



Reimagining the World Wildlife Gallery Community Plan

Kendal Museum has an important responsibility to communicate nuanced histories of dominion over human and natural worlds. We are working to be more inclusive, equitable and accessible, ensuring that all visitors can confidently exercise their curiosity amongst our collection.

This project uses our World Wildlife Gallery to begin telling stories of interconnected ecology in order to deepen collective understanding between audiences and natural environments.

We hope that by magnifying previously marginal or hidden knowledge, people will be more empowered and equipped to navigate the troubles of our contemporary world.

Summary of inputs and discussions

Using the stated themes (climate change, biodiversity loss, decolonisation and animal rights) as a prompt, a number of discussions evolved over the four months of meetings. As the project developed, the group became familiar with particular interests and knowledge areas of the other members, and were able to develop their opinions within this shared space.

Group members were invited to make a 15 minute presentation on a relevant topic related to their background, and several kindly took this up. In tandem with guided discussion, workshop activity and open ideation, the group enjoyed presentations on *Decolonising Museums* by Dr Joe Rigby, *Bringing History to Life (Black Lancastrians)* by Lela Harris, *Victorian Paradigms of Natural History* by Matt Sowerby, and a guided tour of the museum's Natural History collection by curator Carol Davies.

A number of discussion prompts were developed by the community contributors in relation to the ethics of taxidermy, local conservation initiatives, universal and accessible design, artistic modes of collection interpretation, among other topics. Documentation of these, along with minutes, collection inventories and image resources were shared on a web-based platform (Google Drive) that group members could upload and comment on outside of meetings.

The group consisted of contributors with varied backgrounds, from artists who had previously been commissioned in museum contexts, to those with a casual interest in collections, related subjects, or the project themes. The first couple of workshops were informal, guided by the Community Contributor handbook which contained background information about the project, questions to address, and an introduction to concepts and terminology that may be new to the participants. It was emphasised that despite the formality and length of the document, this was a resource rather than a guide, and that agency remained with the community group to think beyond its current remit.

For detailed minutes of each community contributor meeting, please see the relevant document [RWWG community contributor minutes 23-24](#).



Relevant activities

Below are listed several relevant activities that project participants were engaged in over the course of Phase 1. These activities include those parallel as well as central to the museum project.

- Dr Joe Rigby has undertaken research in relation to several aspects of the World Wildlife Gallery, linked via their connection to historic museum benefactor, E.G. Harrison. His method has included researching the provenance of collection artefacts (including trophy heads, several musical instruments and medals) with the support of curator Morag Clement, as well as independent investigation using diary accounts, autobiographies, historic colonial documents, media and activist reporting, as well as international arts and culture projects. This research is articulated in Dr Rigby's paper *A 'decolonial' perspective on EG Harrison and the World Wildlife Collection at Kendal Museum*, currently in draft form. Dr Rigby's research findings and decolonising framework have been an invaluable guiding resource for group meetings and continue to shape the project's direction.
- The evaluation phase of a recent room redesign unfolded during the RWWG Phase 1 timeframe. Community Contributor Peter Lincoln has been a driving force behind this, as he was during its implementation in his role for the Westmorland Geological Society. The RWWG project has benefitted from Peter's interests, which extend from the geology collection to the history of the museum itself, and the historic frameworks of public knowledge and practices of collectors. In addition, the evaluation of the Sedgwick and Ruthven room redesign has been interesting due to its involvement of current Project Manager, Ila Colley, in the same role. This has enabled lessons learned in that project to be implemented in this live project, acting as a blueprint for planning and realisation processes. In addition to reflecting on experience with object handling and collections management, this project included

consideration of use of narrative, visual hierarchy, readability, colour and haptic design.

- Kendal Town Councillor Craig Russell, also a Community Contributor for the project, has been Secretary and driving force behind the launch of Natural Kendal Partnership. The Natural Kendal conference will be held in Kendal Museum of the 18th of May 2024 with the aims of better connecting local groups who are working on Nature Recovery projects, from boots-on-the-ground conservation action, to cultural projects like RWWG that deal with public subjectivities. Among these local groups are Kendal Swifts, which is led by Community Contributor Ros Taylor. Ros kindly arranged the group's donation of swift boxes to Kendal Museum, which were installed at the start of 2024.

Discussion and points of contention

Commonality in thinking was both found and developed throughout the community consultation phase of RWWG. Though included in discussion, disagreement about perspective, tone and intention naturally took less precedence than deliberation on prioritising action, form of decision-making, and how to increase accessibility and engagement with audiences.

