

# **The 227-Mile Museum, or, Why We Need a Visitors' Bill of Rights**

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I'd like to begin by saying "Thank you." Oh, I know, that's backwards. You're supposed to say "thank you" at the end of a speech. At the beginning, you say "I'm happy to be here."

But you do deserve thanks, and you should take some credit. You've spent your lives, most of you, listening to visitors. Listening outside the museum walls to learn what visitors really do in our exhibits. And because you do, and you share what you learn, our exhibits have been getting better and better. Ever since I discovered you, and what you do, I've been getting better.

I'm not an evaluator myself, but I use evaluation as much as I can. As an exhibit developer, it's my job to imagine the exhibit. "What will visitors do, see, hear, experience in this exhibit? What could they learn? What could they feel? What will they take home with them?"

I work with museums to uncover the stories they have to tell, the things they want to show. I find the big idea, a storyline, a clever approach to hold it all together. And then, using what I know about media, and what I know about visitors, I weave it into a rich, relevant visitor experience, ready to draw up and build. With lots of help, of course. And you've helped me more than you know. Visitor studies gave me a place to start. Like most every exhibit developer I know, I'm self-taught. You helped provide my curriculum.

When I first discovered "the literature," I felt just like I did when I was a kid and my mom took me to the Library; the first time my dad took me on a Walk in The Woods. What a world of possibilities was open to me!

Your reports were like travelogues to museums across the land. I learned there were such things as discovery rooms. I read eagerly about visitors' built-in right turn, shorter labels, attraction and holding power, museum fatigue... Many of you -- too many to name -- described characteristics of better exhibits. I gathered your ideas as a checklist, and used it to help me set goals. You gave me a treasure trove of information.

You pointed the way toward more reading, in environmental psychology and human behavior. I felt as long as I could find your reports, read them and stay up all night Xeroxing to share them with the team, we'd be on the right track.

I knew they weren't hard-and-fast rules. But in the years before the Monterey Bay Aquarium opened and we had visitors of our own, they gave me ways to think about visitors. What to expect, what challenges I'd need to overcome. After the aquarium opened, and we had real people to listen to, visitor research helped us answer some vexing questions.

- What do you do when the curator says "The next show's on...jellyfish!", marketing says "No way!", and the director wonders "Will the visitors think jellyfish are worthless blobs of stinging slime? Will they be totally repelled?" ?
- What do you do when the Curator rejects the studies you show him proving people don't read long labels because, he says, "**O**ur visitors are smarter than all those other visitors." ?
- How do you mount a show on Reproduction when the Designer's thinking "Yeah, sex, adults only, red velvet, pink neon", and the Director says "We need more stuff for kids, make this show full of interactives." ?

You listen to your visitors. Not only did visitor research help "inform our intuitions," as Jeff Hayward says, it helped us avoid some costly mistakes. And the shows were terrific.

Some people—maybe you've met them—think that knowing more about their visitors will constrain them; that evaluation will close off their options, stifle their artistic freedom. That astounds me. Evaluation doesn't stifle my creativity; it inspires it. It opens my eyes to the real world.

A big part of my job is to bridge the gap between visitors and curators. Visitor research tells me how big the gap is. Visitor research tells me where my visitors are coming from, so I know what kind of bridge to build to get a message from us to them, and back again.

Right now I'm working on exhibits that range from rock'n'roll to outer space to fish genetics to Leonardo da Vinci. Some have evaluation in the budget, some don't. Can you guess which ones I feel most confident about, which ones I get to be most creative on? The ones with evaluation. What a relief to know I can look to you for answers.

And now that I've said "thank you," I'd like to say "I'm happy to be here."

And I mean, **really** happy to be here. You see, last year at this time, when you were all meeting in St. Paul, I was 5,000 feet deep in the Grand Canyon, stuck on the edge of a ledge. And I didn't think I was ever going to get out.

It was a white-water rafting trip down the Colorado River. Shoot the rapids, travel to the deepest reaches of the Canyon, see flora and fauna the tourists up around the rim would never lay eyes on. The dream of a lifetime. Well, no, not my lifetime. Jim's lifetime. I was along for the ride.

Which my friends assured me would be terrific. Not that they'd ever been, but the idea. One of them had gone rafting. "Do you like roller coasters?" she asked. R-r-r-roller coasters? For 10 days? So I rented a video, to see what it was like. People older than us, white-water rafting. Jim was glad to see they had gray hair; I was glad they weren't all seasick-green.

