Foreword
The Scope of Museum Studies

by Michael A. Mares

From Taking in to Reaching Out:
How Collections and Collections Staff are Being Used
to Create a Community-Centered Museum

by Mackenzie Laminack

Partnerships in Paleoenthusiasm

by Janessa Doucette-Frederickson

Community Engagement by Small Museums in
Northwest Texas: Serving Diverse Audiences Regardless
of Museum Size or Population Base

by Helen Leighanne Ortiz

Edited by Michael A. Mares
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The Masters of Arts in Museum Studies program at the College of Liberal Studies of the University of Oklahoma has proven to be very successful since it began eight years ago. More than 300 students, largely adults working in cultural organizations, have pursued an advanced degree through this 100% online graduate program. One of the most attractive and challenging aspects of museum studies is the vast diversity of the museum world and the many challenges faced by museum personnel. Their museum may be a small historic house with a single staff member, a submarine docked at Pearl Harbor, a Native American cultural center, a museum in a ghost town, another on a military base, or large art, science, sports, or history museums in major metropolitan areas. Our students have come from all of these types of museums. They have studied about museums while fighting in Iraq, traveling through Europe and Asia, working in tiny villages in the Arctic tundra, and conducting major museum programs at the Sam Noble Museum. The scale and scope of their research is always a challenge to their major professors and graduate committees. Their success in the museum world is a testament to their dedication to the educational program that is offered to them and their single-minded determinedness to learn as much as they can about museums in general, and their target museums in particular.

In the first article, “Partnerships in Paleoenthusiasm,” Janessa Doucette-Frederickson examines the commercial fossil market and its influence on museums and on paleontology. Commercial vertebrate fossil transactions have become controversial in recent years, especially with the entire incident surrounding “Sue,” the *Tyrannosaurus rex* discovered in South Dakota and eventually sold to the Field Museum for an extraordinary multimillion-dollar price. Like many museum directors, I was dismayed over the actions of the fossil marketers and the Field Museum in turning fossils into commodities, rather than treasures of a nation, as they are viewed in most countries. Indeed, the Sam Noble Museum faced a similar situation when one of our fossils not yet fully excavated was spirited away by fossil hunters and eventually sold to the North Carolina...
State Museum of Natural Sciences for a multimillion-dollar price after passing through the very same Black Hills Institute that was involved in the Sue imbroglio. The fossil was found and excavated in Oklahoma and would be our state fossil today if not for a disturbing finding of a court in southeastern Oklahoma, wherein the fossil was awarded to the fossil hunters rather than the land owner, who wanted to donate it to the Sam Noble Museum. I am hopeful that in the future vertebrate fossils (not invertebrate fossils which are as numerous as the stones on a hillside) will be viewed as part of the natural heritage of the people of the United States (and of each individual state) and will be protected from depredation by commercial fossil hunters just as endangered species are protected by the federal and state governments. Ms. Doucette-Frederickson presents her initial research on this complex problem that promises to continue to challenge scientists and museum professionals for years to come.

Mackenzie Laminack, in her article “From Taking In to Reaching Out: How Collections and Collections Staff are Being Used to Create a Community-Centered Museum” presents an important study on how museums need to learn to use their collections in a manner that better serves the public. All museums, and many museum professionals, are dedicated to preserving their collections almost to the point where they are unavailable to most people because of the real concerns involved with conservation and object integrity. Museum professionals operate under the idea that collections are forever and thus must be cared for in a manner that ensures their availability across generations. The “modern” museum began more than two centuries ago and the objects in the collections of those first museums are still available for use by the public, scholars, and others. Their availability is a tribute to the care and safeguarding by museum staff members over the centuries. During periods of global conflict many of these large museums had to transfer their treasures (both scientific and cultural) to protected mineshafts or isolated farms to protect them from the bombing of World War I and World War II. When the Nazis grabbed the treasures of Europe to transport them to Hitler’s proposed Führermuseum (Leader’s Museum), it was the allies and their Monuments Men that intercepted these and eventually brought them back to the museums of a reconstructed Europe.

Such is the dedication of museum professionals. The general public must also feel an ownership of the collections they support and the use of the collections by the public should be increased. It is vital that museums reach out to their many publics with creative use of the collections, many of which are discussed in Laminack’s report. There is much food for thought for museum professionals in this article. We must adapt to the changing technological environment of the 21st century or risk becoming increasingly irrelevant to the lives of the people we serve. Museums are late to the game, I would suggest, and it is incumbent upon all of us to move our institutions into the forefront of technological change and the increased accessibility that it affords.

The third article is by Helen Leighanne Ortiz, “Community Engagement by Small Museums in Northwest Texas: Serving
Diverse Audiences Regardless of Museum Size or Population Base.” This report examines the many challenges facing small museums as they attempt (or decide not to) to reach out to the public to make the museum a regular part of their cultural lives. How does a museum in a ghost town increase its reach among the population of a particular region? How does a tiny museum in a large metro area keep from disappearing when its competition may be major cultural institutions with massive buildings and large staffs? Through interviews and site visits, Ms. Ortiz examines operations, exhibit strategies, and public outreach efforts that most of these institutions must engage in to continue to be relevant to their audiences. She bases her arguments within the context of how museums began in the United States and how they changed over time. In some cases, change is pronounced and constant. In others, it is slow and hardly visible. One thing is clear, whatever the size of your museum and its staff, the contributions of volunteers can be exceedingly important in permitting extensive public outreach and effective programs.

Effective community engagement is the continuing challenge for all museums, large or small, rural or urban, rich or with few financial resources. How well and creatively the challenge is met may spell the difference between survival and extinction.

As the Chinese might have wished, we do indeed live in interesting times. We have entered what will likely be considered among the most transformational periods in the history of museums. Knowledge of all types is only a few key clicks away on our portable devices or laptops. We carry our memory around on our smart phone. We carry most of human knowledge on our devices, standing ready to be consulted at any time on any subject. But do we have the wisdom to use these resources while remaining true to the best aspects of our humanity? The heavy use of these devices has already led people to have a shorter attention span than a goldfish! When we connect with our past, is it as effective to do so on the web as in a museum with real objects? Perhaps spending reflective time with real objects will prove to be an antidote to our increasingly limited abilities to focus.

Now we must as institutions move into the world developed by the many new technologies that have come upon us so quickly. We must learn to use these technologies to increase the quality and extent of our services to our audiences, whether they are physically in the museum or visiting the museum via the Internet. But museums are not video games. We are not representations of reality. We are about truth. We are about real objects. We are museums.

My late friend, Stephen Jay Gould was once asked to work with blind people that were attempting to appreciate the Smithsonian’s Air and Space Museum in Washington DC. Air and Space has large objects — planes and rockets — that are hoisted high in the air above the heads of visitors. How does a sightless visitor appreciate a large object like the Wright Flyer or a DC-3 while standing in the museum’s gallery? The first thing that came to mind was providing them with an exact model of the plane in question, one that was perhaps a foot or so in length. This was done. They had the models on a table and the visitors were able to feel what the plane was like. However, there was a problem. The overall feeling by these visitors was that the model only had validity if it were placed below the real object and in the same orientation. The Wright Flyer model had to be right below the real plane that permitted human powered flight.
Partnerships in Paleoenthusiasm

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Abstract: Available information on the commercial fossil market is limited to newspaper and magazine articles and a modicum of peer-reviewed literature. Herein I expand the existing scholarship on aspects of fossil ownership such as value and access. The paleontological sciences have experienced a recent surge in media coverage, as the commercial fossil market has become a publicly recognized phenomenon. The headlined 2012 legal case of United States of America v. One Tyrannosaurus Bataar Skeleton caused friction among academics, collectors, and even the public. The escalating debate between academic paleontologists and commercial collectors over specimen access calls for new research approaches. The efficacy of US vertebrate fossil legislation is a contested issue within the greater paleontological community because public restrictions do not extend to private property; therefore, private land access may fall to the “highest bidder.” The relationship between capital-driven fossil collecting and public museums is complex, and a thorough investigation of the issue demands consideration of public views. Two surveys have been conducted for this study: 1) a survey for the public, available to visitors to the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History, and to online participants; and 2) a survey for self-identified members of the paleontological community. The goal of this study has been to determine what museum visitors and other members of the public know about the commercial fossil market, and how they perceive the future of paleontological logistics in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

I consider paleontology to be a special science, one that can be referred to as a “gateway science”, because it is relatable and interesting to diverse audiences, and it is both accessible and engaging for learners of all ages. A central issue in modern paleontology concerns who gets to participate in the study of the past, by what means, and to what end—an issue brought about by the relatively recent emergence of a distinctive “fossil market” (e.g. Larson and Russell 2014; Shimada et al. 2014). From Montana ranchers to South Carolina divers, many people find fossil hunting irresistible. Actively searching for remnants of past life on Earth is a pastime shared by “paleoenthusiasts” and paleontology professionals alike across the United States, and this paper is an attempt to further the conversation on the social dynamics and politics of interest in natural resources like fossils. I prefer to call fossils “natural resources” for several reasons: 1) they are finite, in a sense, as the animals
and plants they represent will not exist in those exact forms again, and the fossil record is the only authentic record thereof; 2) they are used to produce and reproduce scientific narratives about the past and present, so they hold special significance; and 3) they are increasingly seen as objects of value or commodity, which has led to my interest in producing this paper. Herein the issue of the fossil market will be briefly reviewed and then reexamined through the lens of museology (museum studies) and anthropology.

Amateur fossil hunting with little to no regulation was the predecessor of modern paleontology, and is responsible for the presence of countless, scientifically valuable specimens in today’s museum collections (Larson and Russell 2014). A most wonderful aspect of museum work is delving into and exploring an institution’s collections of objects, and doing so in any reputable natural history museum (e.g. Smithsonian, London Museum, American Museum, etc.) would reveal a trove of fossils whose roots could today be considered illicit or unethical. Pertinent legislation and ethical expectations have come into circulation since the days of famed fossil hunters such as Mary Anning and Charles Sternberg (for a full treatment of legislation, see Lazerwitz 1993 and Lundgren 1998). Public lands such as national parks are generally off-limits to the casual fossil prospector, and are open only to permitted scientists for certain categories of fossil collection (Department of the Interior Report 2000). It is important to note that current legislation of fossil materials on public lands applies mainly to vertebrate fossils, and while a sufficient treatment of the reasons for this distinction is beyond the scope of this paper, the reader may assume that “fossil” generally refers to vertebrate fossils herein. According to the Bureau of Land Management, various laws protect such fossil resources on public lands, including the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. Resources collected from these lands are considered to be in the “public trust”, and care of specimens generally falls to a museum or university. In the United States, legislation protecting fossils on public lands do not extend to private property, and this is a point of contention in current paleontological discourse.

Private collections of natural objects are nothing novel among those who could or can afford them. Wealthy individuals have been collecting remnants of ancient life since at least the 16th century, and many of those early “curiosity” assortments are the direct ancestors of modern museum collections (Impey et al. 2001). What essentially began as a competitive hunt by the rich eventually evolved into the systematic, professional collection of fossil specimens that we see in many museums today (see, for example, Romer 1964’s treatment of the Bone Wars). American paleontology has been solidified as a professional science since the 19th century, but it is important to remember that the spirit of the hunt has in no sense died out among nonprofessionals interested in fossils.

There are multiple parties interested in the hunt for fossil specimens. These include academics, landowners, collectors, dealers, students, and source communities, among others. While these parties are not necessarily continually at odds with one another, a more public debate over who gets to collect, access, and use fossils has ensued in the United States. This debate exists primarily because for the past two decades, a vertebrate fossil market has developed and escalated to a point where museums and other public institutions cannot necessarily afford to compete with private collectors for acquiring “museum quality” specimens. While relatively little academic literature on this topic exists, events in the past few years especially have brought the discussion into the public arena and excited media outlets. For example, a highly publicized legal case that began in 2012 culminated in the incarceration of American fossil dealer Eric Prokopi, sentenced to three months in federal prison for smuggling vertebrate fossils internationally, spurred the publication of dozens of news articles. While mismanagement and illicit trade of fossils certainly exist (e.g. Nudds 2001, Sookias et al. 2013, Hecht 2014), this paper instead addresses a commercial fossil market that is legitimate, legal, and increasingly popular among paleoenthusiasts.

This project has been conducted as an attempt to shed light on a particular party with a stake in the commercial fossil market: the public, whose opinions about the market have yet to be sought out, analyzed, and disseminated widely. The goal of this project has been to collect data on public ideas, demonstrate interest in the topic within the paleontology community, and create productive reflection and dialog among the whole spectrum of the paleontology community.

BACKGROUND

Although fossil ownership for many people simply is about collecting interesting objects or marveling at Earth’s history, we must conceive of fossil ownership disagreements more deeply, in that at the core of the argument lies a debate over who owns the past. This is a battle that has been fought in archaeology and ethnology for over...
a century (see Gibbon 2005; Cuno 2008, 2012), but paleontology was seemingly able to work around this issue until vertebrate fossils began to fetch remarkable prices at auction, one of the most notable examples being the Tyrannosaurus rex specimen called Sue that sold for over eight million dollars in 1997 (Larson and Donnan 2002). While ethnological and archaeological materials are widely protected by such pieces of legislation as the Antiquities Act of 1906, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, and the Migratory Bird Act of 1918, the fate of many fossil resources has remained somewhat ambiguous in federal legislation.

Fossil ownership that was once only popular among the wealthy has now become available to the lay public, and the paleontology community has understood and reacted to this phenomenon in various ways. Academia has long laid claim to fossil resources (Kohlstedt 1988), but American landowners have legal rights to all such resources on their land, as legislation does not extend past public lands (Lazarwitz 1993:626). This creates a competition of interests between professional paleontologists, landowners, collectors, and commercial fossil dealers. An argument popular among academics is that commercial fossil sales threaten the integrity of specimens that have already been sold into private collections, and perhaps those fossils that have yet to be found (e.g. Shimada et al. 2014, Padian 2000). Avocational paleontology enthusiasts and collectors, as well as commercial dealers, tend to assert instead that private ownership is a powerful method of spreading appreciation for fossils and natural history (Nudds 1997, Larson and Russell 2014). While the existing arguments for these perspectives within the literature are compelling and becoming widely circulated, the voice of the public must also be captured. The “public” is presumed here to encompass the categories of landowners, potential fossil collectors, paleoenthusiasts of many types, and natural history museum-goers. Using methods common in museology and theoretical frameworks from anthropology, I attempt to capture perspectives of the public.

FRAMEWORK: WHY ANTHROPOLOGY?
I have undertaken this project as a way to explore the “non-scientific” side of fossil collection more fully, as anthropology is concerned with both material culture and with the phenomenon of collecting itself. The discipline has much to offer in the conversation about paleontological resources, especially if one accepts the premise that the public, whose private land is home to so many contentious fossil materials, is an important group in this situation whose ideas about fossil ownership must be collected, heard, and considered.

The discipline of anthropology is concerned with humanity in all its various flavors, and seeks especially to examine “culture”. This term has many definitions, but here an appropriate one comes from Murphy (1986): Culture means the total body of tradition borne by a society and transmitted from generation to generation. It thus refers to the norms, values, standards by which people act…It is the matrix into which we are born, it is the anvil upon which our persons and destinies are forged. The concept of “culture” is a frustration for the field of anthropology today (see Clifford 1988), but here it suffices to concentrate specifically on how we can bring culture into the conversation on how we shape our values. The role of cultural values, in this case, lies in how we go about collecting, organizing, studying, and appraising things—especially nature or natural objects. Such practices find their systematic, professional home in the West, where valuing scientific knowledge and empirical study constitutes a privileged epistemology (e.g. Mayor 2005, Harding and Figueroa 2013). It is important to consider the culturally constructed value we place on scientific collections as we go forward in thinking about them as contested objects.

