

## Behavior of the French Public Towards the Natural History Museum

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A brief survey was conducted at the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle (Paris) to evaluate and compare visitor behavior in the gardens (Jardin des Plantes), main galleries (Paleontologie and Anatomie comparee) and two temporary exhibits ("Cristaux Geants", "Tibet").

The investigation surveyed 203 people in the galleries and exhibits, and 251 people in the "Jardin des Plantes". Despite the close proximity of all localities (galleries and exhibits are located around the "Jardin"), these results clearly indicate that there were significant differences between visitor characteristics between locations.

Tables 1 and 2 describe the social status and group characteristics of the visitors surveyed. In Table 1 a comparison is also made with results of a similar survey undertaken at a major Art Museum (Le Louvre).

**Table 1: Social Characteristics of Visitors**

Social Status	Gardens	Natural History Gallery	Art Gallery (Le Louvre)
<b>Education</b>			
-Tertiary	28%	58%	43%
-Secondary	41%	34%	34%
-Primary	32%	8%	23%
<b>Income</b>			
-High	17%	25%	22%
-Middle	35%	36%	31%
-Low	40%	21%	31%
-Pension & Domestic	8%	17%	15%

[t-test = 6.279, P, .004]

The data from Table 1 are statistically significant, and they indicate that visitors to the gardens have different characteristics from those visiting galleries. These differences appear to be greatest in population social structure. Gallery visitors appear to be in a higher income bracket and have a higher level of education, whereas Garden visitors appear to have social characteristics typical of the general population of Paris.

**Table 2: Group Composition of Visitors**

Group	Gardens	Gallery	Exhibits		Art Gallery
	1	2	3	4	5
Student	9%	15%	10%	2%	17%
Family	87%	81%	73%	68%	65%
Single	4%	4%	17%	30%	18%

1: Jardin des Plantes; 2: Galerie de Paleontologie; 3: Temporary Exhibit (Cristaux Geants); 4: Temporary Exhibit (Tibet); 5: Le Louvre.

Although there are no large statistical differences between the structure of each population group (the t-test probability for Table 2 data was never less than .04), these data do provide some indication that single visitors are more numerous in temporary exhibits. It is also apparent that student groups attend Gallery exhibitions more than temporary exhibits. That result may be due to teachers or leaders of school groups having a pre-existing cultural bias in their perception of museum exhibits (e.g., data for Tibet exhibition). In other words, temporary exhibits may be too "cultural" or unfit for school groups, whereas Galleries may be less formal or more educational.

Our interpretation of these data, particularly differences between visitors of the Garden and visitors of the Galleries located around it (see Table 1), is that they represent a true reflection of the prevailing attitude of the French public towards the Natural History exhibits. We suggest that those exhibits are not perceived by people who represent the average social and income structures as being "cultural", and that Natural History is a forbidden cultural domain reserved for the better-educated and/or higher income earners. This trend is similar to that found for Le Louvre, which is traditionally labelled as "top of the culture" in Paris. We contend that this cultural perception of elitism must disappear in order for the French public to regain an active interest in Natural History. We further propose that reviving the Galerie de Zoologie, and installing a major exhibition (Galerie de l'Evolution") will provide a contemporary interpretation of life and human history, accessible and comprehensible to all people.

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