Note: The following article is based on a presentation to the American Association of Museums Annual Meeting in Minneapolis, MN, 1996.

# Institutional Acceptance of Visitor Evaluation

Kathleen Socolofsky
Desert Botanical Gardens
Phoenix, AZ

The Desert Botanical Garden is situated on 145 acres of Sonoran Desert in the heart of metropolitan Phoenix. Since 1939, it has been dedicated to researching and disseminating information about the importance of desert plants and desert environments. The Garden has an extensive collection of arid-land plants that is characterized most dramatically by mature specimens of cacti and succulents from around the world.

Until the mid-1980's, the Desert Botanical Garden existed as a traditional botanical garden, providing guided tours on request and depending on plant identification labels and a printed trail guide as the main methods of interpretation. In 1987, following the Garden's re-classification as a living museum, a thematic trail (*Plants and People of the Sonoran Desert*) was opened to the public. It was extremely popular with visitors because of its use of informative interpretive panels and its staffed and non-staffed participatory exhibits.

Building on the success of *Plants and People of the Sonoran Desert Trail*, an interdepartmental team created a long-range interpretive plan for the Desert Botanical Garden. In 1992, as part of this plan, the Garden received a grant of $634,776 for exhibit development from the Informal Science Education Division of the National Science Foundation (NSF). The purpose of the grant was to transform the Garden's extensive plant collections and unrelated trails into a visitor-centered *Comprehensive Desert Exhibit* with unifying themes of desert ecology, botany, horticulture, and conservation. Because of the Garden's emphasis on impacting visitors and because of the requirements of NSF, visitor evaluation was to be a guiding force in the development of all aspects of the project.

During the exhibit development phase, the NSF project managers used formative evaluation techniques to evaluate the effectiveness of exhibits with visitors. As the project managers discovered what did and did not work, it became clear that a wider group of staff and volunteers should be exposed to the formative evaluation process so that they would understand the results and be more likely to support the implementation of the resulting recommendations.

## Steps for Promoting Institutional Acceptance of Visitor Evaluation

The following steps were successful in gaining institutional acceptance of visitor evaluation and in affecting the long-term acceptance of visitor-centered approaches to exhibits:

*I.　The first step was to create an institutional vision for the importance of visitors.* Staff discussions emphasized the importance of visitors from two main perspectives: (1) as the primary audience for fulfilling the educational mission of the institution; and (2) as the primary source of support (financial, participation, word-of-mouth marketing) for the institution. Without a clear consensus as to the importance of visitors, the results of visitor evaluation reports would have had little meaning or urgency.

*II.　The second step was to promote an understanding of the importance of visitor evaluation.* During this phase, it was critical to involve key leaders, including the director, in discussions with experts in the field of visitor evaluation. By talking and working with Dr. Stephen Bitgood and Arlene Benefield of the Center for Social Design, staff members were made aware of the importance of visitor evaluation and its potential for improving exhibits and the visitor experience in general. Staff members also received training regarding visitor evaluation and were introduced to articles on different topics relating to visitor evaluation.

*III. The third step was to train staff and volunteers to conduct visitor observations and interviews.* During the process of observing and interviewing visitors, participants gained a better understanding of the needs of visitors and the role of visitor evaluation. This first-hand experience with visitor evaluation also increased staff and volunteer comfort with the visitor evaluation process.

*IV. The fourth step was to use visitor evaluation to guide teams of staff and volunteers in the development of exhibits.* By developing exhibit mock-ups and then testing them with visitors, staff and volunteers actually saw the value of visitor evaluation as it applied to improving exhibits. Instead of engaging in long discussions about what should work, staff and volunteers actually presented ideas to visitors and found out directly what would work. Decisions were no longer based on personal feelings – they were based on the results of visitor evaluation methods that everyone accepted.

## Outcomes of Institutional Acceptance

The Desert Botanical Garden has benefited greatly from the growing acceptance of visitor evaluation. Listed below are three major outcomes:
(1) Staff and volunteers have become more supportive of the development and implementation of new ideas that result from visitor evaluation efforts.
(2) Staff and volunteers have developed a more visitor-centered perspective which favorably impacts decision-making in every area of the institution.
(3) Staff and volunteers have been able to secure more funding for exhibit-related projects because they are better able to articulate the manner in which exhibit mock-ups are tested with visitors.