METHODS
There are numerous ways we can study scientific practices and understandings; in reaching out to study humanity, anthropologists generally complete ethnographic studies rather than using instruments such as surveys (Schensul 1999), but here it seemed appropriate to consider conducting surveys a suitable method for revealing patterns in public and professional thinking. In order to test my ideas about the importance of the public as consumers, learners, and owners of fossil materials, and of the importance of museums as a one of the major providers of natural history education in America, I have conducted two surveys. One is for the paleontology community, and the aim has been to see how that group (in its full spectrum) thinks about the public and fossil resources. The other is for the public, and has included a diverse sample of museum visitors (n = 117), purposive respondents (n = 209), and random respondents recruited by SurveyMonkey rather than myself (n = 415). Total public survey-takers amounted to 741, but 45 of those did not consent to the inclusion of their surveys in this or any other publication. Therefore, n = 696 for the discussion of public surveys herein.

However biased the survey questions might seem, I attempted to create surveys that reflect the positions of a spectrum of interested parties, especially because I do not believe the phenomenon of the commercial fossil market to be a topic conformable to binary analysis (in other words, I would not ask people whether they are “for” or “against” commercial fossil sales). In selecting questions and answers for this set of surveys, I have been careful to attempt the capture of the larger popular discourse on the fossil market, while also including alternative views as possible. The surveys were subject to review by many individuals at the University of Oklahoma and the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History (where my in-person survey fieldwork took place), and underwent rigorous Institutional Review Board processes before acceptance (IRB #3987).

I wrote the public survey questions with purposive sampling in mind (Mack et al. 2005). One of my aims was to reach people who visit natural history museums, so I wrote the questions with that
context in mind. The professional survey was shared entirely online, so I designed it based on the accessible groups and people available to me through the Internet. For example, since I frequently attend conferences, events, and talks with individuals who are part of the paleontology community in some capacity, I have been able to share the survey with a large number of people via email and social media alone. Beyond this, I have sought out common sites for discussion among these individuals, such as the Dinosaur Mailing List and the Fossil Forum. By these methods I have been able to collect 155 surveys from the paleontology community, and 696 from the public.

### RESULTS

**Paleontology Community Survey, n = 155**

*Note: where answers do not add up to 100%, participants have selected as many answers as desired.*

**Are you familiar with the topic of the fossil market?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>96.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>0.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not sure</td>
<td>3.25%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Have you ever had a discussion about the fossil market with other members of the paleontological community, professional or otherwise?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>91.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>7.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not sure</td>
<td>0.65%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Do you think the public is familiar with the topic of the fossil market?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>16.23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>72.73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not sure</td>
<td>11.69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What is your formal education level?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>26.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>25.32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>26.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s</td>
<td>5.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>5.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current student – undergraduate</td>
<td>3.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current student – graduate</td>
<td>14.94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What is your affiliation to the field of paleontology?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am a professional paleontologist</td>
<td>19.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am an amateur paleontologist</td>
<td>11.69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a “paleo-enthusiast”, but work in a different field altogether</td>
<td>20.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a current student [paleontology]</td>
<td>23.38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a professional who often works in conjunction with paleontology</td>
<td>15.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a commercial paleontologist</td>
<td>2.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a researcher (museum, etc.)</td>
<td>27.27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am a fossil or exhibit preparator</td>
<td>10.39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Do you feel the preservation and public holding of fossil resources is part of responsible Earth Stewardship? (this refers to the active decision of citizens to learn about and care for our planet)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>90.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>5.19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not sure</td>
<td>3.90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Do you feel that an unregulated fossil market could adversely affect any group of people? If yes, who?**

(Common answers: Scientists, Researchers, Everyone, Educators, Source Communities, Landowners)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>83.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>11.04%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not sure</td>
<td>5.19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Where do you think most people learn about fossils?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School – high school, etc.</td>
<td>27.92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College or university</td>
<td>7.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Museums</td>
<td>52.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television/movies</td>
<td>42.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet, other media</td>
<td>38.96%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Do you feel that an unregulated fossil market could benefit any group of people? If yes, who?**

(Common answers: Companies, Dealers, Collectors, Landowners, Poachers, Source Communities)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>81.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>13.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m not sure</td>
<td>5.16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**If fossil collection and ownership were to undergo new legislation or change in your country, what do you feel the ideal situation would be? (Please list your country as well).**

See Appendix A for a complete list of responses.
The majority of survey-takers (nearly 70%) identify as professional paleontologists, researchers, or students of the discipline of paleontology. Fifteen percent of respondents identify as either amateur paleontologists or commercial paleontologists. I was unable to reach a meaningful number of commercial paleontologists with this survey - under 3% of respondents self-identified as commercial paleontologists, and in order to begin deciphering the nuances of that group, I would need to reach many more. For this reason, I will not attempt to situate the group within this research further. When asked about possible effects of an unregulated fossil market, respondents noted that scientists, museums, landowners, and the public would be adversely affected, especially academics in paleontology. Conversely, those whom an unregulated market would benefit include fossil collectors, commercial traders, poachers, and individuals seeking income from fossil sales – which includes "poor people in underdeveloped parts of the world" as well as commercial individuals and auction houses, according to survey data.

The final question on the paleontology community survey is about fossil collection and ownership legislation. Several participants mentioned interest in or support for a system such as the one currently in place in Canada, wherein surface collecting is allowed in many places, vertebrate fossils are considered property of the Crown, and specimens may not be excavated, sold, or exported from the source province without permits. A common theme in survey answers is recognition of the contributions and importance of amateur fossil finding, and several participants shared support for creating a system in which hobbyists and other interested parties would be able to (or legally made to) obtain a permit for collecting fossils. For a full list of answers to survey question #10, please see Appendix A.

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Public Survey, n= 696

Note: where answers do not add up to 100%, participants have selected as many answers as desired.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your favorite part of visiting natural history museums?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational entertainment</td>
<td>61.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An interesting place to spend time</td>
<td>59.05%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A family-friendly environment</td>
<td>33.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to see real specimens</td>
<td>75.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being able to choose what I want to read and learn about</td>
<td>35.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.01%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| How do you think museums get fossils and other specimens?               |            |
| Buy or trade for them from other museums, universities, or scientists   | 83.48%     |
| Buy them from private landowners                                       | 52.01%     |
| Buy them online or from companies                                      | 25.43%     |
| Go & find them with a field team                                       | 67.82%     |
| People donate specimens to museums                                     | 87.21%     |
| Other                                                                   | 3.30%      |

| What do you think paleontologists do?                                   |            |
| Find fossils                                                            | 90.80%     |
| Publish scientific papers                                               | 78.74%     |
| Teach in universities                                                   | 77.44%     |
| Give public science talks                                               | 73.13%     |
| Prepare fossils                                                         | 70.55%     |
| Work in museums                                                         | 69.25%     |
| Write books                                                             | 66.52%     |
| Buy and sell fossils                                                    | 30.03%     |
| Own rock shops                                                          | 15.80%     |
| Other                                                                   | 4.60%      |

| Have you ever heard of the commercial fossil market?                     |            |
| Yes                                                                      | 29.45%     |
| No                                                                       | 55.60%     |
| I'm not sure                                                             | 14.51%     |
| Other                                                                    | 1.15%      |

| If you found a fossil in your own backyard, what would you most like to do with it? |
| Sell it                                                                  | 11.49%     |
| Keep it                                                                  | 48.28%     |
| Donate or sell it to a museum or university                              | 60.63%     |
| Get professional help publishing a scientific paper/article about it     | 9.45%      |
| Other                                                                    | 8.91%      |
| (Common answers: Depends; Consult an expert; Contact expert/ university; Identify first) |

| Do you think unregulated fossil sales could make it more or less difficult for people to see and learn about fossils? |
| Less difficult                                                          | 9.63%      |
| More difficult                                                          | 59.34%     |
| I'm not sure                                                             | 30.32%     |
| Other                                                                    | 2.73%      |
Where is the best place to keep an “important” fossil? “Important” means a fossil that scientists and the public can learn a lot from, or a fossil that can confirm or deny something we think we know about the past.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>With a private owner</td>
<td>3.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At a museum or university, on display</td>
<td>69.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With any institution or person that will let the public see and enjoy it, and let scientists study it</td>
<td>71.41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laboratories or museum collections, not on display</td>
<td>22.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.58%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you think preserving and studying fossils are important parts of Earth stewardship?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>84.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>5.17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm not sure</td>
<td>9.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.59%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Is it important to you to see real fossils when you visit a museum?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>76.87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10.49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I'm not sure</td>
<td>10.78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6.03%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear that the public feels strongly about having real fossils on display in museums, and it seems that “museum” translates to “on display” for many people. About 30% of participants think that paleontologists are involved in buying or selling fossils (with about half of those participants thinking that this extends to ‘rock shop’ ownership). About 53% of those participants who said they would sell their fossil noted that they would prefer to sell it to a museum or university, rather than a private owner or entity. Of those same participants, about 36% would also consider keeping their fossil, and 45% were unsure of how an unregulated market would affect the public display of fossils. Seventy percent of would-be sellers have not heard of the commercial fossil market.

Overall, an appreciably smaller number (just over 18%) of respondents who would sell their fossil thought that unregulated fossil sales would make it more difficult to see and learn about fossils. However, less than 10% of participants who would sell their fossil feel that a private owner is the best keeper of an important fossil. Almost 60% of would-be sellers believe that museums buy specimens from private landowners. About half of all would-be sellers think that museums engage in the fossil trade. There is a 13% disparity between would-be sellers and overall surveys in the importance of fossils for Earth stewardship (71% of would-be sellers say they are important).

It is important to note as well that several online respondents shared that they do not often visit natural history museums, but that these respondents do not overlap with would-be-sellers.

Respondents who felt that the best place for an important fossil is with a private owner also felt that an unregulated fossil market would make it easier to see and learn about fossils (39% of respondents versus 10% overall). Half of those same respondents said that fossils are important for Earth stewardship, versus about 84% of overall respondents. Notably, 60% of respondents who would prefer an important fossil in private ownership say it is important to see real fossils in museums, versus 76% overall.

Museum survey-takers are about 15% more likely to enjoy the family-friendly aspect of museums than online survey-takers, and were slightly less (about 5%) likely to select “seeing real specimens” as being important to their museum visit. Museum survey-takers are around 10% more likely than online respondents to think that paleontologists buy and sell fossils or own rock shops. Museum respondents are slightly (6%) less likely to sell a fossil found on their land, and slightly (5%) more interested in publishing an article about their fossil. They are also 3-4% more likely to keep a fossil and less likely (3-4%) to put it in a museum. Only one museum respondent felt that a private owner is the best keeper of an important fossil. Museum respondents are 15% more likely than online respondents to say it is important to see real fossils in a museum. Museum respondents are about 10% more likely than online respondents to think that fossils are an important part of Earth stewardship.

RESEARCH PROBLEMS

I wish to address some of the shortcomings of this research. First, as noted, a survey is a problematic methodology in many cases, and I believe that it is not the best way to capture qualitative data. Future research calls for a thorough ethnographic study of those who collect fossils, why and how they do so, and what it means to collect and keep natural history specimens within a larger cultural context. The second shortcoming is the absence of more self-identified commercial paleontologists. Without a clear representation of the
perspectives of these individuals, I will not attempt to situate them within this research further, but I hope to continue gathering the perspectives of those individuals until multi-vocal representation has been achieved. A third shortcoming of this project is the limited breadth of questions I have been able to ask participants. For example, the reader will note that demographic information about respondent age, education level, gender, region, religion, and other factors are not part of this study. These factors were not within the scope of this project, but are open areas for future research within the context of the fossil market.

**DISCUSSION**

*Why do people collect fossils?* A question we may forget to ask ourselves is why we are engaging in a certain practice, and whether there are valid reasons for doing so that may not align with our own. Reasons for engaging in fossil collection have been polarized by opposing groups, wherein commercially identified individuals are seen as only being interested in financial aspects of collection, and the scientific community is perceived as being solely interested in empirical data. The locus of fossil market discussions has been the strained relationship between commercial and academic endeavors, but I contend that there is much more overlap in the collecting motivations of these parties than popular discourse has recognized.

The fundamental similarity in which both commercial and academics are grounded is the value placed on *collecting*. Anthropologist van der Grijp describes the value of a collection as “measured or expressed in historical, cultural, scientific, technical, aesthetic, emotional or financial terms…[collections should] constitute a coherent representational universe” (2006:6). I think this description suits fossil collection well, in that paleontologists collect specimens in hopes of recreating some kind of coherent representation of the past. Commercial fossil dealers are trying to offer something similar to their customers, who may collect fossils for non-scientific reasons, but add to their own coherent representation of completeness all the same.

Perhaps it is not as systematic as in a museum, but there is a guiding plan to hobby collections, and even a fossil hobbyist is not a “simple accumulator of similar objects” (van der Grijp 2006:7). Disciplines such as sociology and psychology (Muensterberger 1994; Baudrillard et al. 1994) have contributed many comments to the discourse on collecting objects, but these descriptions can be reductionist and opaque. One useful interpretation comes from anthropology, however: “a single object is never enough, the aim being the accomplishment of a set…hence, the acquisition of every new object is both satisfying and frustrating, because in the end the set will still not be complete” (van der Grijp 2006:15). As a participant of both museum-based and hobby-based fossil hunting, I can attest that this sentiment may be true in both cases, though ultimately the set in question will likely look different and serve different purposes.

**Identifying the real problem.** The academic paleontology community has made clear its position on the fossil market: it is seen as an obvious and imminent threat to the scientific endeavor, whether conducted legally or not, because it provides a direct means for important specimens to be removed from scientific view. I encourage the reader to consider separating two key issues at hand: personal collection and commercial collection. The difference between personally curated collections and those obtained through commercial sales could be deemed as *intent*. I do not believe that I know a single paleontologist who does not have some sort of collection of fossils. While the paleontologist collects because they are perhaps building a teaching collection or other educational set of specimens, the professional discourse paints the hobbyist buying fossils on eBay as someone who wants to own something rare or valuable without respect for scientific study. I have often wondered how true this dialog is, and whether anyone should take issue with people collecting fossils simply because they are interested in them.

I believe that the issue lies with how we use our collections, and the value judgments we place on others in how they use their collections. We may not agree about whether people should legally own any fossils on their private land, but the fact is, they do—at least in America. I think here it is crucial to concentrate on the fact that less than 7% of all public survey respondents (about 50 people) said that they would opt to sell a fossil found on their land. If the fear of the paleontology community is commercial sales, I believe this demonstrates that perhaps there is less to fear in this sense than previously thought; remember also that less than 4% of respondents think that the best place for an important fossil is with a private owner.

Shared concerns of paleontologists, responsible commercial dealers, and the public include access, legality, and availability. Availability and access are crucial to American paleontologists because specimens discussed in peer-reviewed publications must be held in publicly accessible repositories. Specimens in private collections are thus considered “lost to science”; note that this is not necessarily the case in other regions such as Europe. Legality and availability are important to commercial collectors and dealers because these factors are necessary for legitimate fossil sales. The public’s main concern is making sure that fossils are accessible to them for viewing and enjoyment, and this directly overlaps with the main concern of paleontologists, which is that fossils are accessible to them for study. So the relevant question becomes, what is it that the paleontology community has to fear, if the public (who can buy or collect fossils legally) are not necessarily inclined to sell specimens into private ownership? I think, perhaps, the real culprit is the only dispassionate party we can identify: the unaccountable middlemen, such as auction houses.

We must also ask the question about fear in terms of responsible commercial entities, who can also legally engage in the fossil trade,
but would prefer specimens to find homes in museums and other publicly accessible repositories. Survey data indicate that academics generally feel that commercially engaged individuals and entities have the upper hand in this situation, and we must keep in mind that the commercial side tends to speak out for interests like private ownership, and that such an interest is deeply valued in America. This side of the argument holds the fear of losing personal liberties if fossil legislation were to be extended to private lands. I bring up the topic of legislation here because it has been an important element in survey data, wherein very few participants would opt for little to no change in current legislation of fossil resources in America. Most paleontology community survey participants shared ideas that involved concern for fossils on private land, exploring ideas for how science can contend with the fact that the law is on the landowner’s side.