Jim prepared, too. He bought a book. "Listen to this," he said, "from John Wesley Powell, who led the first voyage to explore the Grand Canyon:

*Aug. 5, 1869: With some feeling of anxiety we enter a new canyon this morning. Below us are limestones and hard sandstones. This bodes toil and danger.*

"Try another page," I said. "OK," he said.

*August 17: It is especially cold in the rain tonight. The little canvas we have is rotten and useless; the rubber ponchos have all been lost. The rain, coming down in torrents, extinguishes the fire, and we sit up all night on the rocks, shivering."*

I went right out to buy extra ponchos. Then we got a letter from our trip leader, Fred, a professor of geology at a college in Ohio. He'd led the trip for 12 years. "We do more than float," his letter said. "We like Nature, we like to hike." That was good, I thought. I like Nature, I like to hike. He said we should read Edward Abbey for inspiration. That was good, I like to read. And he listed gear we should bring, with a warning: "Don't bring

too much. We load and unload the duffel each day. If yours is heavy you'll get dirty looks from your fellow River Rats. When you get here I'll tell you the story of a woman named Heidi who brought along a stepladder," he said.

I unpacked the ponchos. I didn't want Fred telling stories about me.

We flew to Flagstaff, joined the group and took a two-hour bus trip to Lee's Ferry. Fred spent the ride preparing us. By talking about rocks.

Fred was heavily into rocks. Especially some rock called Vishnu Schist. Fred told us more than half the group had taken the trip before. Some of the veteran River Rats were returning for the fifth or sixth time. The rest of us were newbies. When we stopped at the general store, Fred yelled "Last chance to get whatcha need!" I wish I'd known then how prophetic those words would be....

The crew was waiting for us at Lee's Ferry. Three boatmen, Bob, Tom and Ted, one to run each raft. And two swampers, Alex and John, to cook and push the rafts off rocks. They'd run this trip before and had provisions. Life jacket, I thought, that's good.

The raft looked solid; Jim kicked a pontoon, like a car tire. "Sturdy", he said, and my fear faded a bit. As I struggled into my lifejacket I noticed some people seemed to know just what to do. They must be the veterans.

We pushed off from Lee's Ferry, and though the water was smooth, I was hanging on tight. I just needed to get through that first rapid OK, and I'd feel safe. But...when would we come to it? "Where's the first rapid?" I squeaked, trying not to sound like a wimp.

"Badger Creek, coming up, a 15-foot drop," a veteran said cheerfully. I grabbed the ropes and hung on, ready and waiting. For the next 20 minutes.

Then we hit it. Surprise! It wasn't that bad! The boatman was skillful, the raft was sturdy, my grip didn't fail me, I **loved** my new life jacket, I was going to wear it for the rest of my life.

After a few more rapids, I felt more secure. Hey, this could be fun. I revised my expectations upward. I could add "learn something," and "share the experience" to my original goal: "come back alive."

And there we were. No phone, no fax, no workday worries. Ten days to relax, become one with Nature. I settled back to look around. Ten days. Two billion years of history. 227 miles of river...

And suddenly it struck me....There are no bathrooms in the Grand Canyon.

There are no bathrooms on the raft. What did I expect? I know there are no bathrooms in the Grand Canyon... No bathrooms on the raft! I begin to panic. It's still morning, I'll bet it's hours before we stop for lunch. When's lunch? Lunch? Who can think about lunch? What about a bathroom. I'm in the middle of a river on a raft run by a buncha guys who, I note with dismay, apparently have the ability to go for hours without...uh, you know.

*Oh my god*, I thought. I was having the quintessential visitor experience.

Everybody had been glugging down beer and soda pop, seemingly unaware of the logical physiological outcome of all that beer and soda pop. I sat there suffering, hoping the boatmen would decide it was time for a pit stop, or some brave woman would speak up for the sisterhood, and holler "Hey, when do we get a pit stop?" But nobody made a peep.

"Hey, when do we get a pit stop?" I heard myself holler, and everybody turned to stare. The boatman swung the raft toward shore. A few grateful women clambered off with me.

Back on the boat, I leaned back to relax. Incredible. Ten whole days. Leave the stresses of the museum world behind. Feel the sunshine, the warm sun beating down on my neck.....the hot sun beating down...

