



Take Me To The River: International Field Study in Support of Exhibits

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For developers and designers

working to create effective exhibits, one of the biggest challenges is to collapse the emotional and intellectual distance between our subject and our visitors. When our subject involves an exotic location, telling an accurate story that offers North American visitors opportunities for meaningful learning becomes even more complex.

When work began on *Amazon Rising: Seasons of the River* at Chicago's Shedd Aquarium, the project team came head-to-head with these issues. By the time the exhibit opened in June 2000, the team's travels to the Amazon region—and the personal connections forged during those trips—had proved integral to our process. More than any other factor, they had shaped our efforts to connect our visitors to a distant, different place. In addition, the Aquarium's investment in travel produced an invaluable set of assets—ideas, artifacts, photographs, video, and personal contacts—that were used and re-used throughout the institution to support education, marketing, animal care, conservation, and public communication efforts.

Work began for *Amazon Rising* in 1995. Early on, the team determined to focus the exhibit on the extraordinary flooding that occurs along the Amazon River. Our Big Idea—"Amazon waters flood the forest each year, bringing new opportunities for animals, plants, and people, too"—closely reflected the theme of "connectedness of ecosystems and people" that the Aquarium had adopted during its recent master planning. Preliminary conversations with the Shedd's visitors showed us they had a high interest in the Amazon, but limited knowledge of where it is or what it is like. Visitors connected it generically with animals and rainforests (many didn't think of it as a river system), and very few thought of people as part of the ecosystem. With a clear main message, and an understanding of the gaps in our visitors' knowledge, we were able to pursue the subsequent process—including extensive travel—with clarity and focus.

Aquarium project staff traveled to the Peruvian Amazon for the first time in fall 1997, during the region's low water season. Core team members including the lead developer, designer and aquarist joined representatives from conservation, video production, education, and veterinary care on a two-week journey arranged by Margarita Tours. They visited different habitats, seined streams and oxbow lakes, swam with (and ate) piranha, and met fishermen, children, entrepreneurs, scientists, and politicians. On this trip, the team forged a key connection which became crucial to the *Amazon Rising* process.

The team's tour leader was Dr. Devon Graham, a biologist with Project Amazonas, a nonprofit humanitarian and conservation organization. Graham spends about half of each year in Peru managing several field research stations, working with nearby villages, and operating ecotours. A passionate and expert guide to this tropical ecosystem, Graham became one of the most important team members. His years of experience in the region, and long-term relationships with local communities there, provided key connections to people and places we could not have made on our own. He offered logistical support for travel, video production, and the collection and shipment of objects and materials. He reviewed all of our interpretive plans, exhibit designs, tank horticultural plans, and label texts, and offered a steady stream of photographs for design reference and exhibit use. Graham met the team's often odd requests with adept problem-solving skills and a sense of humor that helped to smooth the creases of our exhibit process.

For three years after the initial trip in 1997, Graham and his Margarita Tours crew accompanied multiple teams of project staff on focused work trips, each with a different set of goals. The project's two developers made a trip during high water season to complete the seasonal story first encountered during low water; a video production team made three trips to capture footage during all of the



Amazon's seasons; a developer and Aquarium photographer joined a video trip in order to document the day-to-day life of a family and take hard-to-find photos for exhibit graphics; and educators and conservation researchers followed up with trips geared to departmental needs and projects.

This project team may seem very fortunate. How many institutions can afford to send team members into the field repeatedly, even on low-budget ecotours? However, we think that the Shedd's investment in travel paid off in many ways, from exhibit accuracy to the acquisition of assets that gave the Aquarium the best tools to make a broad, cost-effective impact. Furthermore, the team's first-hand experiences with the region deepened our personal investment in the project.

Before talking about general benefits, we'd like to sketch out the specific outcomes of each of our trips.

The initial trip gave the team a clear direction for our story.

During team meetings on the boat during long river trips, we sketched out the entire exhibit, first conceptually and then in drawings. We got an overview and visual reference for every habitat we wished to recreate in the exhibit. On following days, we might go searching for a better example of a "floating meadow", taking photographs, video and notes that would help us later. We made an initial "want" list for animals. While the crew fished for dinner, we recorded fishing techniques and tools, and then examined close-up the biology of the catch. We met local people whom we would later hire to build houses and collect artifacts for us, and who would share their lives for videos, photographs and books. We scoured the city marketplaces, recording medicinal herbs, turtle stew and other delicacies derived directly (legally or illegally) from the floodplain forest. We made initial contacts with fishermen and local biologists to develop a conservation research program.