CONCLUSIONS
When interviewed by The New Yorker, Eric Prokopi asked journalist Paige Williams, “one thing I was wondering is if any of these paleontologists you’ve talked to have given their argument of why paleontology is important...fossils are just basically rocks...it’s not like antiquities, where it’s somebody’s heritage and culture and all that.” In the highly publicized legal case to which criminally convicted fossil dealer Prokopi was referring, people across the globe have rallied to the cause of Mongolian ownership and patrimonial claim to the specimen (see Hecht 2014). Of interest to us is the fact that the scientific community considers such materials to be geologic rather than culture, despite the feelings of groups who may view these materials as culturally significant in similar ways to human artifacts (see Mayor 2005). For example, John Nudds of the Manchester University Museum has argued that fossils are in no sense comparable to ethnographic artifacts as representations of national heritage, noting that geologic time is deep and transcends national borders (Nudds 2001). However, fossils have become items of incredible value both socially and as objects of material culture. The reader should consider: do you agree with Prokopi’s statement above?

This project is merely a first step in discerning the ways in which paleontology is perceived by the public, and a way to help us think about conducting and presenting this science in the future, as well as being a contribution to the larger discourse on the commercial fossil market from the little-heard perspective of anthropology. Going forward, further study is necessary for a more complete picture of museum roles as important sites of informal science consumption and learning in America, but it is clear that museums are essential sites of natural history education for the public. The next step to this project is research on the institutional treatment of access and transparency issues in paleontology and other sciences.
Museumgoers and online survey participants have shown that the public knows something about the commercial fossil market, but perhaps too little to feel comfortable engaging in the conversation about what to do in the future. Museums are responsible for helping people understand and meaningfully discuss issues in American science, but the role of individual scientists is just as important. If the reader is concerned with public interest in and respect for paleontology, but does not currently engage in outreach activities, they are urged to consider doing so, and support their colleagues in doing so as well.

Perhaps the energy academics and individuals engaged in commercial endeavors spend on contesting one another over the fossil market could be put to more productive use examining, and collectively challenging, the power of entities like auction houses such as Heritage, and online trading sites such as eBay. Such marketplaces are virtually unregulated and hold no responsibility for their role in mediating illegal and fraudulent sales that are detrimental to all of the paleontological community, academic and commercial alike, as well as the public. If we may speak with one voice against the illicit fossil trade, we will make progress in discussing the dynamics of the legal trade and scientific access as well.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


**APPENDIX A**

Paleontology Community Survey

**Question 10 Responses**

n = 155

**Question:** If fossil collection and ownership were to undergo new legislation or change in your country, what do you feel the ideal situation would be? (Please list your country as well).

**Responses:**

• **United States**
  - Fossil collectors would have to be hired by museums, and if they did not work for a museum or government agency, would be fined for taking museum property.
  - Ideal: All vertebrate fossils deemed to have importance to science are automatically public property and must go to a university or museum collection for scientific study, even if discovered on private land. United States

• **USA**
  - Scientifically valuable specimens should not be sold on the open market. Less valuable specimens (determined to be such by expert examination) should be available for collectors to buy (or collect themselves as part of digs sponsored and regulated by public institutions) in order to encourage public interest in science. Museums and related public institutions shouldn’t need to get permits from the government to collect on private land when they have the owner’s permission. Waiting for the red tape to be waded through might make landowners less willing to cooperate. It makes no sense that they would be able to collect themselves immediately (when they have no experience doing it), but experienced field personnel need to wait for government permission.
  - United States of America. While I think that fossils belong in public collections and not private hands, I’m not sure that I would be comfortable increasing the regulations beyond where they currently stand, which does not regulate what people are allowed to do with fossils that they find on their own land.

• **USA-** I doubt that any legal changes can be made beyond what we already have, except perhaps to put more “teeth” into penalties for illegal collection

• **Private ownership of vertebrate fossils should be illegal**

• **America.** I feel I do not know enough about the current situation and how it can be altered to provide a substantial answer.

• **All vertebrate fossils (public and private) end up in the public repositories or museums. This would allow all citizens to view and enjoy the fossils as well as remove the gray area from what is private and what is public land in the US.**

• **Ideally all fossils belong to the public or an institution that makes sure researchers and students have access to them**

• **Germany**
  - I live in Ireland. I think all fossils of any note should be kept in museums and/or universities. If I discovered an important fossil, I would like to have my name associated with that fossil and the ability to see the fossil at any reasonable time for free. Otherwise, I think it belongs to the world, not to individuals.

• **I’m unsure but now very interested in the issue! Perhaps you have to be registered as a fossil owner so that we know where all the fossils are?**

• **Federal regulations on fossil collecting. Broad to encourage amateurs, but specific to discourage those who would exploit a limited resource. (USA)**

• **I think all fossils on public property, and certain protected fossils on private property should be regulated and subject for study only by licensed non-profit educational organizations. Public sale of regulated items would be illegal.**

• **Forbidden to dig &collect (they think about in parts of Germany).**

• **All fossils go to the regional Museum of paleontology that will protect and preserve the fossils for generations to come.**

• **Canada.** A better and more responsible approach to the collection, preservation, and interpretation of the country's fossil heritage.

• **Restrictions of fossils that can be privately sold, with significant specimens going to scientific institutions to be held in the public trust. Any fossils that were sold would also**
require information about where they were collected, who did so, etc. to preserve scientific information if they eventually wound up in a museum or similar institution.

- Canada - a national fossil collecting strategy based on the Alberta model of State ownership would be ideal.

- To me every fossil belongs to the public and should not be sold privately. Every bit could be a potential vital clue and lead to new theories. Country: Sweden

- USA I feel that fossil resources should be considered federal or state property and thus, should be housed in a designated repository, unless otherwise specified by special permit (in the case of certain commercial collectors that maintain large collections and are willing to keep good locality data and collection records)

- USA, I’ll leave that to the professionals to decide

- The US should take advice from Alberta and copy their laws (i.e., that all fossils belong to the state). However, the places where the fossil markets are most prevalent (Montana, the Dakotas) are also the areas where annual income from farming is highly variable and not reliable due to e.g., variable weather conditions like droughts. Therefore, in order for legislative changes to be effective and well-supported, they need to be coupled with governmental support to the land owners who currently sell fossils to subsidize the loss of profit they will inevitably experience.

- Difficult to tell, since in US private ownership & capitalism combine to ensure that fossils can and will be sold. But this sales only rarely help advance the actual science of paleontology, and much more frequently hurt the science by removing potentially significant fossils from the scientific record. Commerce in fossils may be OK in the US, but it isn't science.

- allow vertebrate collection on public lands as long as it’s supervised. Now they are left to erode and weather

- My country: Canada. To me, the most value that fossils have is in the information that they provide us about the natural history of Earth. Therefore, I feel that it is crucial for their collection to be regulated, at least to the extent that collection be supervised by professionally trained teams from recognized scientific institutions in order that (1) geological contextual information not be lost due to the activities of inexperienced and untrained individuals and (2) the fossils be collected and transported in such a way that they are not sufficiently damaged to preclude scientific study. However, I do realize that the actions of responsible members involved in the fossil trade are beneficial to drum up public support for paleontological study. Therefore, perhaps the optimal situation would be one in which fossil trading is not completely prohibited, but (1) fossil excavation is strictly regulated and supervised to ensure that scientifically valuable information is not lost, (2) finds deemed especially significant to science immediately go to major academic institutions where research may be done on them for publication in peer-reviewed scientific literature, (3) material discarded by paleontologists or deemed not significant enough to collect for study possibly be released to the fossil trade, with right of first refusal on any resulting sales being given to academic institutions or museums and not to private individuals. This is a very complex problem and there are probably many aspects of my answer that I would alter following further consideration.

- USA: collected on private land, up to owners, everything else goes to science.

- USA ideally make vertebrate fossils public domain regardless of whether they are found on public or private land

- No sale of fossils, no excavations without permits. No digging of fossils except with vetted professionals or paleo students. Bad apples treated with harsher rules. Canada

- USA- I would like to see stricter regulations banning the sale or private holding of significant fossil specimens.

- Ban sales of any non-“key” specimens for those outside accredited universities, research institutes, or public museums. Identification of key specimens can and should include any specimen in which there are less than, say, 20 reasonably complete museum specimens. Canada

- USA. Protection of fossils collected on private land will never happen. We have good laws protecting public land fossils but don’t have the resources to enforce them. Better to put money and effort into education.

- Ideally, making the buying and selling of fossils illegal. However, I know that’s not realistic, but perhaps coming up with a form of record-keeping for fossils that sell at a certain value, or those deemed to have scientific value; something similar to how art is tracked as it changes hands. This would also create more jobs for paleo students.

- I live in Alberta and our fossil regulations are quite strict. I believe that other countries would benefit if they adopted our regulations.
• Collection, curation, study, and release for sale should be managed by a professional association/board of paleontologists.

• Vertebrate fossils should be considered government property, to insure that they are publicly curated and available for both public viewing and scientific research. USA

• No one has the right to dictate who can access or collect fossils or has any more authority over any others to claim them, buy them, find them, own them, or regulate them.

• Canada. Researchers and research institutions get first right of refusal. If the fossil is refused by the scientific community, then a search should be made for an interested public institution to take on stewardship (i.e. municipal museums). If no such institution can be found, a public auction should be held to raise funds. This process is widely used as the deaccessioning protocols for museums across Canada. It constitutes due diligence to try and maximize public access, while still allowing for private purchase should there be no possible greater good.

• Perhaps creating laws to protect the country’s fossils and keep them within borders would help preserve our country’s history.

• More protection for fossils to be in the public domain. not with private collections. Canada.

• Restriction and regulation of collections on public lands, education and credit to landowners to see fossils properly collected by knowledgeable groups and institutions, enforcement of fines for raided, damaged collection sites and trade of improperly obtained fossils.

• The ideal situation is just to leave things as they are - at least on the East Coast of the USA. I have taught many families about fossils and the creatures from which they came. It has sparked an interest in science in many of the children who have collected fossils with us. In the East Coast of the USA, you aren’t going to find very many complete skeletons of fossilized creatures, only teeth or bones or spines. If we don’t collect them when we find them, they will not be as preserved in the future. The rivers will tumble them and ruin them. Why not let us then collect them when they are still in good shape. They are not like Native American pieces that are very localized and rare. The paleo layers go on for miles usually. It’s just a matter of being able to get to the layer and finding the fossils. I REALLY HOPE that there is NEVER legislation to stop fossil collectors in the East Coast to collect fossils they find. If so, there will be MANY less good specimens found, because so many will have been naturally destroyed. As I said, it’s not like Native American treasures. There is almost an unlimited amount of wonderful fossils waiting to be found. If not found, they will be destroyed. Our government has their hand in enough things - leave our fossils ALONE!

• no regulations on surface collecting of invertebrates on public lands, vertebrates with permits.

• If collecting laws were to remain roughly the same as they are, that would be ideal except for the fact that massive fossils bearing areas are off limits to amateurs/commercial collectors, and it is impossible for all these areas to be collected and studied by paleontologists. So, thousands of potentially important finds are allowed to erode away with no one benefiting. I think that areas that are off limits now and will never be studied professionally should be open to amateur collecting, except for privately owned land which could be collected with the owner’s permission. USA

• Regulation. Perhaps similar to the same way mineral rights are regulated or perhaps synonymous to other industries where you have to prove your legitimacy before you can engage in said industry.

• USA. We need regulations requiring a certificate of origin accompany any fossil that is sold, imported, or exported. This is none for animal parts. Many fossils, including significant specimens are legally sold. Lying on such a document would be a crime and can be verified. We cannot guard all public land, but the sites for sale of (particularly) major specimens are quite limited. PAPERS PLEASE!

• Really?

• Not sure. USA.

• a way to limit commercial collecting without affecting amateur enthusiasts

• United States. I don't think legislating collection and ownership is a good idea (aside from obvious cases like National Parks and private property). There are too many fossils for professionals to collect them all, and legislating amateur collection would result in those specimens being lost. Far better to encourage amateurs and professionals to work together where scientifically important specimens are involved.

• USA - open to collecting through a permitting process

• Country is U.S. “Check-in” system based on locality (important or unimportant specimens). We would need to get
our education system up to snuff. Sadly, this would require manpower and funding and nobody would want to pay for it.

• I’m not sure how best to reform fossil ownership, since there are so many pieces already in private hands. Collections going forward - a system similar to Canada might work. What is really needed is for the general public to understand the value of science. Without that I think any law or series of laws will not achieve what we set out to do.

• I live in the US, I would like to see a system similar to what Canada has, where all fossils found in a country are considered public property and no one person may own them. Even if found on "private" land. The whole Canadian attitude about fossils and commercial paleontology is very different from that we have in the US where people think that they should be able to privately own everything.

• Canada, illegalization of trade in any vertebrate fossils.

• U.S.A. Any future regulations or legislation that removes private property for nebulous reasons is a blow to individual rights. Don’t go there, you won’t like the outcome. Ideally, people should be able to sell or trade their property. Fossil collection could be regulated to some extent on publicly held land, but should be unregulated on private property. Professional paleontologists have a role to play in educating people of the significance of some fossils. But not become the mouthpieces for political programs that inflate government bureaucracy via cronyistic relationships. Private businesses that responsibly deal in fossils do as much or more to fuel the interest of individuals as a museum. Some museums are dependent on those private businesses to supply them with fossils to sell in their gift shops, etc. Bear in mind that construction and mining destroy more fossils many times over than all demonized fossil dealers combined. Perspective is one of the lessons of paleontology.

• Fossils should be made available to museums first and foremost without fail. USA

• Private ownership allowed but perhaps with a review by professionals. USA

• Te best change would be no change

• (Canada) 1. All fossils would be property of the government. 2. Any person, regardless of professional affiliation, would require either a) a research permit to collect, or b) a permit from their closest natural history museum for avocational collecting. 3. All fossils have to be assessed by a professional palaeontologist prior to sale, to assess whether the specimen is of scientific importance.

• Country: USA Ideally, one would register for a permit or license, for collecting on public/state/federal lands, with need to report significant finds to a governing authority or museum. A nominal fee would be part of the licensing, to help support the governing entity. The sale of vertebrate fossils, would need to be regulated, as well as closely monitored. Any fossil found to be rare or unique to science, Would need to be surrendered to the governing body. Rare or unique to science invertebrates would need to be surrendered, studied, and sales regulated. Sale of common/well studied vertebrate or invertebrate fossils should not be restricted nor should collecting of said fossils be restricted in any way.

• museums and research institutes only.

• United States- More and more “public” areas are being closed off for exploration and enjoyment. We the public own this land...not the government!!!

• I am in Canada, and fossil legislation varies from province to province. I would support Alberta-style regulation for all provinces (the Tyrrell Museum has a good summary on their website).

• USA - proud that we passed PRPA. Making sure it is enforced as strongly as ARPA would be good.

• I’m in the UK where the current regulations are satisfactory and the existing codes of practice are sound (if adhered to).

• no change likely in the UK

• usa the issue is education. if the general public knew more about the value to science of paleontological research more fossils would make their way into the hands of scientists and museum collections.

• I live in the United States of America and have been interested in fossils for many years. I've volunteered my time on fossil digs sponsored by universities and have donated fossils of interest to several university, state, and national museums, I would like to see legislation opening up vertebrate fossil collection (surface finds only) on public lands (FS, BLM, etc) except for National Parks or Monuments, for non-commercial uses.

• USA Allow public collecting on Government land. Today to many fossils go to waste because institutions do not have resources to collect the vast west
• US—full protection for fossils from all public and tribal lands

• (United States) The ideal situation would be the regulation of scientifically significant vertebrate fossils while allowing the continued commercial collection of relatively insignificant fossils.

• USA. USA. USA. I don’t know about current legislation, honestly. But I do know that it’s difficult to regulate archaeological sites and that there are government offices that do that. So maybe paleontology can have something like that. And there are also regulations on the sale of artifacts, especially internationally. So maybe something like that with fossils.