**Water!** I had to have water. I only had a liter in my day pack, that was gone. The netbags slung over the pontoons held beer and soda, but I needed water. Oh no, the water's stowed with the sleeping bags under the tarps, we'll never get it out...

**Food!** Where was the food? When would we eat? I was already hungry...I was sure they'd packed some food, but what if it was all bologna?

**Bathrooms!** I could see the folks who set this trip up didn't go nearly as often as I did.

And what about **shelter**? Life on the raft was going to mean hours of sitting unprotected. All day long in the sun; then suddenly you were hurtling through the rapids, drenched with cold water.... Riding the pontoons was thrilling, but relax your grip and you'd fall right off. You could sit high and dry in the back of the raft, but that was for newbies and wimps. Did you wear your slicker for the rapids or your swimsuit for the sun? The veterans knew the route, so they knew what was coming. I was starting to feel they knew everything, and I was just plain dumb.

Suddenly we pulled ashore. “A pit stop?” I asked. “Just one hike today,” said Fred. “A real easy one, to a nice waterfall. Not much of a climb, but we’ll go through a stream.”

Miles from civilization, and I’m worrying “What shoes do I wear?” Tevas, for wading through the stream? Hiking boots, for scrambling up a cliff? Sneakers, for that casual “I’m not scared to scramble up a cliff” look...?

I was **not** going to ask a dumb question. So I took all three.

The hike was more of a climb than advertised, but the waterfall **was** nice. And since none of the guys had asked for a pit stop...I figured this must be their secret. Back on the raft, peeling off my wet shoes, I realized I was going to have to struggle to meet all my basic needs. Comfort. Safety. Food, water, shelter. Where was I? I really wanted some orientation, a map. We’d seen a map of the river back at the general store, but the details didn’t stick.

What was all this rockery I was looking at—it was awesome, of course, but wasn’t there some interesting story behind it all? *This is like being in a museum, I thought. One of those art museums where they don’t put up any labels, because the art “speaks for itself.”*

Beyond its beauty, it didn’t speak. “How was it formed?” I wondered. “Did Indians live here? How many people lost their lives to the rapids?” Yeah, where **were** those rapids, so I’d know when to hang on tight? Fred would call them out, but he was on Raft #1, we were on Raft #3, and I couldn’t hear.

I could see him up ahead, regaling his raft. I envied the orientation and interpretation they must be getting. Our boatman, Bob, weathered like a cowboy, was taciturn. On our raft, the veterans talked to themselves, and the newbies turned to their companions.

“Tomorrow,” I told Jim, “let’s get in Fred’s raft, so we can learn about what we’re seeing in the Canyon. I really miss a lot if I don’t know where I am.”

Finally, we pulled over to our campsite, a narrow beach and a big rock ledge. The veterans sprang off the boat and threw their bedrolls on the beach; the newbies were left to sleep on the ledge. Dark falls fast in the Canyon. As bats flitted overhead, I thought about how frustrating the day had been. *It was like traveling through a museum, miles and miles of a linear-path museum, with no map, no signs, no guard to ask. No idea when a bathroom, drinking fountain or cafeteria might...materialize.*

*Oh great, I thought as I fell asleep. I'm trapped in the Fred Museum, and there's nobody in charge of Visitor Services.*

The second day, we had to be up at first light, which meant it was still dark. You had to shake the silt out of everything, pack your day pack, stumble down to the c-o-l-d river to wash, haul your gear to the rafts by:

5:30 - Breakfast time!

5:45 - Break down camp.

6:00 - Duffel line! Toss the gear, hand to hand, up on the rafts.

6:15 - Last call for the porta-potty!

(Yes, there was a chemical toilet, I discovered, but for solid waste only. And they only set it up at night.)

6:30 - Scramble onto Fred's boat.

A new day. I was ready to leave frustration behind. Jim was ready to fill some intellectual needs. It didn't bother him so much that there weren't any bathrooms in the Fred Museum, but it bothered him there were no labels.

"I finished my book. There's nothing to read," he complained. "Last night I read the label on my sleeping bag five times."

"Fred said they brought a stack of nature books," I said.

"Yup," he said, "they're boxed up and lashed down, on Raft # 2. We're on Raft #1, dear."

