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# MULTICULTURAL INCLUSION AT THE NEW ENGLAND AQUARIUM AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS AND THE LAKE VICTORIA EXHIBIT

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## Defining the Issue

*"...museums must achieve greater inclusiveness. Trustees and staff must acknowledge and respect our nation's diversity in race, ethnic origin, age, gender, economic status, and education, and they must attempt to reflect that pluralism in every aspect of a museum's operations and programs."*

*AAM Task Force on  
Museum Education, 1992, p.262*

Contemporary society is becoming more diverse in terms of its economic, racial, ethnic, and religious composition. Geertz (1986, p. 120-121) points out that "we are living more and more in the midst of an enormous collage." As aquariums and science museums spring up in urban centers across the country, they expose a unique opportunity to bridge a cultural melange of perspectives and to provide a truly public forum for informal science learning.

Not surprisingly, visitor studies

research has indicated that frequent museum visitors tend to be Caucasian, well-educated, and come from middle to upper socio-economic classes. Visitors to the New England Aquarium are no exception. Recent demographic studies at the aquarium indicate that approximately 86% of aquarium visitors are "white/Caucasian," while racial minorities represent only 14% of the aquarium's audience. Roughly 45% of aquarium visitors have a median household income of greater than \$50,000, and 68% hold a four-year degree or higher. Compare this to the city of Boston<sup>1</sup>, with 41% of the population representing racial minorities, 19% of the population 25 years or older holding a four-year degree or higher, and an overall median household income of \$28,100.<sup>2</sup> There is clearly a gap between the demographic characteristics of those who visit the aquarium, and the demographic characteristics of the surrounding community.

## The Lake Victoria Exhibit

The New England Aquarium, in partnership with the National Science Foundation and in collaboration with the National Museums of Kenya, the Kenyan Marine Fisheries Institute, the Uganda Fisheries Research Institute, and the Lake Victoria Species Survival Program, is currently in the developing and planning stages for a new exhibit focusing on Lake Victoria in East Africa. Lake Victoria is the world's second largest freshwater lake and provides aquatic resources for some 30 million East Africans. Over the past eighty years, the lake has undergone rapid environmental changes, including mass extinction of native fishes, dramatic changes in species composition, loss of biological diversity in and around the lake, and changes in the cultures of the people who depend on the lake for their livelihood. The exhibit will immerse visitors in the beauty of East Africa by presenting the story of the people of Lake Victoria, the environmental crisis they are currently facing, and the success stories of African scientists working to ensure the lake's survival.

The Lake Victoria exhibit is seen by the aquarium as a critical step toward achieving "Aquarium 2000," a new institutional vision that calls for narrowing the gap between the demographics of the aquarium's traditional audience and the demographics of the greater Boston area. The exhibit provides a unique opportunity to link multicultural audiences with the aquatic sciences as a field of endeavor. By showcasing African scientists as role models and presenting their work on solutions to Lake

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*Boats on Lake Victoria*

Victoria's environmental crisis, it is hoped that minority children will identify science as a career possibility. Foremost, the exhibit will provide an opportunity through which the African-American community can come to appreciate the aquarium as a positive, comfortable environment and a community resource.

### **An Integrated Approach**

In the development of the Lake Victoria exhibit, a multi-dimensional approach was taken to address the lack of representation by racial minorities, specifically, Boston's African-American community (which represents 24% of Boston city's population, and 1% of the aquarium's audience.)

First, Jeff Hayward of People, Places and Design Research was contracted to conduct a planning study. The study focused on examining the interests and perceptions of current aquarium visitors, in addition to identifying the interests and perceptions of a sample of African-American visitors from Boston's metropolitan area (interviewed at community sites in the predominantly minority areas of Boston.) The study found little difference between the interests and perceptions of the general aquarium sample and the interests and perceptions of the sample of African-American visitors, with one exception. African-Americans tended to show more interest in the role of "African scientists" as a topic of interest than did visitors from the general aquarium sample. This result has informed the exhibit design process by reinforcing the plan to showcase the activities of African scientists.

To build awareness of the project in the community, the aquarium contracted with an African-American audience development consultant. She developed the initial list of "opinion makers" in the African-American community that was used to develop

committee and event invitation lists and to promote the aquarium's new outreach initiative. The consultant is also responsible for scheduling speaking engagements and presentations with African-American community groups, and for researching and writing grants aimed at developing partnerships between the aquarium and African-American community-based organizations.

To ensure the cultural integrity and accuracy of the exhibit's messages, and to build ownership in the underserved Boston community, the Lake Victoria Project Team staff has created two advisory committees: an Exhibit Advisory Committee (EAC)

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and a Community Advisory Committee (CAC). The EAC is comprised of nineteen community members plus two alternates who represent local museums, environmental agencies, high schools and universities, corporations, a museum trustee, and several aquarium staff. Three of the committee members are native Africans, and fourteen are African-Americans.

The role of the EAC is to:

- evaluate exhibit messages and images on the basis of authenticity and cultural sensitivity;
- contribute ideas for the exhibit;
- comment on and review prototypes and design models.

The EAC has confirmed both the attraction of the story and the images that the Lake Victoria exhibit will

present. From the first meeting, the Project Team learned that there appear to be no "land mines" in the proposed content, and that many of the findings of the planning study appear to be accurate: specifically that African scientists and interesting animals attract significant interest.

The EAC members have also been invited to attend the first Community Advisory Committee meeting. This committee is much larger and will meet to respond to specific exhibit items as they are developed. While the EAC will maintain a more intimate working relationship with the Project Team and aquarium on many levels, the CAC will be task-specific, evaluating graphics, text panels, and prototypes of hands-on activities. These activities have traditionally been undertaken only by the professional staff developing them. Opening up this process not only will assist the aquarium in building better exhibits, but it is hoped that this process will also foster a sense of ownership among the committee members who test the exhibits.

### **One Step at a Time**

The Lake Victoria exhibit at the New England Aquarium will provide a catalyst for the aquarium's efforts to respond to the needs of a growing community with diverse cultural, socio-economic and religious backgrounds. However, the Lake Victoria exhibit will not accomplish these goals on its own. The aquarium's commitment to cultural diversity and "Aquarium 2000" runs deep. Continuing efforts to address the communities' needs will not only be directed toward providing culturally relevant subject matter, but also will address image management, access, and advertising.

As potentially invaluable resources for bridging a diversity of

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## NEW ENGLAND AQUARIUM (CONT.)

cultural perspectives, museums must be responsive and accommodating to the needs and interests of their surrounding communities. Museum trustees, staff, and volunteers share the responsibility of bridging the gap between the demographics of their traditional audiences and the demographics of the surrounding communities. The issue of multicultural pluralism in museum audiences must be addressed at multiple levels throughout the institution, since low attendance by minority groups is not new

and is unlikely to change overnight.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The New England Aquarium is centrally located on downtown Boston's waterfront.

<sup>2</sup> 1990 US Census Bureau Data