• I am in Canada, varies province to province. I think the approach taken by Alberta and Saskatchewan works well (amateur surface collection ok, material is in trust for the province and can be put in museum if scientifically significant, all else by permit only, no commercial sale)

• Minimum government control. usa

• No change...it’s good now.

• I’m in the US, and I think changes that allowed better enforcement and implementation of existing regulations and facilitated scientific research (primarily through increased staffing) would be a big benefit.

• Absolute ban on commercial collecting on public lands; restrictions on commercial collecting on private lands so scientifically important specimens go to public institutions with adequate curation; tight controls on poached specimens imported from outside US

• Commercial and private collection in public land should be restricted. Commercial and private collections in private land should be allowed, but sales across state/international borders should be licensed.

• I live in the USA. I would prefer a legal situation like there is in Canada, where fossils are the collective property of the state/country regardless of whether they were on public or private land, but that landowners could not be forced to allow access to their lands. I also like one aspect of the situation in California, where new construction requires a paleontological survey in addition to archaeological, environmental and endangered species surveys. Of course, this requires that our government also put funds in place to make this happen, and an attitude shift among Americans that would result in some sort of sense of shared national heritage that superseded monetization. I do not expect this to happen here.

• I feel that the current legal situation in the United States (my country) is mostly adequate, though more attention/funding towards enforcement of existing fossil protection laws would always be welcome. I think greater involvement by the government and from scientists/museums in educating private citizens about the benefits of choosing to entrust fossils found on their land to an approved repository could be very helpful, without the need for additional legislation.

• I think current regulations and policies are working. No need to fix what isn’t broken.

• United States Potential holotype specimens and other rare vertebrates (ex. theropod remains) should not be legal to own. The collection of common vertebrates (ex. Gren River fish) should remain legal, but regulated regardless of land ownership.

• In the United States, the government can exercise eminent domain over vertebrate fossils, compensating the landowner and them in the public trust.

• I think the current situation in the US is fairly good. While I personally wouldn’t mind the concept of public ownership of all important fossils, I think this would be wildly unpopular. It also introduces the problem of determining what an “important” fossil is. And I honestly don’t have a problem with people collecting small bits of fossils they find, as long as they have the proper permits or permission from the landowner. Commercial sale of fossils is a different issue from collection. One way I think things could be improved is through some sort of authentication process for the sale of fossils. Each fossil would have to carry with it information about where and when it was collected, by whom, and who the landowners were. This could help to ensure that only legally collected fossils were sold. As a researcher in paleontology, the thought of scientifically important specimens being sold to whoever can pay for them is worrisome. However, I admit that it’s rather difficult to define, in legal terms, what counts as scientifically important. But if a standardized definition could be agreed on, I would love to see a ban on the sale of such important fossils. Regardless of any legal matters on the issue, I would love to see cooperation between commercial collectors and museums on this front—if a collector finds an important specimen, they could give it to a local museum, while retaining rights to create casts for sale. In that way, the collectors, researchers, museums, and general public would all benefit.

• All scientifically important specimens should be housed in a repository that allows scientists access to them for study. USA.
not sure. its complicated.

USA Specific fossils should be given different levels of protection based on rarity and informational value, sort of like a fossil version of the Endangered Species List.

Canada (my home country) has some pretty good fossil protection legislation. Surface collecting is allowed in most places, but excavations require a permit. Surface collecting is restricted in national/provincial parks and other protected areas, and also requires a permit. Residents of Alberta can hold fossils "in trust" for the crown, but cannot sell or otherwise export those fossils. One exception is the sale of gem-quality ammonites (ammolite), and there is one ammolite mine near Lethbridge. When vertebrate fossils are discovered during mining or construction activities, palaeontologists are called in to assess the find and recover the fossil if it’s significant - this has led to some important marine reptile discoveries at the ammolite mine and in the tar sands, a dinosaur in the tar sands, and several dinosaurs in sewer, pipeline, and road works projects.

Legal documentation with precise provenance information should be required to prove the provenance of fossil vertebrate specimens that are claimed to be from private land. This documentation should be required to be transferred with the fossil when ownership of the fossil is transferred. I do not agree with more stringent rules recently proposed for the collection of invertebrate fossils and think those should be accessible for collection on public land. USA

The ideal situation for me would be that any fossil that holds scientific value to be in a public collection and open to analysis by the scientific community. I live in México.

In my opinion, the ideal situation for paleontology and fossil collection in my country (the United States) would be to have a system where important fossil resources are protected but at the same time amateurs and other interested individuals can also collect fossils and become involved in paleontology. Currently, it is impossible for amateurs or people who are otherwise interested in paleontology to transition into becoming professional paleontologists unless they are wealthy enough to attend a four-year college and then able to navigate the tumultuous political landscape of modern paleontology (though there are a few notable exceptions). Perhaps the best system for balancing amateur and professional fossil collecting would be a system based on that currently used in Florida or in the Green River Formation of Wyoming. There, one has to obtain a fossil-collecting license from the government, but with it one is allowed to collect common fossils in that region. The license does cost money, but it is generally cheap and the money that is gained is usually spent to protect paleontological resources. Ideally, one would also be required to know the basics of fossil preservation and conservation to obtain such a license (which is not required by either of the above examples now) in order to make sure fossil damage is kept to a minimum. This would also help to ensure that rarer fossils, which would not be covered by such a license, are brought to the attention of the proper authorities. It should also be noted that a simple invertebrate/vertebrate dichotomy, as is used by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) on collecting in public lands now, does not really work. At some sites, vertebrate fossils are extremely common (the Chadron and Brule Fms. of the Black Hills, Nebraska, and eastern Wyoming, for example) and plant/invertebrate fossils are rare. Although this is not something that can necessarily be changed through legal means, the paleontological community as a whole also needs to find a way to become more open to people who are amateurs or otherwise not professional paleontologists. Many people go into amateur fossil collecting because there are almost no opportunities to work with fossils otherwise, and even if there are local volunteer programs they will often be restricted from doing anything more important than grunt work. Amateurs also have difficulty publishing any research they do, even if it is scientifically legitimate, the fossils are all curated in established repositories, etc. Banning amateurs does little more than further turn paleontology into an oligarchy, where a few professionals essentially have a monopolistic hoard over the majority of the fossils, and it is impossible for someone outside looking in unless you have the proper connections. Although it is necessary to preserve fossils for future generations, essentially hoarding them for a “future” that never comes seems at odds with our responsibility to learn about and care for our planet and its resources. Additionally, in this (U.S.) and other countries, the laws that govern fossil collecting are so strict, and the line between amateur and professional paleontologist so blurry, that it is easy to use the laws as they now stand to prevent actual professional researchers from doing work in the field through political manipulation (and I have heard about it happening in both cases)

USA - I would like to see all fossils become public property ("historical treasures") but that will never happen here, so instead I’d advocate a strengthening of federal laws about collecting on public lands in combination with a reward system that could compensate amateur or private collectors that discover such items and alert a museum to them (or, if properly licensed, collect them for a specific museum).

Italy - I live in Italy, the fossils’ property is state, this is good but I would like more controls
• free open market

• Fossil protection laws here in Australia have been described as ‘confused and inadequate’. We have laws regulating (in theory) the export of Australian fossils to other countries, but the laws protecting fossil sites from disturbance or destruction within the country are poor, and vary widely between states. We need uniform laws across the country, and clear accountabilities of the government departments responsible for overseeing those laws.

• Make all significant finds a public resource and wealth.

• Strict regulations regarding the sale of fossils

• Not quite sure about this. I don’t believe the gov’t should own all of the fossils, but I’m also weary to allow for anyone to dig up and then sell fossils. (US)

• USA, we already have fairly strict rules regarding the regulation of fossil collecting on public lands.

• USA, public trust status for rare fossils (though there may well be hitches to this that I haven’t thought through).

• I believe that everyone should be encouraged to register their fossil finds. Reasonable compensation for finds that are considered important/unique should be made available. Fossils should be treated as national treasures. USA

• U.S.A. The ideal situation, in my view, would include: 1. Greater oversight, documentation, and accessibility of fossils collected by public agencies/repositories from public lands - the commercial market thrives on mistrust of public agencies. 2. Greater incentives for private landowners to allow access and donate fossils found on their land to public repositories.

• Fossils collection and ownership by public institutions would be encouraged and supported.

• USA. I think a permit system similar to a fishing license should be considered. This can allow judgments that allow collecting of more common fossils yet regulate the more precious ones. The value of collecting by amateurs is usually only described in terms of a new fossil find that has scientific importance. The contribution of collecting as a means for the general public to gain appreciation for the science is underestimated.

• USA - Significant fossils should belong to the nation, not just whoever happens to own the land at the time they are found.

• UK Something similar to current legislation in Germany, where professional palaeontologist examines fossils, and if they are deemed scientifically significant the finder is paid a finder’s fee and the fossil is deposited in a museum. Or similar to UK laws on archaeological treasure finds.

• treat fossils like any other natural resource and stop pretending that academics are the only ones worthy of deciding the fate of individual specimens. I believe that academic arrogance on this issue is self-serving and ultimately harmful to the scientific literacy of the world’s citizens. And asking academics to decide government policy on fossil collecting is like needing a babysitter and hiring a dingo.

• To allow safe collection and sale of especially common fossils, but to make any fossil that bears any scientific information accessible via a public-access repository to ensure methodology & standards in science are upheld. To have existing disputed finds (private vs public ownership) replicated by backdating the law, so that information isn’t lost - as such key finds ought to be recognised as part of the legacy of the ‘people’, culture, & place, not belonging any single wealthy collector.

• Individual landholders, territorial and state representative governments have the right to restrict commercial and other exploitation of earth resources including fossils, so agreement among stakeholders (including appropriate permit systems) is required. Exemptions may be granted for particular sites, types of fossils, etc. but default is that ownership is not cancelled by unlicensed collection or export. (Australia)

• Awareness would be raised to those interested in collecting fossils, and the general public, about the scientific value of fossils and to report finds at their discernment to the local pertinent authorities. Venues that sell fossils would have to be accredited to do so and have their stock regularly appraised by an independent professional so that at least labeling reflects the actual items. My country is Portugal.

• Something similar to archaeology law that we have in the UK. Striking the balance is difficult. I do not believe we should restrict the ability of private individuals to collect but, at the same time, important fossils should be saved for the nation and declared treasure trove and property of the crown. At the same time, I do not believe that there should be wholesale restrictions on the ability to sell fossils. As I say, striking the balance is extraordinarily difficult.

• USA. Obviously, the best situation would be for academics and commercial types to work together, but academics always REFUSE to accept our position as acceptable.
• free access to fossil sites for all (within the usual legal principles), mandatory reporting in conjunction with reward system and balanced mandatory handing in for valuable scientific discoveries Germany

• no comment

• The ideal situation for me would be that all fossils that are found and have a potential scientific value have to be presented to a museum. People can then act as donors or “adopt” their fossils, but have no right to take it home and have the specimens locked away. In turn, exhibitions displaying fossils could be free for the public. I live in Germany.

• USA: probably some minimal private ownership would be appropriate

• USA allow collection on government lands instead of allowing the fossils to disintegrate as in the Badlands

• USA. Something akin to a combination of fishing/hunting regulation with regards to common fossils on land not especially protected (National Parks, Monuments, etc. must remain off limits!) Such regulations should be based on type of fossil, amount collected per day, total amount per year. Vertebrates and especially rare invertebrates and plants should have the strongest regulations; common invertebrates and plants weaker ones.

• USA- there should be no new regulations. However, a permit commercial collecting system such as Canada’s would benefit both researchers and commercial paleo.

• USA - The problem has always been, and will be, trying to legally define which fossils are scientifically important, and which are common enough that they are put to best use by letting the public collect, own, and sell them. Good academics and good amateurs already have good relationships where the amateurs are thrilled to donate their significant finds to museums, and the academics are happy to let the common fossils be enjoyed by public children and adults. That is the relationship we need to encourage, even if it can’t be legally defined.

• Here in the US, museums and professional paleontologists should receive the first chance to examine the fossils. After completion, it should be up to them to decide what should be done.

• Regulated fossil legislation like what is done in Canada has worked well with the people there and might be a good model for the USA as well.

• Fossils should be in the public realm. Countries, States and Provinces need to enact legislation to protect them. But until they do such, and as long as the professional organizations (ie. SVP) give “professional” status to commercial dealers then it’s all for not. SVP and other organizations should be under more scrutiny for allowing commercial dealers to be members. Then SVP can pressure states and provinces to enact legislation without being hypocritical. Should there be a fossil market? Yes. Should it be unregulated? No.

• Systems were amateurs who find fossils can post finds to sites where professionals can see what they found so they have access to those fossils

• USA- Supply proof of permit and land ownership with every fossil for sale on the market.

• All fossils on public property should be considered the property of the state and under the jurisdiction of state owned universities and museums. On private property, certain types of fossils should be considered “national treasures” or similar, and illegal for property owners to sell.

• United States. Ban the sale of fossils like archeological artifacts.

• The fossil protection laws of Baden-Württemberg work very well, they should be in place in all states of Germany.

• Italy First, there should be a proper legislation about fossils -we don’t really have a clear one: every fossil is protected by the State, so there is no room for ‘wild collectors’, but there are no clear laws about fossils and in the end everything falls under the “cultural heritage” dome. The most important thing to do would be to introduce specific regulations about how to deal with fossils.

• I feel that vertebrate fossils should be the sole property of the government. Moderate compensation may be paid to the landowner (perhaps $100). USA

• I am originally from the US, but now live in Alberta, Canada. The US should change their legislation to something similar to Alberta’s laws where all fossils are the property of the government but where citizens can be stewards of non-scientific fossils. Fossils cannot be excavated without a permit and they cannot be sold or removed from Alberta without the proper paperwork.

• That anyone can be allowed to collect fossils on publicly
owned land for whatever purpose with a permit; much as a permit to cut and obtain firewood.

- USA - fossils should be studied by a team of scientists first to determine if they have any significance that contributes to the study of science, and if they do not, they can be released for sale to the public.

- [USA] I feel like Alberta has the best laws I’ve been exposed to because all fossil material (or all vertebrate fossil material, at least) belongs to the province and therefore can’t be legally poached or taken out of the province without a permit.

- Germany everyone has the right to buy fossils for own collections there are rights for scientists to get fossils from private collections and from institutions for borrowing (for free) - to do their scientific studies maybe basic fossil-data should be stored in a free scientific data base before selling.

- Canada’s fossil protection laws vary from province to province, but ideally there should be a nation-wide moratorium on the sale of fossils. If fossils have a perceived monetary value then people are less inclined to donate fossils to museums and, instead, expect financial compensation, which few museums could afford.

- Australia: all fossils belong to the state, are displayed with the collector’s name, collector who donated the piece receives a free 3D printed replica.

- Canada: I feel that the legislation in Alberta is pretty good. Fossils cannot be excavated without a permit, but surface collecting of non-valuable specimens is ok (except in provincial or national parks or other protected areas). You hold the fossil in trust for the queen and can’t sell it or take it outside of Alberta. A few commercial operations are allowed, like quarrying for gem-quality ammolite (from ammonites). Construction and commercial quarrying needs to stop if any fossils are discovered, which has led to the discovery of many important specimens from the ammolite mine, tar sands, municipal construction in Edmonton, etc.

- Depends on the situation. I feel that universities and research institutions should get priority of specimen samples and education. Collectors should be better educated and regulated to prevent price inflation and or poaching. Touchy subject.

- Canada: pretty strict provincial laws already in place

- Although it is important to protect fossils, I also believe in individual property rights including fossils found on private land belonging to the land owner. Alternately, any fossil on public lands should be considered off limits for collection unless specifically allowed (ex. collection of invertebrates and fossil plants). Penalties for poaching fossils on public lands should be much harsher and education about fossil collecting rights should be more wide spread. Also, legislation requiring any fossil skeleton being sold to have provenance would be good. It might cut down on illegally poached fossils being sold with impunity. It would put the burden of proof on the seller vs the BLM to prove where a fossil came from.