Just then Fred stood up. "Three hikes today. Medium difficulty, some scrambling, but a great waterfall, we'll have lunch there." Another newbie, God bless her, said, "Fred, what kind of shoes?" "Sneakers!" he said.

I was happy. I knew what to expect. I was going to get some orientation, I was going to get some interpretation, and best of all, I knew what shoes.

As we floated by the incredible rocks, I settled back to listen to Fred. He was in the middle of the Paleozoic. "...*dadadadada* Permian ... Kaibab, Toroweap; Coconino Sandstone *dadadada* Hermit Shale, Esplanade Sandstone *dadadada*. Supai group *dadada* Pennsylvanian *dadadada* Wescogame Formation, Watahomi Formation, Mississippian. *Dadada* the Devonian! *Dadada* Muav Limestone, *dadada* Bright Angel

Schist *dadada* Tapeats Sandstone... And then," he said, "we come to the Great Unconformity. *Dadadada* Vishnu Schist...." or something like that. It all ran together for me; my eyes glazed....

The River Rats seemed to be following just fine. So was Jim, who'd brushed up on his geology before the trip.

He explained it to me on the first hike. "The Great Unconformity, it's a time gap, between what they call the Tapeats Sandstone layer, and the older layers underneath. Hundreds of millions of years of uplift and sediment, but it all eroded. It's missing. So the geologists just ignore it."

Just ignore it, that was becoming my tactic. I do like rocks, I've developed exhibits on rocks, but I didn't want to hear as much about rocks as Fred wanted to tell us about rocks. What about the plants, trees, birds, lizards we were seeing? When I got up the nerve to ask, Fred managed to turn it back to rocks.

And then there were the crowds. Hiking up cliffs in a line of 36 means you see more backsides than wildlife. You know, when you see the brochure, there's nobody there. And the Grand Canyon's so big, you'd think even 36 of us would have plenty of space. But Fred had to do crowd control; keep track of us, so he kept us all together, all the time. Fred also set the pace: the visitor flow. Jim thought Fred's motto must be "Let's move as fast as we can through a gorgeous wilderness." That was the pattern. Three hikes a day, start early before it gets too hot, hike to some point of intense geological interest. Second hike, the lunchtime hike, always led to a waterfall. Fred hyped the waterfalls to keep us together, to keep us from choosing our own path. Third hike, another geology lecture.

Usually, when Jim and I hike, we like to stop and share the experience: name the plants, watch the chuckwalla swallow a cicada. I tell Jim about Jimsonweed, he tells me about hawks. By the third hike that day, the two of us had learned to get up in front of the pack, so we could walk ahead fast enough to look around, and glance at the things we were interested in, like cactus. Prickly pear. Penstemon. And lots more stuff they rushed us by. Pat, another newbie, asked "Are you guys biologists? You seem to know a lot about plants and stuff." "No, we just like living things", I said, a bit defiantly.

That evening, we were the first to leap off the boat to stake out a territory. Find a sleeping place for two away from the hot rocks, the ever-blowing silt, the rising river, the invisible scorpions. Not so far from the porta-potty you couldn't find it in the dark, but not so close you could smell it.



That night, as the bats flitted overhead, I reviewed Day 2 in the Fred Museum. *When I'd been longing for interpretation but was too far away to hear Fred, I felt the same frustration as when I can't read the labels 'cause they're in teeny type over my head. But today, being close to Fred was like being in an exhibit where the labels go on and on, but never say anything you're interested in.*

*There were no interpretive planners on staff in the Fred Museum, and nobody did evaluation, that was for sure. The crowds and the pace meant I couldn't learn the way I like to. I felt bad about the times I'd asked clients "How fast do you want to move visitors through?"*

As the canyon wind picked up, blowing a fine layer of silt over us, Jim said grimly, "Silt. I can't stand this gritty feeling, silt everywhere in the wind, you wash in the river, the water's silty. When you see the videos and read the books, nobody talks about the silt. I can't believe I forgot the entire job of the Colorado River is to move silt downstream."

"I know," I said. "When they said hikes, I expected nature walks. I can't believe I forgot if you're at the bottom of the Grand Canyon and somebody says let's go for a hike, the only way to go is straight up."

Two smart people like us, we were surprised how dumb we'd been.

Day three brought new lessons. I was still struggling for competence: how do you keep clean when the river's f-f-f-forty-six degrees? I had almost mastered the 10-second shampoo and brushing my teeth with beer.