The follow-up trip by the developers "completed the picture."

Despite photographs, who can truly imagine fish swimming between trees and nibbling on fruit? Or paddling up to a village square that, just four months earlier, could only be reached by climbing 60 feet of stone stairs? These extraordinary experiences gave us a passionate commitment to focusing and translating how the floods "felt" into an exhibit experience for the Shedd's visitors. With a smaller group of travelers, we were also able to make closer contact with local people, including the boat crew, and learn about their day-to-day lives. Our conversations on the river would later become both an

exhibit element and a children's book, *My Amazon River Day* (2000). The two of us even collected and cleaned the skulls of our dinner fish, which became valuable artifacts used by both exhibit and educational programs.



Kris (left) and Barbara prepare fish skulls

The video team made three trips over a year's period.

With the Big Idea, storyline and narrative in hand, this team took superb footage documenting high water, receding water (planting season) and low water seasons, specifics required for the exhibit. With Graham's help, as well as meticulous planning and budgeting, they filmed birds, fish and mammals coping with the changing water levels. They particularly focused on the impact this had on people's lives — families paddling among trees to collect fruit; children diving and splashing off their front porches or paddling to school in canoes. They also constructed camera mounts in several locations to record the changing water levels on a more continual basis throughout the year. Graham's help was critical for this, as he visited these stations at regular intervals to install and de-install cameras.

A developer and Aquarium photographer created a family storyline.

Accompanying the video crew on one of their trips, these team members spent more than a week with a family who lived alongside an Amazon tributary, recording each member of the family carrying out their daily activities during a typical week in low water season. The family was paid for their time and received copies of the published book, as well as a selection of the photographs. Our relationship with the family continued beyond the project with periodic shipments of clothing and supplies. Additionally, the developer and photographer filled in the gaps on the project's photo list, shooting images needed to closely match exhibit text and creating a resonance between exhibit graphics, story, and video.



Educators made a trip of their own once the exhibit opened.

This trip allowed them to collect artifacts needed for their programs, and to acquire first-hand experiences to help enrich their programs and talks.

Several trips helped establish a research program.

In conjunction with Project Amazonas, the Aquarium developed a conservation research program to deepen the institutional connection in Peru. An Aquarium researcher returned to Peru multiple times to work with Devon Graham, documenting life cycles and demographics of aquarium fish in the floodplain. Collection and sales of these fish provide an additional source of income for many floodplain residents, and is a subject of one of the exhibit displays. Although the Shedd Aquarium is no longer involved in the project, this research program is ongoing through outside grant funding.

The benefits of our travels to the exhibit development process were multiple. Through travel and on-site contact, the team acquired:

1. A passion to communicate. Before our travels there, we had read about the Amazon River in books and listened to many experts. But these second-hand accounts were no substitute for actual experiences—personal journeys that helped us to develop the strong sense of place this exhibit needed. After seeing first-hand the extraordinary ecosystem and its dynamic yearly changes, we pushed harder to communicate the “real” place rather than how we had imagined the place might look.
2. Cultural respect. On our visits, we saw first-hand how deeply integrated the local people are with their environment and its yearly cycle—an experience that is less evident (although no less true) in most North American communities. After meeting and working with many generous Peruvian people, we became doubly committed to representing their story fairly and respectfully. We are very grateful for the opportunity to give back to our local consultants in the form of direct income for services, photographs and other gifts, as well as support for the ongoing community work of Project Amazonas.
3. Real stuff. Through Graham’s work in the field and our own travels, we were able to collect or recreate those details that make an exhibit ring true. For each recreated habitat, we collected or replicated from life the trees, vines, seeds, grasses and other vegetation that would make the habitats as representative as possible. On the cultural side, the two houses present in the exhibit are true to life. One was built in traditional fashion by ribereños in Peru, disassembled and brought back to the Aquarium, where it was put back together. The second was built by Aquarium staff, who modeled their work on the first. Decorative details are also authentic. Shopping lists emailed to Graham read like a hodgepodge of Amazonia: two identical fish traps; two canoes, size small; pots and plastic buckets from the market; a brazil nut seed pod; three fishing spears and five nets; skin drums; etc. Those of us who traveled there collected posters from restaurant walls and soccer calendars hanging in upriver villages. Audiotape captured soccer matches and music programs from local radio stations.
4. A truly iterative exhibit process. As exhibit development proceeded, our trips became opportunities to expand on ideas, check for details, acquire video or photographs to support our messages, and collect specific artifacts. When the label copy talks about a father treating his son with *sangre del grado*, a medicinal plant, we have an image of it. Upon their return to the office, team members were renewed and eager to share their experiences authentically with future exhibit visitors.
5. A focused exhibit. With their travel experiences reinforcing the exhibit’s Big Idea, and numerous resonant details, the team on the whole maintained a focused communication goal for the duration of the process. It is reflected in an exhibit that reinforces its message and seems to have aged well (in our humble opinion). While developing our story of an incredibly intricate and complex environment, we returned again and again to our Big Idea and kept that focus for ourselves—and,