Central and recurring topics of conversation are listed below:

- The specific ambition and vision statement relating to the RWWG project. This emerged early on due to the relatively open-ended goal of reinterpretation along themes. It was hoped that a guiding statement of aims could be drafted in order to inspire and practically guide the project production, its constituent elements and team members, and its longevity into future offshoots. The outcome of this is written in italic at the top of this document.
- The purpose of the gallery and its exhibits. Are they useful tools in communicating scientific and social histories? How can they be made richer critical tools? This discussion was contextualised in understanding of Victorian practices of collecting and colonising, as well as more recent turns to decolonise, including practices of reparation and restitution. There was general agreement from the group that the gallery itself was a form of historical artefact, and that its longevity was rooted in this unavoidable fact. Recognising this is a crucial step toward understanding.
- Deciding on a realistic set of achievable reinterpretation elements. Though this objective seems simple, there was valuable deliberation in terms of how to select and balance these points of intervention. From consideration of e.g. thematic or geographical groupings, discussions about codification and its relation to taxonomy emerged. This was a key point that may help to avoid an authoritative relationship to visitor learning, as well as preventing the reproduction of museal didacticism that is rooted in colonial thought.
- Increasing accessibility of interpretive media through varied formats. A lack of non-textual interpretive elements was highlighted, and other media forms were proposed, including an audio tour, tactile handling station and colourful illustrations. It was observed that the gallery was crowded with information and stimuli, meaning it can be difficult to navigate and absorb, especially for younger, neurodivergent, SEN, or others with specific access needs.

- Safeguarding was raised by several members of the group who were concerned that some details of human and animal history from the gallery (including violence, death and war) may be disturbing to some visitors including children. However, it was important to other participants that criticality should not be jeopardised, and that many details, horrible as they were, are crucial to reveal to the public in order to properly attest the historic (and continued) wrongs. The strategy developed in response to these questions was to ensure that elements that may be triggering or upsetting would be designed to include warnings, and embedded at different engagement layers, so that audiences are empowered to opt-in or out. For example, an audio tour, or QR link to supplementary web-page.

Outcomes and agreements

This community plan contains a summary of ideas and issues raised by the group of Community Contributors during Phase 1 of Reimagining the World Wildlife Gallery. Below are the key takeaways from the final meeting, at which this draft community plan was the core objective.

For detailed minutes of this meeting, please see the final entry in the relevant document [RWWG community contributor minutes 23-24.](#)

Declutter

- Clear the Darwin display and create a Reimagining entry display that communicated the project and its future.
- Reformulate the lower diorama boards into permanent features, perhaps using tactile laser engraved animal outlines rather than photos and making object number smaller.
- Remove the plaque naming Harrison as benefactor.
- Remove some of the trophy heads (especially those species that are duplicated).
- Remove or rationalise other elements lacking hierarchy or section relevance.
- Remove, update or reintegrate labels with outdated info/maps.

Gallery reinterpretation strands

- The Harrison board needs to be replaced and a replacement written or visualised with close reference to Dr Joe Rigby's research. This wall's interpretation boards could be extended and some of the wall-mounted taxidermy removed.
- 4-5 artefacts from the World Wildlife Gallery are to be given new scripts, either in conventional label form or using alternative media.
- Volunteer research is a valuable resource for this strand and the budget should be used mainly toward production and installation elements.
- Each present member made 1 or 2 proposals for artefact selection. This was narrowed down to 5: polar bear, thylacine, butterflies, swift (or other local bird), brain coral (should be moved to the gallery), pearl mussel (off-display?), crayfish.
- Reinterpretation strands should not be coded or constructed via themes, they should instead follow and thereby express the project values determined by the Community Contributors.

Mural entryway

- A mural in the entryway is the popular choice.
- The mural should be colourful, playful and gesture to some of the geographical/cultural contexts, some serious issues of the gallery, collecting practices and contemporary wildlife concerns. This balance is an exciting challenge!
- It is agreed that the main gallery script is the budgetary priority.

Meanwhile phase

- Simple forms of redisplay, temporary display and feedback infrastructure should be implemented while the permanent elements are being produced.
- Ideas for communicating the project in progress include: stickers next to subject artefacts, QR codes to a web page with draft interpretation and moderated visitor comment submissions, a big sign and short text introducing the Reimagining project and its participatory potentials.

Research

- The research of Dr Joe Rigby continues into Phase 2. If provenance of the musical instruments can be identified, it is in the interest of the museum to engage in collaboration with stakeholder communities and respond positively and promptly to any restitution request. Prompted by the project's development, Kendal Museum is producing a policy for claims for the return of cultural objects. This is being supported by Westmorland and Furness Council (the owners of the collection).

Project future

- Joe, Lavinia and Craig have been particularly interested in the possibility of the project's extension after Phase 2 implementation. There are ongoing discussions between the museum and these participants with regard to possibilities for e.g parallel exhibitions with local and international partners, funding for more collections engagement projects, artist-led activities, and permanent redisplay techniques (digital, 3D printed etc) for absent, repatriated or deaccessioned items.

Thanks

A huge thank-you to the volunteer Community Contributors who made this project:

Amos Blyth, Anna Hall, Beth Driscoll, Cheryl Hitchcock, Donna Campbell, Craig Russell, Lela Harris, Joe Rigby, Lavinia Haslam, Matt Sowerby, Melissa Glackin, Peter Lincoln, Rosalind Taylor, Jane Scutts, Sue Madden.

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