel of *Unshelved*, referring to both the variety of specimens and the “low-key” atmosphere of the exhibition.
- ◆ **Additional content:** A few wanted to know more information about the specimens in the exhibition. For example, one participant wanted to know which specimens, if any, were extinct. Another participant wanted a better sense of the main idea of *Unshelved*.
- ◆ **Questions about storage:** One participant wondered where exactly the storage areas are located at The Nat.
- ◆ **More narrative:** One participant suggested The Nat create a guide or map through *Unshelved* that provided more of a narrative for children describing the people who collect the specimens.

OTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT THE COLLECTION?

“It was really well put together. It was pleasing to the eye and educational. The colors, seeing all those different things together. The design aspect. It’s not just geology or herpetology. It’s all together in one place.”