On-site expert Devon Graham (left) at work



we hope, for visitors. Practically everything was designed to reinforce that message. Summative evaluation on *Amazon Rising* showed that 40% of visitors were able to say clearly what the exhibit is about, and many others mentioned flooding and seasonality in separate answers.

An Excellent Judges assessment

(<http://www.msu.edu/~dillenbu/EJ/home.html>) of the exhibit resulted in a fairly high agreement that the exhibit was engaging and meaningful, although glare and tank obstruction reduced comfort levels.

6. Buy-in from the broader Aquarium community. The materials and stories that the team brought back helped to keep all elements of the exhibit project on a relatively focused path. The travelers had experienced first-hand the centrality of Amazon flooding and were committed to telling that story. The aquarists who made the trips are still dedicated to maintaining the storyline, even as the needs of animals and the public make some changes to the exhibit inevitable. Exhibit team members used stories, slides, artifacts and video to train interpreters and volunteers who are a prime interface for visitors in the exhibit. Some of them have subsequently made trips to Peru or Brazil to enrich their own experiences. In hindsight, it would doubtless have paid to include members of the marketing and communications teams on the initial trip, thus enriching the impact they have in the final stages of the process.
7. Assets. Photographs, video and ideas were the main items collected during the various trips to Peru. They have all been used and re-used in broadening circles, creating a cost-effective repurposing of these materials from a single budget. The majority of video and photos in the exhibit were provided by expert staff. If purchased, their cost would have been prohibitive. These same materials were also used in all marketing and public relations efforts. Many of the photographs are represented in the Aquarium's Resource Center and on the website, available for viewing or purchase. Video footage was re-used in a number of ways for marketing the exhibit, including a 30-minute program produced and broadcast regularly by the local public television network. In addition, the Shedd Aquarium, with the support of the Illinois EPA, funded a 30-minute video comparing flooding on the Mississippi and Amazon Rivers (*Big Rivers Rising*, 2001). The idea of "floods bring fortune," which had been developed so thoroughly in the exhibit, is communicated in this video via rich visuals. This stresses the point that unmodified, natural river cycles can bring great benefits locally

to people, plants and animals in the Midwest, as it does in the Amazon Basin. The video premiered on a Chicago public television station and was made available nationally to other PBS outlets. In addition, over 400 copies were distributed to educators and to conservation agencies.

Travel can greatly strengthen the process of exhibit development, the effectiveness of an exhibit experience, AND the power of your message to be disseminated beyond the institution. From our experience with *Amazon Rising*, we end by passing on a few guidelines that seemed critical to our process.

1. Do your homework before you travel. Know what your main goals and Big Idea are and focus the objectives of your trips. Exotic environments can be incredibly distracting, and can easily pull you off track if you do not have your goals clearly defined.
2. Establish a local connection and make use of it. For our project, our connection with Devon Graham was fortuitous but critical. He was the conduit of ideas, objects, contacts, and shipments from our foreign locale to our institution in North America. From his 25-pound postcard of rainforest heartwood addressed and sent by mail, to his 34-page handwritten treatise on how to assemble a ribereño house, we could not have done it without him.
3. Be adventurous. Dodo what it takes to get close to your subject. We slept in ribereño houses under mosquito netting, drank *masato* (a fermented drink made of chewed up and spit out manioc); got shocked by electric eels; and slogged up to our waists in freshly deposited silt, holding camera equipment above our heads. All of these experiences, as well as the sunsets on the river and the chorus of frogs and insects that kept us awake at night, made us passionate about our subject matter and eager to communicate it to others.
4. Open your mind. Be willing to amend exhibit plans if the reality you encounter on your trip demands it. Your team might head into the field with expectations and preliminary sketches that are disproved by the real thing. Allow your experiences to shape the exhibit's feel and infuse the project with the little details that give a real sense of place. If your subject is ancient North America, maybe that means digging in an archeological site; or if it is Leonardo da Vinci, perhaps it means taking a class in fresco painting. If our experience is a guide, your audience and your institution will benefit.