Jim had graduated to trying to satisfy his social needs. Tired of being a newbie, he was trying to get inside. He became a volunteer, helping the boatmen tie down the gear.

"They grade the campers," he'd discovered. "When you help out with the dirty work, they give you an 'Attaboy.' If you mess up—untie the raft, knock over the potty—that's an 'Oh, schist.' One 'Oh schist' wipes out 25 'Attaboys.'"

He was in a dark mood that morning. "It's a secret society," he muttered. "You're ranked by the number of trips you've taken. Fred's the high priest. The boatmen are the inner circle, and they", he nodded toward the veterans, "are the acolytes." "What are we?" I asked. "Goats," he said. "Sacrificial goats." Well, I didn't think it was that bad, but I saw what he meant.

*Like in a museum, the insiders had what you call the "museum set": they knew how to behave, they didn't have to spend precious time trying to figure it out. The veterans knew which rapids were fun and you*

*should sit on the pontoons, or when you should put on your slicker ("Hellraiser #7, two bends from here..."*

I already knew they had a secret language. You had to know words like "Nankoweap" and "unclassified dolomites" to crack the code. The password was definitely "Vishnu Schist."

*Museums again. I felt guilty about the time I let the words "symbiotic zooxanthellae" slip into a label.*

At lunch that day, I felt left out. People who knew each other were talking to each other, mostly about rocks. We weren't people to them; we were "newbies," and only if we were to pass the loyalty test—if we came back again, would we have merit in their eyes. I knew Jim was using all the geology he had to try to break into the inner circle.

That night, he reported back. "Fred's a pretty conservative geologist," Jim said. "He hasn't quite accepted Continental Drift. I tried to engage him in edge speculation about geology, but..." Jim went on but I wasn't really listening; I was speculating about edges myself. The edge of a rock was poking into my sleeping bag.

*Outsiders," I kept thinking. "First-time visitors. Abandoned in the Fred Museum. If Fred came to Seattle to visit the Judy Museum, I would make sure he felt like he belonged..."*

The next morning, I decided to stay on the raft. I wanted time to rest, to read, to think. When Fred finished telling us what kind of shoes, I said "OK, so if we don't go on the hike we can stay on the boat, right?" Everybody looked at me. Fred was alarmed. "Geology geology, Vishnu Schist, join the gang, don't be a wet blanket. It's going to be a great hike!"

"But the boatmen stay with the raft, and I'd like a quiet morning," I said.

"Oh, you don't want to miss the waterfall!" he said.

"Can't I stay on the boat?" I said.

"You can't stay on the boat," Fred said with finality. "You'll broil in the sun."

It was a tough hike. We shimmied up a rock wall one by one; those of us who were short needed a boost. And while it was a real challenge, I knew I didn't have to worry about going back, since I knew what to expect -- in reverse.

After two hot and dusty hours of rock climbing, we stood looking at the little stagnant pool they called a waterfall. Surrounded by a suspicious number of geologically significant rocks. Jim caught his breath and said "You can see it from their point of view. Liability. They need to keep the

group together.” What I saw was that Fred’s needs would always win over mine.

The way they made you participate made me uneasy. *When I’m in museums, sometimes I like hands-on, sometimes I like to talk to the docent, but sometimes I don’t. I want freedom to choose, not feel pressured to join in.*

On the way back, Fred decided to take a different route. This time, we had to jump.

The ledge I was on.

The ledge ahead of me.

A four-foot leap across empty space.

I couldn’t do it.

Bob the Boatman held his hand out, but he was too far away.

“Just jump,” he said, “Don’t think, just jump.” Just jump? Obviously these people did not know their audience. Don’t think? Too late! My legs were frozen, my chest was tight (my brain was the only thing working, and it was saying, “Absolutely not.”) I stood and stood, shaking with fear and embarrassment. Ten people had made the leap before me. But I was stuck, absolutely stuck, all eyes on me.

Somehow they got me across, I’m still not sure how.

I was past Anxiety, and well into Overwhelm. And I didn’t learn a thing. Except that I wanted to avoid anything having to do with these people and their rocks.

As we walked back to the raft, Edna and Marianne told me they’d been scared, too. So it wasn’t just me! I caught up with Fred and said “Some of us are slower, or have a problem with heights. It might help if you addressed that.”