- In Canada, fossil resource management is done on a provincial basis, where every province/territory has their own specific fossil resource management policies and procedures. In British Columbia, for example, fossils found on Crown Lands (the equivalent to the US federal/public lands) are property of the Crown. However, there are very few management policies and procedures in place. My ideal situation would be for Crown Lands: 1) Vertebrate fossils and their traces (excavated or surface collected) require a permit for use and extraction, and those permits be restricted to credentialed researchers. - special case-by-case scenarios would be considered for very common items such as shark teeth, etc. 2) The sale of fossils from Crown Lands, Parks, or any designated heritage sites would be prohibited, as would their export (special cases would be made for research institutions loaning/donating fossils as part of their regular operations). 3) Every natural history museum in BC would be required to manage Avocational Permits, allowing amateur collectors to collect and archive fossils under the accessioning system of the host natural history museum. These permits could be granted to individuals, public schools, etc. On the cessation of avocational activities by the permit holder, the fossils are the responsibility of host museum and would be curated at that facility. 4) Commercial activities would be restricted to tourism-related activities only. In the case of the US, where fossils can legally be sold from private lands, I would like to see (in my ideal scenario) 1) A price regulation system set in place, where commercial collectors can still sell fossils, but the price would be capped at the cost of recovering and preparing the specimen plus a small percentage. This would hopefully stop the runaway prices of charismatic vertebrates, 2) An independent assessment by academics (not under the employ of the auction houses or the closest academic institution of specimen origin) who determine a fossil’s scientific “value” before sale. No fossil could go to public auction without a clearance certificate from said assessment. Fossils of high scientific value would have to be offered to local museums at a capped price, similar to what was described above.

- The US would benefit from following the models provided by half the provinces in Canada, Italy, and Mongolia, where fossils are protected from the market on all lands, including
the private lands which in the US the commercial market exploits. In short, the ideal situation in the US is for vertebrate fossils to have equivalent legal protection that bird feathers have.

• USA: All fossils considered a public natural resource regardless of land ownership. Private collection for commercial sale of significant fossils would no longer be legal.

• Persons should be able to prospect for fossils on public land. But any important fossils found there should only be removed under the supervision of an accredited paleontology professional and be held in a designated public repository for future study. USA

• USA: Simple enforcement of current laws is sufficient, and would quash the black market for smuggling (see Heritage Auctions vs. Mongolia). A huge problem is that law enforcement simply isn’t happening.

• There must be Clear Rules. Research has to be First - doesn’t matter if private or Museums specimens - Strict contracts- that some Fossils “Kulturgut” can not leave the Country in which it has been discovered. Germany

• In Italy there’s actually a very old regulation on fossil collection and trading, often hampering a professional study of the fossil material. A new legislation should allow researcher to study their subject without incurring into complex and tedious time-consuming bureaucracy and that guarantees to amateurs in general who find new and important specimens to manage their findings without having to incur into irregularities and to easily get in touch with professionals able to appraise these specimens.

• Germany In Germany laws are a different than in the US. Even if fossils, or more often Archaeological finds, are discovered, they do not automatically belong to the person owning the land it was discovered on. Those findings technically belong to the country and its people. I think this is a pretty good way to approach this situation.

• Rather than stopping the sale and private collection of fossils (which is essentially what the end-game appears to be for current legislation here in the US), there should just be a provision that private collections should be bequeathed to public institutions in the will of the collector.

• US - no fossil trade/ commercial paleontology. Academic paleo and digs by trained scientists, volunteers, researchers only

• USA Federal ownership of all significant fossils — but this is never going to happen.

• This is a difficult question to answer for those of us in the United States. Ideally, It would be great if only state/federal repositories were allowed to excavate and maintain fossil collections...but I could see other privately owned institutions being allowed to maintain fossil collections under strictly monitored guidelines (detailed collection data, proper prep and collections management).

• Canada

• Sales of vertebrate fossils over $100.00 will be made illegal (USA). I feel the laws are sufficient for fossil collection and ownership.
From Taking In To Reaching Out: How Collections and Collections Staff Are Being Used to Create a Community-Centered Museum

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Abstract: Since the mid-20th century, museums have become more outwardly focused and have attempted to become community centers — places of conversation with diverse dialogue, places that celebrate the richness of individual and collective experience, and places that are active and visible players in the civic life of their communities. Object-based institutions, such as art museums, natural history, social history museums, and local historical societies depend on their collections as the foundation for their engagement with the community and use these collections to encourage critical thinking, inspire discussion, and change paradigms, as well as educate about the outside world. But with new technologies and the public’s expectations for entertaining experiences, it is no longer enough to merely display objects with information about their construction and provenance. It takes an entire museum and its staff to engage a community and respond to that community’s needs. Collections staff — traditionally academics or curators of the collections who work behind closed doors — should seek to become visible and active within the community along with the collections they curate. The following includes a discussion of why collections and the staffs that care for them are important components in community engagement. It will examine methods that various museums throughout the United States and Europe are using to utilize their collections’ staff and the collections themselves in an active role to engage local communities and reach broader audiences. I also comment on how areas of weakness may be improved to fully incorporate and utilize collections and collections’ staff in a museum’s effort to position itself at the center of its community.

“…the best imaginations of museums enthusiasts have not yet set before us a clear picture of a museum of full and rich utility”

John Cotton Dana, founder of the Newark Museums, 1927 (Hirzy, 2002)
From their beginnings as cabinets of curiosity, museums have undergone much change. Objects that were previously uninterpreted oddities are now typically used as catalysts for discussion about the world and its diverse peoples. Predecessors of today's museums once welcomed only elite members of society. Now, a museum's holdings are held in trust for the public can be sent to all people in all parts of the world, and museum staffs intentionally create programming to encourage the participation of underserved demographics.

Alexander (1996) explained that American museums began to shift from internally focused places of cultural homogeneity to institutions with a more external orientation of serving diverse audiences as a result of civil rights changes between 1960 and the 1980s. During that time, the American Association of Museums (AAM) — now the American Alliance of Museums — had published several reports that not only formalized this change but communicated professional expectations for museums as institutions of public trust and education. In Mastering Civic Engagement, Hirzy (2002) emphasized the inclusion of people from outside the museum — teachers, ethnic groups, and the general public — in the conversation regarding museums' definitional and educational roles. The other was the 1989 publication of Excellence and Equity that encouraged equity and required the seamless integration of education into all aspects of museum mission and operation (Hirzy, 2002; American Association of Museums 2008). Excellence and Equity defined equity within museums as a mutual exchange of support that requires reflection and reaction to the interests of the public and taps into the community's strengths, while identifying its weaknesses (American Association of Museums, 2008). Integrating the public into museums and, likewise, the museums into their communities, meant providing places that visibly celebrate both the individual and collective experiences, places that participate in collaborative problem solving, and places that provide a safe haven for the exchange of ideas. The museum was thus a trusted incubator for change (Hirzy, 2002). Furthermore, a community, if properly served by the museum, should anchor and revitalize the museum's mission and sense of purpose (Hirzy, 2002), as well as the museum itself.

But becoming and remaining a regular part of community life is an ongoing process that involves more than creating exciting exhibits and programming. Hirzy (2002) and the American Association of Museums (2008) recognized that an exploration and reinvention of the civic role of the museum was and would continue to be an ongoing process. Reaching new audiences, as well as regaining the interest of existing ones, has prompted the need for professional development within pre-existing departments and the creation of specialized departments that cater to the museum visitor experience. The AAM (2008) noted that a museum's educational mission is no longer the discrete province of educators, but requires input from museum staff who care for a museum's collections. Collections staff members (e.g. curators, collection managers, some exhibit technicians, conservators, and registrars) are vital to increasing access by a museum's audience for the full use of collections (American Association of Museums, 2008). In addition to performing the traditional tasks of preserving and organizing objects, these professionals should be engaged as integral components to fulfilling a museum's role as a community center.

At the Center of It All

The 2008 republishing of Excellence and Equity highlighted the American Association of Museums observation that museum collections are in unique position of public service and are, therefore, inseparable from the goals of education and contributing to a richer human experience. Objects are no longer merely viewed as things in themselves, but as carriers of complex context and significant value vital to the purpose of understanding nature and culture. Used to their full potential, collections can cultivate an understanding and respect for all peoples, inspire a spirit of inquiry and openness, develop skills in analyzing problems, and help create an understanding of how history, science, and artistic expression are essential for a responsibly led life (American Association of Museums, 2008). However, with the availability of information and education through television programs, private organizations and institutions, and the Internet, museums are no longer unique in the role of educating the public. Identifying exactly how they are to function as an important community-centered organization alongside these other public resources is vital to their relevance and even their survival.

Even before the 21st century, it was anticipated that museum collections could be used worldwide as commercial property — disassembled and reassembled by individuals in some virtual reality (Moore, 2000). Just as predicted, initiatives such as the Rijksmuseum's Rijksstudio provide anyone in the world with an Internet connection complete access to their collections, which can be organized into personal, digital collections (Rijksmuseum, 2015). This high level of access has the potential to deepen the public's knowledge and sense of ownership of museum objects; however, with objects and their information readily available there is less need for people to leave their couches to see the physical objects themselves.

In Museums and Popular Culture, Moore (2000) pointed out that many museums unintentionally maintain outdated and single-minded missions to preserve objects by restricting public access to collections or by simply making preservation, rather than public service, the priority. Such museums are essentially self-fulfilling organizations that ensure above all else the continuation of their collections as the reason for their own existence. However, if preservation is the primary goal of museums, digital preservation of an object's image and information can render museums obsolete.
Museums should, according to Moore, ultimately exist for the communities in which they reside and focus less on object preservation. One might insist on the uniqueness of physical objects that, supposedly, only museums have to offer, but this is a reactionary and weakly founded argument. Barnett (2012) dismissed the ability to engage with physical objects as an argument for the uniqueness of museums, relying on the belief that objects have an esoteric effect on audiences. This effect cannot wholly justify a museum’s existence. Moore (2000) and Barnett (2012) challenged the purpose and efficacy of museums and insisted that to ignore such a challenge is to remain naïve and inflexible. Barnett (2012) further pointed out that museums are at a critical juncture in which they must learn to capitalize on the authenticity of their collections by re-evaluating their relevance in order to develop diverse narratives. By capitalizing on the relevance of their collections, museums may discover new ways to appeal to the ever-changing interests and needs of existing and potential users.

ADVANCING COLLECTION USE AND STAFF MANAGEMENT
Collections and collections staffs are being challenged to serve the public in ways beyond preservation and exhibition. They are becoming active in breaking down barriers to new audiences, solidifying relationships through diverse object interpretation, opening up collections through increased access, and meeting changing needs and expectations of the community. The following examples, while not exclusive to the institutions mentioned, are some that represent community engagement through the use of collections or direct contact with collections staff members.

OBJECT INTERPRETATION
Moore (2000) described exhibit interpretation as a practice that has been driven largely by the objects of greatest historical significance with extensive narratives. Museums tend to provide more interpretive information than most visitors are willing or able to digest. Moore (2000) also stated that many interpretation styles unintentionally remove objects from their larger and discursive contexts, which functions to separate them from their deeper meaning and identity within a community. Since the mid-20th century, many museums have acted as contact zones that empower diverse communities to articulate their claims to expertise on a subject. Srinivasan et al. (2010) stated that including community expertise in museum interpretation can allow for multiple and sometimes incommensurable perspectives to exist within the museum setting. They (Srinivasan et al. 2010) emphasized this was an important augmentation to the experience of the larger community. Using different perspectives and ontologies creates a story-driven approach that is more didactic in nature and may emphasize deeper cognitive learning (Moore, 2000).

The Tampa Bay History Center has encouraged self-representation by providing the community with a space to demonstrate its expertise. In an interview (March 2, 2015), Curator Rodney Kite-Powell highlighted the use of the Community Case — a large case that was intentionally designed for community-generated displays. The Community Case provides an opportunity for local groups and organizations to exhibit their own collections, history, and role within the greater Tampa Bay area. When the Case was first created in 2009, a few organizations were approached by the History Center to fill it. Now, its success is evident by its 3-year waiting list of community organizations interested in exhibiting their collections. Although staff may provide technical assistance, all interpretation, design, and installation is done solely by a participating group.

Publications such as *A History of the World in 100 Objects* from the British Museum, *The Smithsonian’s History of America in 101 Objects* and the New York History Society’s *The Civil War in 50 Objects* are also examples of stories of objects being used to provide a rich experience for audiences as well as opportunities for those audiences to make conclusions about the world in which we live today (Jones, 2014). In *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, Neil MacGregor (2010), director of the British Museum, attempted to encourage this among readers by using stories to draw connections from the past to the present. One excerpt highlights a Turkish coin made between 305 and 281 B.C. stamped with the head of Alexander the Great. Despite being made 40 years after his death, the coin was meant to honor him and connect that society with his accomplishments. From this, MacGregor explained that today’s money featuring past leaders might function in a similar way as present-day governments may wish to associate with the triumphs and values of past leaders (Jones, 2014).

OPENING UP THE COLLECTIONS
*Physically.* The U.K.’s Museums Association (2005) asserted in a report titled, *Collections for the Future,* that while exhibits remain the primary way of engaging the public with collections, they may no longer be the most efficient way of presenting what museums have to offer. Simmons (2006) supported this by revealing that museums generally have about 2% of their holdings on view for the public and to exhibit the entirety of a museum’s collections at once would create an “indigestible” amount of information and present a museum that is “impractically large” (Museums Association, 2005, 11). To balance the two extremes, open storage has been used by some museums as an all-access resource and as a means to promote preservation of collections or to expose the professional activities of collections staff.

There are several variations on the concept of open storage throughout the U.S. and Europe. The Museums Association (2005) highlighted the collections storage at the Glasgow Museums Resource Center. While physical access is not open to the public at all times, it is considered open because of the Center’s offering of interpretive guided tours of the storage and some of its holdings. Similarly, the Luce Center at the New York Historical Society has
a glass-walled storage system with 10,000 objects on display that visitors may view any time the museum is open (Simmons, 2006).

Although effective in revealing more about how collections are stored and possibly the curatorial needs required to maintain collections, open storage systems should not be considered a sufficient solution in engaging the public. In their review of open storage systems in Europe, the Museums Association (2005) found that the number of visitors to a museum’s open storage system is typically much less compared to overall attendance at the museum. The Museums Association also added that because many objects require interpretation to be meaningful, deeper learning is not as likely to occur as with exhibits or programming. Due to limitations of space for organized interpretation in many museums’ collections storage spaces, open storage often results in more of a type of dense display not unlike that of curiosity cabinets. To highlight the strengths and weaknesses of different models, the Heritage Lottery Fund in the United Kingdom is seeking to evaluate open storage projects (Museums Association, 2005).

**Digitally.** To be effective and relevant, museums must accept that current attention spans are shorter, making the window for engagement smaller and the mission for education even harder. Rodney Kite-Powell, curator of the Tampa Bay History Center, stated that demands on the public’s time and vast amounts of information accessed through the internet have created a world in which it is no longer necessary to physically visit museums to see “the real thing” (Personal communication, March 2, 2015). Truly open collections require more than a glass-walled storage space. Rather than attempting to draw more people in, collections staff and the collections can engage the community outside the walls of the museum by digitizing collections and the use of social media and blog platforms. Reaching audiences where they live and work allows museums to engage their local communities more effectively and even incorporate new members into their communities based on function and interest rather than physical proximity (Ridge, 2013).

Digitizing collections is an efficient way for audiences to become acquainted with most or all of a museum’s holdings. In fact, through digital collections, museums are living up to the true sense the public owning museum collections. The Rijksmuseum was the forerunner of this concept and allows the public to access works of art in its collection to use, reuse, or redistribute as a person wishes, with only the requirement that the original author receive credit. People can use museum images to create their own works, from coffee mugs to new interpretations (OpenGLAM, 2015). In fact, Rijksstudio holds an annual competition for the most creative public works that feature art from their collection (Rijksmuseum, 2015). On another platform known as OpenGLAM (2015), some or all of the holdings at 21 galleries, libraries, archives, and museums can be accessed through high-resolution images along with all associated metadata.

Social media, especially when used on mobile devices, has greatly increased the amount of information we can access at any given time. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Vogel (2009) explained, has used social media to spark public interest, encourage interaction, and capitalize on its permanent collection rather than bringing in blockbuster exhibits. The Met promoted an opportunity for visitors to upload any photos they had taken during their museum or outreach experience to the museum’s social media page. Some of the photos were then chosen to be displayed on billboards, the sides of buses, and posters. The amateur photographers were not only given credit for their submissions, but also received a cash prize of $250 and a free annual membership to the museum. Very popular with its participants, the Met received thousands of entries that showed the vibrancy of the museum in an unexpected and non-institutional way (Vogel, 2009). Rather than museum staff choosing what objects would interest the public, members of the community chose for themselves what they thought others would like to see. Furthermore, by creating a spirit of competition through prizes, visitors may have engaged with the collection more and the memberships awarded may have encouraged winners of the contest to bring new visitors to the museum.

Another advantageous digital trend includes blogs, podcasts and other online publications that museums have created to engage audiences. Ridge (2013) explained that the nature of blogs allows for interaction in the form of comments which can develop skills in the public such as discussing topics, comprehending others’ perspectives, and interpretation. Ridge further stated that these points of access can be used by museums to allow individuals to control the amount of engagement that fits their interests, needs, and schedules.

Bender (2014) observed that the blog of the Phillips Collection allowed the small museum to engage on a deeper level than a mere visit to the museum or even educational programming could do. The blog, Experiment Station, was created to preserve the “sanctity” of the museum’s reflective atmosphere while focusing on the collection to encourage dynamic engagement from the community. Experiment Station has been used to offer an inside look into the processes at the museum: how complicated works are installed and the effects of those that alter the physical structure of the museum. Regular contributors included museum staff from curators to members of security. Those who contributed were, according to Bender, able to demonstrate knowledge or skills that may not have fit into their professional roles. For example, a former book buyer for the Phillips used works from the permanent collection to inspire a series of poems featured on the blog during National Poetry Month (Bender, 2014).

Other contributors included guest bloggers from the local community of authors, chefs, and actors. This collaboration has allowed the Phillips Collection’s blog to offer a wide variety of topics, have a personalized voice, and create beneficial exposure
of the museum’s community partners and the blog’s audience (Bender, 2014). By capitalizing on modern technology and trends, Experiment Station is a co-created effort for developing new participation and has augmented the public’s experience aside from what the physical museum would typically offer. The public’s interaction on Experiment Station by means of commenting on blog posts has also been used to inspire programming and influence institutional design at the Phillips Collections (Bender, 2014).

Using public commentary on the meaning of art as an example, Ridge (2013) considered this level of interaction a challenge to the traditional concept of expertise that can change the relationship between the audience and museum. Although this change may foster a more equal exchange of ideas than is necessary for museums to serve as community centers, the issue of authority needs to be addressed with any project encouraging co-creation with the public. Ridge urged museums to consider whether or not they are willing to make changes in response to the participation of the public and to decide how much control over meaning can or should be shared. To demonstrate that collections belong to the public and allow this type of exchange, museums with similar programs will have to be less protective of their intellectual property and interpretation (Museums Association, 2005). Museums should be regarded as resources for accurate information; without deciding on the limitations of public interaction on such platforms, there is the danger of compromising that position and reducing the role of museums to that of becoming physical incarnations of Wikipedia.

PRESERVING ALL COLLECTIONS
As explained by the American Association of Museums (2008), equity involves the equal exchange of ideas and support that comes from understanding on both sides. To promote understanding of a museum’s role in preserving and conserving collections, some have openly shared their efforts. The Heritage Preservation (2004) presented the Donald W. Reynolds Center for American Art as a prime example of this. The care of objects — typically done behind closed doors — was brought to the forefront at the Reynolds Center. The Reynolds Center of the Smithsonian Institution includes the Lunder Conservation Center, which features a floor-to-ceiling glass wall that allows visitors to watch conservation treatments taking place (Heritage Preservation, 2004). Educational programs explaining various treatment tools and techniques accompany the open conservation area. The results of a focus group conducted by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the National Portrait Gallery revealed this to be the highest-rated and most informative attraction within the entire museum (Heritage Preservation, 2004).

Presenting to audiences a museum’s responsibility to collections care is a way to convey the importance of preserving objects. To involve their communities and to show understanding that their objects are also valuable or important, some museums have created outreach programs for the collections and heirlooms of community members. In response to the great amount of interest after a preservation workshop, the Senator John Heinz History Center (2014) was one of the first museums in the U.S. to offer direct conservation consultation to the public in addition to regular preservation workshops throughout the year. Members of the public are able to bring in their own objects, receive advice, find connections to private conservators, and may purchase archival storage materials. By having access to the same treatment that museums give to their objects, this gives the impression that all objects are deemed important — not just those with academic or historical value chosen to be preserved and exhibited by the museum (Moore, 2000).

CREATING DYNAMIC COLLECTIONS
In *Collections for the Future*, the Museums Association (2005) promoted the idea of “dynamic” collections: those collections that are regularly in use for either exhibition or research and are crucial to museums as active and engaging community centers. Many museums around the world are using innovative strategies to engage
their community; however, use of collections can still improve as collections staff become more engaged in fulfilling the potential of their institutions. Going beyond basic collections care to create dynamic collections is not yet the standard for museums and many obstacles still remain. Some of these obstacles are not exclusive to the care and use of collections — such as time and money. These, while important, will remain outside the scope of this discussion, which will instead focus on fulfilling professional standards as a priority in creating dynamic collections that engage the community more fully.

Although the American Alliance of Museums has since expanded on the responsibilities of collections staff and the use of collections, there are five basic priorities listed in AAM’s 1984 publication Caring for Collections that are important to dynamic collections: (1) improve environmental conditions for collections, (2) achieve documentary control of collections, (3) conserve objects within collections, (4) expand knowledge of collections through in-depth research, and (5) enhance the public’s understanding of collections by disseminating information. Another point to consider is to engage in active collecting and responsible trimming of the existing collections to create a more relevant collection that may evolve with the needs and interests of the community (Museums Association, 2005). Although it is important to approach each of these priorities simultaneously as much as possible, it may be argued that the enhancement of public understanding of collections (which ties directly into the educational mission of the museum) may not be fully realized until the first four priorities have been mostly satisfied. If not sufficiently completed, a museum’s ability to access and understand its own collections will be hindered. Nevertheless, while a museum is completing these priorities, collections staff can use them as ways to engage with the community.

**DYNAMIC COLLECTING**

According to the Museums Association (2005), creating a dynamic collection is partially dependent on the acquisition of new material. Sullivan (2004), as a member of the AAM Accreditation Commission for many years, pointed out that developing a collections plan is an “essential best practice” for museums in order to have direction for their collections. Developing a collections plan allows a museum to acquire new material that is focused and appropriate for its mission (Sullivan, 2004). The Museums Association (2005) also recommended focused collecting to add strength and depth to a museum’s collection.

The other aspect of dynamic collections is active use. Many collections are under-displayed or underused in research due to the lack of a museum’s understanding of their collections (Museums...
Association, 2005). If an object sits in storage for years without public exposure — with the exception of culturally or religiously sensitive objects — collections staff remain mere caretakers rather than active agents in education and involvement in community engagement. This is, however, counter to the obligations to the public and our professional standards (Srinivasan, et al. 2010). Additionally, the cost of maintaining unused and inaccessible collections in storage is an unnecessary burden on the museum (Museums Association, 2005). Funding for museums is a great enough obstacle without paying for the cost of things that are never used.

Museums must “face up to the reality that resources for culture will always be limited” (Museums Association, 2005, 9). Therefore, we have the responsibility to either use what we have intelligently or find another institution that can. In A Legal Primer on Managing Museum Collections, Malaro (1998) noted that deaccessioning objects had been viewed as a taboo practice and such a perspective has created museums that function more like repositories than sites of learning. But within the past three decades, the practice of deaccessioning has become a reality of responsible collections management (Malaro, 1998). Trimming collections to be more relevant to their communities is an opportunity for collections to be re-envisioned for the needs and interests of their community (Museums Association, 2005).

**IMPROVING ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS**

In a 2004 analysis of 30,000 historical societies, libraries, museums, scientific research collections, and archaeological repositories in the U.S. (with 4.8 billion objects held in public trust), Heritage Preservation (2004) revealed in its Heritage Health Index that 70% of these institutions do not have a current assessment of their collections. An astounding 26% of these institutions had no environmental controls to protect their collections, while many more had limited space, or were without emergency plans in place. This discrepancy was due mostly to lack of adequate funding and or staff members inadequately trained in the science of collection preservation. The Heritage Health Index also revealed that staff members in 71% of institutions need additional training and expertise in caring for the collections. Without properly trained staff able to care for collections according to current professional standards or to act as a resource for information for the community, museums are little more than poorly maintained repositories (Museums Association, 2005).

To engage the public in the need to preserve collections, the Heritage Health Index revealed that museums are choosing to feature preservation through exhibits that educate donors and supporters, or have featured this aspect of the museum on their institutional websites (Heritage Preservation, 2004). As a part of the Local History Services department, the Indiana Historical Society (n.d.) published a graphic novel entitled, _Deteriora and the Agents of Destruction_. Intended to be a fun way to help the public understand the challenges that environmental conditions can pose to a museum, _Deteriora_ explains the effects of light exposure, water damage, pests and other detrimental conditions. In addition to informing the public about part of the museum’s preservation mission, the project also engaged other community organizations, such as a local civic theater, in the project to create a unique “living” graphic novel (Indiana Historical Society, n.d.).

**BEYOND BASIC DOCUMENTATION**

There are many different platforms for digital documentation to fit the specific needs and budget of a museum and many that support building digital collections. Srinivasan, et al. (2010) stated the importance of collections staff members reconsidering how objects are represented, retrieved, and described within the information system used. They claimed the weakness in the current approach in information management is the tendency to limit documentation to basic, categorical taxonomy. As a practice stemming from 19th century classification, basic documentation has fulfilled museum requirements for little more than public accountability. Srinivasan, et al. (2010) explained that historical and anthropological museums, in particular, are more apt to use multiple narratives and contextual meaning to illustrate the world today. Despite deeper interpretation, such narratives are not reflected in the cataloging system in which the more permanent identities of objects are stored. Rather than stopping short at clinical descriptions, context should instead be the primary goal of documentation. Incorporating multiple ontologies — particularly those from community groups that have expert knowledge, such as Native American tribes — into the permanent documentation of an object reflects their value to the museum. Furthermore, if a museum decides to use its information management system as a platform for public digital access, basic classifications and descriptions are of little help to researchers and are antithetical to developing a deeper understanding in the community (Srinivasan, et al., 2010).

As recently as 2008, the American Association of Museums acknowledged that many museums were reluctant to present differing viewpoints at the risk of compromising institutional neutrality. However fully integrating a variety of cultural perspectives throughout the museum — starting with the documentation process — can foster inclusiveness as well as provide a balanced interpretive message and richer learning experience for the visitor.

**LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE COLLECTION**

When collections are understood and well-documented, museums are good resources for both staff members and the public. The Museums Association (2005) considers poorly managed collections a significant impediment to the proper functioning of a museum because these cannot be used to their full potential. In fact, prior to its 2005 report, the Museums Association found that many museum staff members felt that a lack of understanding of their holdings prevented better use of the museum’s collections.
Moreover, because many museums did not have a current inventory of their collections, there was even less in-depth metadata to support research, exhibits, and understanding of collections. Proper and complete documentation of collections is not only helpful to the holding museum but can play a crucial role in establishing lending relationships with other institutions through partnerships or object loaning networks to augment and therefore create more dynamic collections. The Museum Loan Network (MLN) at Brown University in the U.S. promotes long-term loans between museums by providing information about participating collections, awarding grants, and connecting museum professionals through the U.S. (Brown University, 2015). Likewise, the Asia-Europe Museum Network connects over 70 member museums on both continents (Museums Association, 2005). A notable project within this network was a loan from European countries of significant Filipino objects that had never been seen by Filipino audiences. It is because of properly documented and well-inventoried collections that networks such as these function and can be used to engage visitors with new information (Museums Association, 2005).

**ENHANCING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING**

It seems that the first reaction we museum professionals have to the phrase community engagement is to consider the many ways to engage with the community that steps through our doors. Despite the many resources and technologies available, creating access through digital collections is an underutilized method of engagement (Museums Association, 2005, Bender, 2014). Time and money and the reluctance of museum professionals were the primary obstacles suggested by curator, Rodney Kite-Powell, (personal communication, March 2, 2015) to the process of digitization. Regardless, museums must always be building upon successful techniques and there will almost certainly be future uses for digitized collections that have not yet been envisioned (Museums Association, 2005). The digital world has made collections more dynamic through increased accessibility and enhanced public understanding of collections and museum missions. Experiences can be tailored to the individual’s interests through blogs and museums with minimal resources that can reach broad audiences (Ridge, 2013).

**CONCLUSIONS**

The commitment to community engagement is one that many museums are currently taking on and working to make an institutional norm. As discussed above, the process involves constant examination of beliefs and practices, nurturing staff growth and capability, engaging in sustainable relationships, and exploring the new methods of impacting the civic landscape. Such actions require a commitment from a museum’s entire staff—especially the commitment and use of the collections staff. It is no longer enough for collections stewards to be passive or maintain a behind-the-scenes role in community engagement. Instead, collections staff members are the key to using collections to their full potential. It is a responsibility to our communities and our profession to always strive for the highest standards in practice and theory, to become familiar with trends in and outside the museum field, and to become leaders in ways to interpret, use, and create access to collections. Achieving this is vital to staying true to the purpose of museums and will bring about a clear role of museums as full, rich, and indispensable fixtures in their communities.

**REFERENCES**


Google earth image of the town of Thurber, Texas, a near ghost town that supports a small museum.

Community Engagement in Small Museums in Northwest Texas: 
Serving Diverse Audiences Regardless of Museum Size or Population Base

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Abstract: This study provides insight into the workings of small museums in Northwest Texas: Texas Civil War Museum in Fort Worth, TX, Log Cabin Village in Fort Worth, TX, Red River Valley Museum in Vernon, TX, W.K. Gordon Center for Industrial History in Thurber, TX, and The Old Jail Art Center in Albany, TX. I present an overview on whether small museums can survive with or without effective community engagement and remain relevant and sustainable in the 21st century. The museums were chosen on the basis of their size, location, and content. Engagement techniques, tools, and advice will be drawn from a variety of rural museums, historical homes, community museums, and small historical and art museums.

Since the early 18th century, museums in the United States have continuously struggled to remain relevant and sustainable. Budget deficits, limited staff, poor resources, and relevancy amidst changing audiences continue to exist. Although museums have gone through several transitional periods, these challenges affect the sustainability and relevance of all museums in the 21st century.

Once considered residences of timeworn objects of the past, museums have steadily evolved amid shifting cultures and generations. Similar to museums today, the first museums were founded to entertain, attract, and educate. Museum founders had little knowledge of cultivating community growth, but understood the importance of engaging the audience and attracting visitors.

Artist Charles Willson Peale established one of the first museums founded in the United States, the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1794. Peale, an American portrait painter, founded the museum based on his personal collection of natural history specimens including bones and taxidermy mounts of animals (Kulik 1989).
Peale’s cabinet of curiosities is an archetype for what defined early American museums. His museum was the first to demonstrate that museums can be diverse and passionate, and that community engagement is an important component of a successful museum. Peale’s museum was the first museum in a modern democracy to combine a scientific system of classification with a broad educational intent included in exhibitions (Kulik 1989). Peale was the first to embrace the exhibition of natural historical specimens in an American museum, amassing over 100,000 objects intending to entertain and educate (Skramstad 1999).