At the campsite that evening, Fred gathered us around. He said “Tomorrow we have three hikes, we’ll take lunch on the second one. It’s a great hike. Incredible waterfall. Part of it involves a narrow ledge with a steep drop-off, so if any of you have a problem with heights, you might want to think twice.”

I didn’t even have to think once. I looked at Edna and Marianne. “So, you’ll leave some lunch behind for those of us who’d rather not take the midday hike?”

Everybody looked at me. Startled, Fred said, “Oh, you don’t want to miss this hike, you’ll kick yourself for the rest of your life. It’s got a great waterfall, the ledge isn’t that bad, and anyway, you can’t stay on the boat in the sun.”

As we got ready for bed, Edna and Marianne came over. They were scared of heights. They were worried about the ledge. So after dark, I went to find Fred. "Can those of us who feel tentative start ahead of the group, so there's less pressure?" He sighed and said "Look, John the Swamper's good with first-timers. Why don't you go ask him?"

And next morning, that's what we did. Before we set out, John the Swamper gave us tips on how to walk toward the inside of the ledge, telling us how to place our hands and feet. By the time we got there, I felt ready. The ledge was narrow, but the rock face was solid, and I saw I wouldn't have to jump. So I went first. We went slowly but we made it, finding handholds, inching along the precipice. I helped Edna and Marianne by talking them through it.

We all got to see the waterfall. And swim in the pool. That night, I said to Jim, "Tomorrow, we're getting on the same boat as John the Swamper."

And on the fifth morning, everything changed. John the Swamper knew about the Anasazi: the ancient people, ancestors of the Hopi and other Pueblo tribes. He pointed out their granaries, high above Nankoweap Creek. "They used to store corn and beans here," he told us. "Some of those corncocks have lasted 2,500 years."

I began to relax. Here was something I cared to learn about! We asked questions and he answered them. He knew all about the wildlife, too, and was ready to tell us any story we wanted to hear. I can't tell you everything he said, nor how he said it. But as the day wore on, I knew someone in the Grand Canyon Museum cared. Didn't think I was a wimp for being scared to jump. Accepted me as a human being.

Fred was right, John the Swamper was good with first-timers. It changed my whole outlook. I still had to schlep, I still had to hike, but now I was enjoying myself.

You know, it's funny. I learned a lot on my trip through the 227-mile museum. But none of it was what Fred wanted me to learn.

Yes, there were amazing moments: The sunrise every morning; the Grand Canyon light show. Feeling really small in Redwall Cavern. Staring up at the Bright Angel shale, all pink and green.... Discovering the cold Colorado River's warm tributary: the Little Colorado. Impossibly blue, wonderfully warm, and shallow—a challenge I could handle. Finally touching the famous Vishnu Schist, basement rock of the Canyon, 1.7 billion years old. And every night, the bats flitting overhead.... But until

my needs were met, I couldn't learn, I couldn't appreciate, I couldn't turn my attention to higher things -- the kind of things a Canyon trip was supposed to be about.

After the trip there were no exit interviews, no questionnaires. They assumed we'd had a great time, because when we hit dry land we said "Thank you!" and waved good-bye.

Back home at work in the museum world, I couldn't stop thinking about the trip. Two things bothered me. First, that I couldn't appreciate the Canyon until all my basic needs were met. Second, how the feeling of being excluded affected my whole outlook, diminished me.

That gap between Us and Them. It was too much like the gap between "Us " and "Them" in the museum. "Us"—the curators, the museum insiders, even a select circle of expert repeat visitors. "Them"—most all the visitors, especially the first-timers. Though I've always worked hard to bridge the gap between curators and first-time visitors, even though I always try to advocate for "Them," to reach out for them and make them feel included, I suddenly felt I wasn't doing enough.

It's one thing to sit in a meeting, look at the plans and say "We need to put in more seating." It's another thing entirely to **go** on a three-hour hike and not get to rest till the end. In the meeting, there's always a reason we can't put in seats, cut down the noise, put carpeting in, give visitors a chance to talk back. Time, money, aesthetics, not enough space, got to cram it all in. But what if YOU were the one on that three-hour hike...if YOU were the one who didn't know where you were...if YOU were the one who felt "I just don't belong."?

When we spend our days sitting in meetings, it's easy to stop seeing visitors as real people. In the meeting rooms, we're seeing our problems, we're seeing our own needs. We're not out there seeing visitors at all. In our meeting rooms, the visitors become a bunch of dirty fingerprints, wear and tear on the building, why the carpet needs fixing. They're a nameless, faceless mass of gum-chewing, toilet-paper-using, too-loud-hollering, hard-to-teach-'em, no-way-to-please-'em, money-costing, time-taking, resource-burning bunch of people disturbing the peace.

How do we get everybody in those meetings back to seeing visitors as human beings?

In your work with your client museums, in your work on in-house teams, you model empathy; you accept the visitor. You get other staff down there on the floor helping with evaluations or watching real visitors,

and you see the light dawn on them. That's the best way. Grass roots. But as you know, it's slow going, educating each new client, winning over other members of the team. Some of you are directors, or have the director's ear: the empathy and acceptance comes from the top. That makes it easier, but it's still a local solution.

And what about all the museums out there who don't get it? Sometimes there's one lone voice on staff trying to speak up for visitors, but all too often there's no one. These are the museums we need to reach out to, to spread the word to.

I want to lobby for respect, acceptance and empathy for visitors. And I want to do it globally, reaching out to those places that have been resistant to visitor studies, that don't yet have an advocate on board.

That's what made me think of the Visitors' Bill of Rights.

Quite simply, it's a one-page reminder to put visitors first. A set of standard guidelines, like "visitors need easy access to bathrooms" and "visitors have the right to not be confused." Ideas so basic, they reinforce the idea that visitors are human beings, with legitimate human needs. Needs we can all relate to.

A Top 10 list, an open letter from visitors to museums—whatever the form, the purpose is the same: a one-page document that codifies visitor needs. It puts the visitors' agenda square on the meeting room table, and adds them to the museum's other goals—budget, time, money, aesthetics.

It focuses on the whole visitor. In considering the whole visitor—his or her physical, intellectual, emotional, social and cultural needs—it crosses departments: it's not just Visitor Services, or Design, or Education.

For exhibit planners, it's a one-pager to bring to meetings, put on bulletin boards, share with the team (they're more likely to read it if it's short and sweet.)

For designers, it's a standard you're trying to work to: a set of visitor-centered goals to try to meet. It offers a why and what, but doesn't dictate how—that's up to your creativity.

For directors, it helps with staff training, a clear outline to help people "get it." It refreshes their memory about their goals, and serves as a reminder that museums are about people.

It'd be useful to hand to architects, and say "Besides all the legal and technical issues you address, we also want you to consider this."

For evaluators, it offers the chance to help clients find out where they're succeeding, and what they could improve. And it opens the door for learning more about their specific visitors' needs.

For the Visitor Studies community, it's a one-pager you can send to every museum, zoo, park and aquarium. You may not have a foothold there yet, but you can slip this in under the door.

So this Bill of Rights, what does it say?

It speaks to the visitors' need for comfort, caring, acceptance. Freedom of choice. It seeks to break down barriers to our museums, to offer better access. Not just physical access, but intellectual access. Emotional access. Social access. Cultural access.

What does it say exactly? I'm hoping you can tell me. I've been reading the literature, collecting ideas. Some of you have already written about visitors' needs. Others sent me their thoughts over the Internet. I've drawn these ideas together, in a rough draft. I need you to tell me what to add or subtract—and then how you think we should get input from the visitors themselves.

I think it's important to write it from the visitors' point of view. Not from what we hope to give them, but from what they really need. (To do that, of course, we need to know what they're thinking.) And I think it's important the list be easy to refer to and remember.

Each idea short and snappy enough to fit on a T-shirt.

When a visitor's thinking,

**"I'm hungry, I'm tired,  
I need a bathroom, NOW."**

he's feeling the need for

**Comfort**, for you to meet his basic needs.

When a visitor's thinking,

**"Where am I?  
What do I do?  
What's this all about?"**

he's feeling the need for

**Orientation**. Help me make sense of this place.

When a visitor's thinking,

**"I'm not sure I belong here."**

she's expressing the need to be

**Welcomed**, to see herself here, to know she belongs.

When a visitor's thinking,

**"When do I get to play?"**

she's bored! She wants to have fun, to

**Enjoy** herself, a big reason she came here today.

When a visitor's thinking,

**"I want to share this with  
my family, my friends."**

he's telling you about his need to

**Socialize**, a big reason he came here today.

When a visitor's thinking, I want you to

**"Accept me for who I am  
and what I know.  
(Por favor, no dejéme colgado.)"**

she's expressing the need for

**Respect**, to be honored as an individual and for her culture.

When a visitor's thinking,

**"I want to learn something new,  
but I want to do it my way."**

he's telling us he needs to be met at his own level, to

**Learn** in his own way and at his own pace.

When a visitor's thinking,

**"I don't get it.  
(...can we ask questions?)"**

she's telling us she needs clear

**Communication.** "Talk to me, let me talk back to you."



When a visitor's thinking,  
**"Let me choose.  
 I know what I'm doing."**  
 she's feeling the need for  
**Choice and Control.**