Museums during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were few in number, but were increasing. In a report issued by the United States Commission of Education in 1873, there were a total of 13 museums of art and archeology in the United States; in 1874, the number of museums was listed as 27 (Kent 1913). At the time of this 1874 report, museums were considered by the United States government as educational resources for the public. However, most museums during this period were privately owned, possessed privately owned collections, and did not allow for small institutions the opportunity to seek acquisitions from private collectors (Kent 1913). Today, there are over 7,500 museums in the United States.

The Boston Museum of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art emerged as two of the leading museums in the 19th century. Similar to Peale’s museum, these museums were established to promote education and serve community members from all social classes. Charles Callahan Perkins, one of the Boston Museum of Art’s first trustees, noted that the museum was established to “give enjoyment to all classes . . . to elevate men by purifying the taste and acting upon the moral nature” (Weil 2002). In 1870, the Metropolitan Museum of Art was established as a place of enlightenment and solace; an institution for everyday people to escape their “dimly lit” rooms to embrace “the brilliant lighting inside the Museum” for the opportunity of character improvement (Weil 2002). The Metropolitan Museum of Art was one of the first museums to create methods to enhance a viewer’s experience, both visually and emotionally.

As the 19th century progressed, a shift among museums in the United States took place with new practices and principles. These practices encouraged museum professionals to consider ways for American museums to enhance and expand their purpose. In 1889, George Brown Goode cautioned that museums must make “living thoughts rather than inanimate things its central concern” (Weil 2002). The 20th century ushered in several transitions for American museums. In “An Agenda for American Museums,” Harold Skramstad discussed these changes of period by asserting that “museums shifted the direction of their energies from public education and inspiration toward self-generated, internal, professional, and academic goals” (Skramstad 1999).
John Cotton Dana, former President of the American Library Association, and a revered writer and much-admired museum scholar, pushed for other changes in the American museum and library systems. Dana proposed a new museum model for the United States — a new class of museums that would cease to mimic the European traditions of architecture, facilities, and exhibitions (Weil 2002). He believed that American museums should not be modeled on European institutions and was one of the first to recognize that American museums needed a different form of public education to remain afloat and function as attractions. In his viewpoint, the new museum would exemplify the true work of the museum as a service institution that enriched the quality of its visitors’ lives, not merely accumulating masterpieces for the museum's own glory, which characterized many older European museums that maintained relevancy and sustainability because of their complex collections and histories (Weil 2002).

The idea that a museum’s only purpose was to collect and display objects began to disappear. Large collections do not make museums any more desirable than museums that offer more intimate, educational opportunities with smaller collections. He emphasized the importance of museum and community relationships. In Dana’s New Museum, he stated the importance of this relationship by arguing that museums need to “learn what aid the community needs” and “fit the museum to those needs” (Weil 2002). Education, community outreach, and audience communication began to evolve. The shift of purpose added accountability to a museum’s decisions, and resulting community education led to the renewal of museums in the United States.

This ideological shift in educational and functional roles of museums in the United States continued to develop into the late 20th century. During this period, museum professionals replaced traditional functions with approaches that served the personal interests of museums and visitors. Due to their desire to publicly interpret collections for visitors, museums were burdened with the strain of creating socially acceptable exhibits that would be consistent with the values of society (Cameron 2002).

In the 20th century, the role of American museums was thus “transformed from one of mastery to one of service” (Weil 2002). Cultural shifts affected the overall functions and structures of museums. Robert R. Archibald observed that “power in our communities is moving from older, more hierarchical forms to broad-based citizen coalitions. Decision-making processes in most communities are becoming democratic and inclusive; increasingly, those who will be affected are insisting on involvement in the decision-making process at the outset” (Archibald 2002). During this period, museum professionals recognized the need to change from the old hierarchical forms to institutions that included community input and involvement.

Although the overall quality of museums and museum programs in the United States increased in the 21st century, economic recession in 2008 and 2009 affected the sustainability of many museums. By 2011, approximately 40% of AAM member museums had experienced a decline in total revenue (Archibald 2002). AAM revealed that more than 67% of AAM accredited museums reported economic stress at their institutions (American Association of Museums 2012). Tough times impacted museum budgets, constrained the range of programs, diminished staff budgets, and reduced operations to such a degree that some museums considered layoffs and even closing. By the mid-2010s museums also faced a permanent decline in public support for higher education, had difficulty in obtaining members for governing boards, saw the decline of property values, and experienced a shift in philanthropic focus among donors (Highbeam Business 2014).

Many museum budgets declined and many undertook cost-cutting measures in order to sustain operations. During this period, museums also recognized the need to develop stronger visitor relationships. According to the American Alliance of Museums, by 2012, 20% of museums relied more on volunteers and 18% relied more on their own collections for exhibitions (American Alliance of Museums 2012). In 2011, approximately 40% of AAM member museums experienced a decline in total revenue (ibid.). More significantly, in 2012, 34% of museums reported a change in strategic plans to reflect changes brought on by more difficult economic conditions (ibid.).

Some might assume that larger museums are more likely to successfully address changing cultural needs and expectations, whereas smaller city, community, and rural museums might be expected to encounter difficulties in persevering and adapting to shifting cultures and expectations due to having small staffs and small budgets to deal with change. According to a 2013 study by the Mid-America Arts Alliance, 60% of all American museums are located in small, rural communities (Mid-America Arts Alliance 2000). Seventeen-percent of these museums are located in rural areas with fewer than 20,000 residents (American Alliance of Museums 2012. Although small museums had limited operating budgets, they sought to strengthen community outreach, educational offerings, and other programming in order to compete and flourish. Most significantly, small museums embraced community engagement in order to retain visitors.

It is no longer enough for a museum, large or small, to simply maintain collections and exhibits, and to meet basic national standards of best practice. In “What is a Museum?” Theodore Low asserts that “museums of today must be willing to alter and to modify their internal structure and their ideas to the changing world conditions and social thought” (Low 2012). Although smaller museums appear to be more closely connected to their communities, large museums may have relationships that are just as strong.
According to Candace Tangorra Matelic of the Alberta Museums Associations in Canada, the traditional activities of collecting, preserving, researching, exhibiting, and interpreting are simply no longer sufficient for museum operations (Matelic 2012). In order for small museums to remain relevant institutions in the 21st century, their standards, programming, and educational resources must adapt to changing cultures, visitor expectations, and younger generations. Larger institutions are able to be more diverse, culturally involved, and have the financial clout to connect to younger demographics.

An industry report prepared by Highbeam Business, found that in the first decade of the 21st century, 8% of museums had annual budgets of $1 million or more, 57% had annual budgets of $100,000 or less, and 38% had annual budgets of $50,000 or less (Highbeam Business 2014). These statistics demonstrate that more than two-thirds of museums in the United States are relatively small institutions, and about a third are very small, with minimal budgets. Now, more than ever, the work of improving the standards, programming, and educational resources of small museums is critical to maintaining their sustainability. The functions of programming, community engagement, and education must be better integrated within each museum and embraced by all staff members in order to maximize the role that the museum plays within its community. Even with limited staff, small museums must continually strive to improve programming, education, and community engagement.

This study addresses the ways in which several small museums in Northwest Texas, with operating budgets of $250,000 and less, are engaging their communities in the 21st century. In Northwest Texas, the success of a museum, regardless of size and financial support, relies solely on being successful at this task. I will compare rural, small town museums to those in larger cities within this geographic area in terms of community engagement and audience support. This research emanates from first-hand experiences. Engagement techniques, tools, and advice are drawn from a variety of rural museums, historical homes, community museums, small historical museums, and art museums. Along with community engagement, the relevance and sustainability of small museums will be addressed throughout this study. The qualities of small museums that have been proven successful in community engagement will be highlighted.

SMALL MUSEUM ENGAGEMENT

In a diverse field, small museums struggle to maintain stability, relevance, and an understanding of the role they play in their community. Sixty percent of all American museums are located in small, rural communities (Mid-America Arts Alliance 2000). Local, community, and historic house museums comprise the majority of museums in these areas. Even so, large cities contain a significant number of small, local, and historic house museums that contribute to the overall cultural experience within a community. In an industry where most visitors tend to visit larger institutions with attractive gift shops, compelling exhibits, and programs filled with entertainment, small museums have had to find their niche to attract diverse groups of people, rather than a targeted audience. At the 1912 Convention of the American Federation of Arts, Robert W. de Forest spoke of the importance of having art museums in smaller cities, describing them as being as inherently important as a public library to the cultural fabric of the town (Mechlion 1913). Small museums play a significant role in American culture by providing access to culturally diverse subjects to rural areas and small towns.

In 1925, the American Association of Museums sought to improve the conditions of small museums. In “A Plan for the Promotion of Small Museums,” Laurence Vail Coleman (1925) observed a lack of museum knowledge among the staffs of small museums. The challenges faced by such museums in the early 20th century were the same struggles they face today. Coleman noted that small museums of that period had few trustees who were knowledgeable about museum practices, lacked proper procedures, and faced financial limitations that restricted hiring trained staff. Writing in 1913, Henry W. Kent (1913) similarly recognized the challenges and disadvantages faced by small-scale museums in the realms of borrowing, lending, and acquisitions. Small museums today endure similar challenges, but thanks to a larger number of private collectors and donors, small museums may have more opportunities for acquisitions and donations than their counterparts in the early 20th century.

Small museums, with operating budgets below $250,000, often specialize in the arts or local history. Historic house museums (ranches, historic homes, etc.), representing family heritage, also are common. Museums are all embracing and are made up of diverse groups of institutions. Theodore Low (2012) defined the contemporary museum as being “a little more than masses of conflicting ideas centering around masses of often unrelated objects.” Low’s concept, albeit a half-century old, unintentionally defines the state of many small museums in the United States today. These museums play a significant role in the cultural arts of a goodly portion of America. More importantly, eclectic groups of small museums validate both the unique stories of the diverse cultures that make up society and the shared story that unites all its members (Lord and Lord 2001).

A museum’s size does not define its success, but may affect its ability to engage the community. Many small museums believe restrictions on staff size, financial resources, programming, and exhibit content constrain visitor attraction, but actually, it is the quality of a museum’s community engagement that determines visitor retention. Unfortunately, the increase in size and quantity of a small museum’s operations takes time, funding, and expertise that most museums will acknowledge is not available for all (Katz 1995).
Museums are now posing important questions of how to incorporate audience building, outreach, and connectivity with communities. Seeking to expand their workforce, small museums are responding to the demands of both the visiting public and the educational establishments (Katz 1995). Small historical museums potentially have a greater ability to relate to their communities since local citizens are more likely to care about preserving local history and are willing to be more actively, physically and financially involved.

Due to complacency and habit, some small museums remain satisfied with limited, effective community engagement. Change is a difficult process for museums. Rather than acknowledging the need to change, some small museums withdraw as far as possible from the present and adopt a 19th century mentality with regard to museum philosophy (Lord and Lord 2001). Although these museums remain in existence, there are a significant number of small museums where community engagement has been embraced and is effective.

In “A Visible Community Center,” Rosann Guggino Garcia (2002) discusses the redevelopment of the Ybor City Museum Society in Tampa, Florida. With the fear of losing its heritage in a changing environment, the Ybor City Museum Society understood the importance of reconnecting with the community to rebuild its role by embracing civic engagement. A five-year growth plan was established to create programming, events, and exhibits that were community-oriented, ultimately seeking to become an institution that would be a community center. This example shows how small museums can take charge and choose to adapt to their role in the community.

The digital world has changed all aspects of museum engagement. While some museums are able to digitize images in their artifact collections and archival material because of greater staff and volunteer resources, most small museums do not have the available staff, resources, or time to digitalize their collection. Those museums that are able to digitize their collections online or in searchable databases from multiple institutions are better able to share their art or artifacts with the general public, creating exhibits that can be enjoyed from a computer (NPower). Due to advances in museum technology, visitors are no longer required to physically visit a museum to experience their collection, although real objects will always characterize the uniqueness of museums to visitors.

One of the newest forms of community engagement used by museums is social media or YouTube channels carrying gallery talks and special events. Most museums use social media as networking tools to reach community members by posting news, promoting exhibitions and events, and creating conversation about their museum and collection. All the museums in this study have informative websites and use some form of social media: Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Most employ Facebook as their main social media site; however, the number of “likes” for each museum is low and is not as effective community a outreach tool as the museums would like. Instead of full access to a digital collection, some of the museums use Facebook to share pictures and information on specific artifacts or work to draw visitor interest. Each of these museum’s websites are historically informative, but have limited information on their collections.

It is essential for museums to understand who they are, what they stand for, and what their limitations are. Mission statements and strategic plans help guide a museum in fulfilling its role within the community. They allow a museum to state its objectives and mission statement (Lord and Lord 2001). Small museums have small staffs and often have more volunteers than staff members. It is thus essential to utilize volunteers to supplement their staffs and broaden the audience. Each of the North Texas museums in this study embraces community engagement differently. Each museum or historic home specializes in local history or art and each was chosen because of its location, size, and museum content.

**THE TEXAS CIVIL WAR MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS**

Small museums hold a special niche in the field of history. The Texas Civil War Museum in Fort Worth, Texas is a small museum that understands its role in the local community. Established as a non-profit institution in 2006, the museum encompasses 15,000 square feet of exhibit space and 4,000 Civil War artifacts (Texas Civil War Museum website). The museum is not located in the business or cultural district of Fort Worth, but maintains its popularity because of its unique subject matter. According to the Executive Director, Cindy Harriman (interview November 2014), “the museum maintains relevancy on its own and they don’t have to justify its existence to the public because the Civil War” is a subject that will always draw interest.
The museum utilizes docents and a small staff to educate adult and school groups. There are over 150 school field trips each year. The museum accommodates local school district by only charging $2 for elementary students and $4 for secondary students. The cost-effective tours were instituted to bring more students to the museum. Costumed guides offer diverse tours that often include music performances and discussions of medical instruments of the Civil War era. Such tours entertain as well as inform. Involvement in community events or social media outreach is not regularly pursued by the Texas Civil War Museum, but the institution understands its function in the community and targets specific audiences on Civil War history. Harriman adds that the museum pursues “minimal advertising” because it is supported by a private benefactor who maintains staffing, programming, and overall funding of the institution.

The museum attracts only moderate attention from local residents. Harriman notes that the museum’s “local relevancy is a problem — the local community is unaware of our existence.” Although they are located in Fort Worth, Harriman notes that their location is a “downside because they are not in the prime touristic area of town — the business district doesn’t bring many visitors passing by.” Fortunately, they do not have to commit extra effort to attract visitors. The museum receives over 20,000 visitors each year, with a third of them from foreign countries. Most out-of-town visitors are Civil War enthusiasts. Its intimate, traditional tours and array of Civil War artifacts has contributed to its relevance and sustainability within the community and beyond. Unlike small museums with extensive art collections and local history artifacts, Civil War artifacts have always maintained their popularity in the United States. Harriman believes it is because the Civil War was a “turning point in American history; educational systems across the country tell the story of the Civil War in their history books.” The museum has one of the largest Civil War collections in the United States.

**LOG CABIN VILLAGE. FORT WORTH, TEXAS**

Log Cabin Village is a historical site in Fort Worth that was established in the 1950s and 1960s. Its vision statement, “Log Cabin Village aspires to build connections to 19th century Texas by providing education opportunities and sensory experiences that are engaging, accurate, and as authentic as possible,” demonstrates the site’s purpose within the community. Furnished with authentic artifacts, each of the historic structures in the village provides a vivid look at life on the 19th century North Texas frontier. Each structure displays different aspects of pioneer life. The exhibits include a water-powered gristmill, a one-room schoolhouse, a blacksmith shop, an herb garden, and several log home settings. Historical interpreters, who are City of Fort Worth employees and volunteers, depict the lifestyle of the people who lived and settled the area in the mid to late 1800s (Log Cabin Village website).