When a visitor's thinking,  
**"I'd like to try it, but  
 I don't want to look dumb."**  
 he wants to take on a  
**Challenge**  
 but needs to be **Confident** it's a challenge he can handle.

When a visitor's thinking,  
**"Inspire me.  
 Excite me."**  
 She's saying, I came here to feel  
**Revitalized.** Send me home alive!

Now I need your help. What would you add to a list of common visitors' needs, written from the visitors' point of view? Please, scribble your ideas on it and get it back to me. Then we'll start thinking about how to ask the visitors, themselves. When we're finished, we'll have a set of guidelines to offer the profession. Each museum would have a copy to read, discuss and consider. They can choose to adopt these standards; but even in museums that don't, something called "The Bill of Rights" is bound to start some discussion.

And it puts the idea of visitors—and visitor studies—front and center.

My hope is that a list that's short enough, basic enough, will help staff see and accept visitors as human beings...break down some of that "Us and Them" resistance, understand that rather than being "customers" whose value to us is their money, we accept these people as....people.

Just imagine. Ten, fifteen years from now you could walk into most any museum, zoo, park, aquarium and know you'd be welcomed. Know you'd be accepted. Know you'd be respected. Know you could make sense of it, know you'd enjoy it. Know you would have a clear path to a clean bathroom!

It's a good place to begin.

## Appendix

### The Visitors' Bill of Rights

A list of important human needs,  
seen from the visitors' point of view

- **Comfort**  
“Meet my basic needs.” Visitors need fast, easy, obvious access to clean, safe, barrier-free restrooms, fountains, food, baby-changing tables and plenty of seating. They also need full access to exhibits.
- **Orientation**  
“Make it easy for me to find my way around.”  
Visitors need to make sense of their surroundings. Clear signs and well-planned spaces help them know what to expect, where to go, how to get there and what it’s about.
- **Welcome/belonging**  
“Make me feel welcome.”  
Friendly, helpful staff ease visitors’ anxieties. If they see themselves represented in exhibits and programs and on the staff, they’ll feel more like they belong.
- **Enjoyment**  
“I want to have fun!”  
Visitors want to have a good time. If they run into barriers (like broken exhibits, activities they can’t relate to, intimidating labels) they can get frustrated, bored, confused.
- **Socializing**  
“I came to spend time with my family and friends.”  
Visitors come for a social outing with family or friends (or to connect with society at large). They expect to talk, interact and share the experience; exhibits can set the stage for this.
- **Respect**  
“Accept me for who I am and what I know.”  
Visitors want to be accepted at their own level of knowledge and interest. They don’t want exhibits, labels or staff to exclude them, patronize them or make them feel dumb.

- **Communication**

**“Help me understand, and let me talk, too.”**

Visitors need accuracy, honesty and clear communication from labels, programs and docents. They want to ask questions, and hear and express differing points of view.

- **Learning**

**“I want to learn something new.”**

Visitors come (and bring the kids) “to learn something new,” but they learn in different ways. It’s important to know how visitors learn, and assess their knowledge and interests. Controlling distractions (like crowds, noise and information overload) helps them, too.

- **Choice and control**

**“Let me choose; give me some control.”**

Visitors need some autonomy: freedom to choose, and exert some control, touching and getting close to whatever they can. They need to use their bodies and move around freely,

- **Challenge and confidence**

**“Give me a challenge I know I can handle.”**

Visitors want to succeed. A task that’s too easy bores them; too hard makes them anxious. Providing a wide variety of experiences will match their wide range of skills.

- **Revitalization**

**“Help me leave refreshed, restored.”**

When visitors are focused, fully engaged, and enjoying themselves, time stands still and they feel refreshed: a “flow” experience that exhibits can aim to create.

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