Similar to other historical homes and buildings, daily tours of the facility are the central interactive attraction offered by the Log Cabin Village. Special events such as family fun days, children and adult summer camps, Pioneer School, and Wagon West also are offered to the public; each program requires a small fee of less than $10 per person. According to Director Kelli Pickard (interview March 2014), the museum uses a variety of tools to engage the community. We participate in targeted outreach events that fit our mission and attract our target audience. These events include Frontier Forts Days, Prairie Days, and partnerships with other local museums. We are also actively involved in social media where we try to personal engage our current and potential audiences. As time allows, we speak to community groups such as Rotary, Kiwanis, and Lions Clubs, along with church groups and historical societies.

Log Cabin Village’s association with the City of Fort Worth allows for many different opportunities to connect with other cultural institutions and events. The historical site connects with different community members through living history programs that make history accessible on a personal level for each visitor and group. As with all museums, maintaining relevancy in a constantly changing society is important to sustainability. For Log Cabin Village, to remain relevant its director believes the museum “must constantly seek and evaluate visitor feedback. We listened to our customers and pay attention to how they communicate, how they prefer to receive information, how they like to learn, and how we can improve their experience,” Pickard says.

This requires studying trends, networking with peers and colleagues, and being willing to change. We pride ourselves on the fact that we are the same, but different from 48 years ago when we opened. We are the same in that we have historical structures, artifacts, and nineteenth-century historical interpreters, but we are extremely different in how those structures are preserved and interpreted.

The director of Log Cabin Village believes the museum “can truly provide the same visitors a different experience every time they visit us. If you are not improving, you remain stagnant. If you are stagnant, you cannot remain relevant.” Although many museums come to this realization too late, Log Cabin Village understands its role in the community, how to engage the community, and how to remain relevant among changing conditions. Log Cabin Village has maintained and cultivated the interest of younger generations by examining the ways in which they can enhance the visitor’s experience. Not many museums, large or small, are able to effectively survey their visitor’s needs and meet those changings needs.
Fig. 3. Map of Log Cabin Village, Fort Worth, Texas

RED RIVER VALLEY MUSEUM, VERNON, TEXAS

The Red River Valley Museum in Vernon, Texas is located 45 miles northwest of Wichita Falls near the border of Oklahoma. The museum was first established in 1963 and changed locations three times before finding a permanent home on the campus of Vernon College. The museum houses a wide variety of local history collections, consisting of Native American artifacts, various works of art, and an extensive collection of ranch and farm artifacts. At the time of its establishment, the museum had no director and only volunteers to maintain a growing collection. The museum is now guided by a Board of Directors, a Director, and her assistant. The museum’s community engagement, although limited, reaches the city of Vernon and surrounding towns in ways that best meet the needs of their intended audience. Former Director, Carolyn Gilbert notes (interview March 2014) that “The Museum has a guild for women with an annual membership fee, is a venue available for meetings and events for a nominal fee, hosts an annual county-wide quilt show, and offers school group tours by the Director or volunteers.” The museum acknowledges its limited staff and understands its limits by utilizing its docents to produce events and daily tours, and undertake site maintenance and registration duties related to the collection. The museum has free attendance and utilizes social media such as Facebook to connect with audience members beyond Vernon locals. Their Facebook page has “599 likes;” not a very large audience of followers considering there are at least 11,000 residents in Vernon alone.

The Red River Valley Museum is limited in the ways in which it engages its community and does not adequately meet the needs of its target audience. Although its limited community engagement affects the museum’s ability to meet the needs of its community, it utilizes its small collection, staff, and venue to the best of its abilities to sustain visitor interest. The museum’s financial capabilities play a major role in its outreach, but this fact should not be a factor in maintaining relevance. Many small museums are able to engage their audiences with limited funds. A museum dedicated to engagement in community life can lead to imaginative, rich, and relevant programs (Jackson 2002). As Gilbert attested, however, there has been a significant lack of dedication to the engagement in community life and maintaining relevancy. The exhibits have not changed in years — hindering the museums ability to make visitors to want to return or to reach out to others about the museums worn exhibits.

Fig. 4. Historical marker from the Red River Valley Museum, Vernon, Texas

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Fig. 5. W. K. Gordon Center, Thurber, Texas
**W.K. GORDON CENTER FOR INDUSTRIAL HISTORY, THURBER, TEXAS**

The W.K. Gordon Center for Industrial History in Thurber, Texas is another example of a small museum located in an isolated, rural community that is continuously working to remain relevant and sustainable. Built in 2002, almost 70 years after the town was abandoned, the museum was established to honor the men and women who once lived in the thriving oil and coal town (Jennings 2002). The museum is located in a near ghost town with a population of less than five, after once boasting 8,000 to 10,000 citizens during the oil and coal boom of the early 20th century (Red River Historian website). The unusual location does not allow for typical community base of support and visitation, relying instead on travelers along Interstate 20. According to Director T. Lindsay Baker (interviewed November 2014), the W.K. Gordon Center “receives about five thousand guests annually as a museum,” and because of its rural location, it’s surrounded by “more cows than people.”

![Fig. 6. Thurber, Texas opera house, late 1800s](image)

The museum “actively collects materials pertaining to the economic, political, and social history of Thurber and other centers of industrial development.” The mission of the W.K. Gordon Center is to preserve, document, and research the industrial history of Thurber and the State of Texas and to interpret its influence on the people of Texas. Initially, the museum was intended to preserve and exhibit the history of Thurber, but due to its rural location, the museum represents all of the industrial history of Texas. Since the museum is located in such an isolated area, almost 60 miles to the nearest large city, it is a daily challenge for staff to engage a specific community. Bethany Dodson, a former staff member of ten years, describes her experience with community engagement:

> We worked to engage several smaller, more specific audiences. We had programming aimed at Tarleton students and faculty, some programming aimed at the surrounding Strawn, Thurber, Mingus area, and we all did outreach. We allowed for outreach within a one hundred mile radius. That means we went to Fort Worth schools to give talks, meet with social clubs, and offer lectures at small libraries.

The museum staff is aware of the importance of engaging in a broad outreach program and seeks to meet the needs of its extended community. Adult programming, rather than child-based learning programs, is the museum’s primary focus since the industrial history of Texas mainly attracts older visitors.

Curatorial Assistant, Shae Adams (interviewed November 2014), agrees that the museums remote location affects the way in which community outreach is approached. One way the museum attempts to remain relevant is through social media, mainly with Facebook. Adams concludes that the museum uses social media to connect to those who “can’t be here physically. It allows us to create discussions about our museum, what we’re doing, what people would like to see, and it helps us shape our interpretations as a whole.” Although Adams believes Facebook plays a significant role in community outreach, the W.K. Gordon Center only has “451 likes” on its official Facebook page; these numbers suggest that not as many “community” members are being engaged as they believe.

According to Adams, the W.K. Gordon Center the “main goal” of the Center is to “be part of the community,” and if the community does not come to the museum, he says, “We will go to the community.” Offering a more current review of educational and programming opportunities than Dodson, Adams shares that the museum offers “free programs, is an historical resource for students at Tarleton State University, and has a monthly Night at the Opera House where an old movie is shown to represent and help share the story of the men and women who once lived in Thurber.” Staff members are aware of the museum’s remote location and are actively “trying to find ways to be more relevant — one of which will be to install mini-exhibits to tell the individual stories of the once working class people of Thurber.”

Relevance is determined by a museum’s outgoing engagement and relationship with its community. Although the W.K. Gordon Center is remotely located, its historical record of the working class of Thurber and the industrial history remains to be an effective attraction for visitors. The museum’s affiliation, with and financial support from Tarleton State University, impact the Center’s sustainability but does not play an active role in its relevance.

**THE OLD JAIL ART CENTER, ALBANY, TEXAS**

The Old Jail Art Center in Albany, Texas is a small art museum that operates in a town of fewer than 2,100 residents (City Data 2013). The museum was established in 1980, in the original 1877 Shackleford County Jail.

The museum’s Vision Statement, “Art is for All,” or as it is popularly known: “Art for Y’all,” describes its humble, eccentric place in the community. The museum and most of its programs are free to the public. “This is the most basic way we make ourselves accessible to the public,” says Interim Director, Margaret Blagg. “We are
constantly raising money so that we can underwrite programs, and the cost of free admission.” For many small museums, the first step of engaging the community is to offer free admission because of their rural location or inability to draw visitors by collections alone. The exhibitions of the Old Jail Art Museum are made up of “mixed programs to appeal to a broad segment of the population. We follow up with a variety of didactic materials that will help the public engage with the art.” The museum’s exhibitions are coordinated with the Education Department of the museum and local schools to offer a wide variety of programs—something that is a rarity among small rural museums with such a limited audience. The distance learning programs that the Old Jail Art Museum provides reach beyond Texas. The museum offers Art-to-Go lessons in local and area classrooms, family festivals, monthly drop-in family activities, and activities for homeschooled children, workshops for children and adults, lectures and films for adults, summer education programs, summer programs for Albany’s community resource center, and teacher workshops. Additionally, programs are offered for blind and partially sighted people with multisensory touching tours, programs for “Life Skills” groups with cognitive impairments, family festivals based on different cultures represented in their collection, iPad checkout available at the front desk for digital family guides, and a yearly tailgating party during the football season that is a free event. Erin Whitmore (Education Director, interviewed March 2014) adds, “These programs encourage community investment and a feeling of ownership of the space. Our first goal is to build a trust relationship and increase their comfort in our space.” The museum’s outreach programs are much more community-oriented than just educating Pre-K-12 students. Whitmore describes how the museum . . . offers courses geared towards Alzheimer’s Patients at Assisted Living Centers and Retirement Homes. We connect virtually to the centers and engage their residents in a discussion and tour of the galleries, and then lead them in a coordinating art activity. These discussions focus on the idea that objects and images trigger both long and short-term memory processes . . . the programs are very interactive and residents are encouraged to share whatever it is that the image brings to mind. As a bonus, if the cooperating site is within one hour’s drive of the museum, another education staff member travels off-site to them and helps to physically facilitate the conversation and art activity.

This varied list of programs shows that any small museum is capable of utilizing its programs for benefit of the community and museum.

The museum’s programming draws visitors into the museum and stimulates community engagement. Additionally, the museum understands that their outreach programs go much farther than the city of Albany. The closest largest city to the Old Jail Art Center is Abilene, Texas at a distance of 40-miles. The Old Jail Art Center plays an active role in the college arts community in Abilene by offering internships, programming opportunities, and an additional cultural institution for students in the fine arts. These programs have been created with the intention of expanding outreach to larger cities and broadening their audience base.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

**Texas Civil War Museum.** The Texas Civil War Museum is a small, privately owned institution in Fort Worth that, unlike many museums, does not do any extra advertising, social media, or programming to engage in community outreach in order to maintain visitor attraction and relationships. The history of the Civil War is a never-fading subject for Americans; thus interest in this collection and museum is not affected by how well they engage their community. The lack of community outreach by the Texas Civil War Museum demonstrates that not all small museums must engage their community in order to be successful, and to remain relevant and sustainable.

**Log Cabin Village.** Log Cabin Village historical site has been able to successfully create programs and opportunities for community engagement in Fort Worth. The effort to understand the museums audiences and engage their needs shows how important efforts to build relationships are to the overall mission. The museum is able to handle school field trips, family groups, and children all at once. Log Cabin Village is the only historical site of its type in the Fort Worth area, and its ability to remain relevant depends on visitor feedback and constantly finding ways to relate and adapt to the community.

**Red River Valley Museum.** The Red River Valley Museum in Vernon represents a museum that is not necessarily relevant to younger generations, but remains somewhat sustainable in the community as a historical resource and community event venue. Its has failed the remain relevant to all segments of the population because aging board members do not lend financial or moral support to acquiring new objects or updating exhibits. Most of the museum’s revenue is attributed to its inexpensive prices for local elementary school field trips. The museum is over 50 years old and rarely changes. An important question is: How much longer can it remain open and be a vital part of the Vernon community? However, the museum plans...
to undertake a major renovation of its foyer and M.K. Berry Gallery in 2015. Will this renovation be too late to save the museums reputation and relevancy? Only time will tell—at least it is a small step toward accepting that change is essential to adapting to new generations of visitors. Community engagement has been limited and is primarily oriented toward adolescents. Although the Red River Valley Museum has limited community engagement, visitors to the small Vernon community keep returning and praise it as a vital cultural outlet for the community.

W.K. Gordon Center. I have traveled through Thurber, Texas often, visiting the museum only once. Generally, the parking lot of the W.K. Gordon Center is nearly empty. The museum and previous staff members tout their success in the rural ghost town, but it is hard to accept that community engagement has been successful. The W.K. Gordon Center is fortunate to have a university affiliation; one that probably influences its ability to remain open. Although the W.K. Gordon Center receives an average of 5,000 visitors a year, community engagement is a vital effort of the museum’s staff. Because of its location in rural Thurber, Texas, however, these outreach attempts receive little attention from those outside the Thurber area. Nevertheless, the museum has remained a sustainable resource to the history of industrial Texas because of its collection and affiliation to Tarleton State University in nearby Stephenville, Texas. Whether the Center will remain sustainable and relevant are questions for the future.

Old Jail Art Museum. Although located in a town with fewer than 2,100 residents, the Old Jail Art Museum has been able to successfully engage its local community and its immediate region. The Old Jail Art Museum’s ability to attract a wide array of visitors and artists from around the country, who come to Albany to display their works, shows its dedication to community and the relationships it sustains. This dedication and effort offer education, culture, and a fine arts experience to visitors of all ages and disabilities. Their vast list of programs shows how the museum has been able to remain relevant and sustainable to younger generations, while still attracting older visitors.

In this study, the small museums located in larger cities were able to maintain more attractive, diverse programs with an overall higher visitor attendance due to their location than were their rural counterparts. Such museums have more opportunities to create diverse programming connect with other institutions and target secondary audiences. The Northwest Texas museums included in this study varied widely in their struggles, engagement approaches, and understanding of their communities. Community engagement was not defined by a museum’s size, but by its ability to successfully involve community members in its decision-making, events, programs, and exhibits.

The small museums that have successfully embraced community engagement were dynamic and flexible in meeting the cultural needs of their communities. Although community engagement does not necessarily yield immediate success, diverse exhibits, programming, and outreach proved effective for the museums in this study. Most of the museums surveyed are community-oriented, accessible to their audiences, engaged in community and social events, and solicitous to individual needs. Regardless of museum size and population base, a museum can be successful whether they embrace their community or not. Their success is measured more by whether their community engagement has allowed them to remain relevant and sustainable as a cultural institution in the community in which the museum resides.

Regardless of size, community engagement is a key component of museums in the 21st century. The lack of staff members, volunteers, funding and other resources affect a small museum’s overall ability to engage its communities. These challenges require museums to limit their engagement or become resourceful in its application. This study of small museums in North Texas demonstrates the various ways in which community engagement is carried out, successfully or not. The approaches to engagement are as diverse as the communities that these museums serve. The relevance and sustainability of these museums relies on their everyday practices. Although effective community engagement and outreach are major aspects of large museum operations, this study demonstrates how ineffective community engagement is as a whole to the success of small museums; mostly it affects whether or not a small museum remains relevant and sustainable within its overall community.

Each museum in this study demonstrated a different approach to community engagement and the degree of success that each enjoyed varied significantly. A museum’s location, staff size, and financial resources play important roles in its ability to engage its community. The Old Jail Art Museum in Albany, Log Cabin Village, the Texas Civil War Museum in Fort Worth, the Red River Valley Museum and the W.K. Gordon Center have all faced different challenges in being able to incorporate innovative approaches to community engagement. Small museums located in larger cities have more flexibility and more outreach and fundraising opportunities to help strengthen community engagement. The diversity of larger cities also allows museums to be selective in the ways they can engage the community.

Maintaining relevancy is the greatest challenge for these small North Texas museums. Much of the subject matter these museums interpret is outdated and unfamiliar to younger generations, limiting their interest to visitors. No matter what a museum’s subject matter may be, resourceful community engagement that attracts younger generations is proven to affect a museum’s ability to remain relatable and relevant. Local support and commitment has led to several of the small museums surveyed being used more as community centers or venues rather than educational or cultural resources.
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