

Land of Extremes

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Visitor experience helps improve museum exhibits



LEFT: The new topographic map has become a huge highlight in the Desert Museum's permanent exhibit. **BOTTOM:** The fascinating and complex history of Lake Cahuilla is told through the "Water is Life" program and topographic map. PHOTOS COURTESY OF NEIL V. HITCH

BY NEIL V. HITCH | Special to this Newspaper/ Imperial Valley

A necessary stage with every new exhibit in a museum is getting visitor feedback. Not just before, but also after a new component has been installed. In April, several interactive components of the new Land of Extremes exhibit were installed and for the last three months they have been going through evaluation and troubleshooting. Museum staff have been watching how visitors interact with the exhibit: what works, what doesn't, what should be changed. In August, Weldon Exhibits will be returning to complete the installation of Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the exhibit and will tweak the existing parts of the exhibit based on what we have learned.

Mapping success

One of the most popular pieces of the new exhibit has been the topographic map we call our "Water is Life" visitor interactive. At the edge of the Lake Cahuilla diorama, this interactive, made possible by a donation from the Imperial Irrigation District, is a raised topographic map and touch screen computer program. In sleep mode it shows different local mountains, but when activated it invites visitors to explore the history of water in the Imperial Valley.

A projector mounted in the ceiling reflects the program onto a specially designed, laser cut topographic map. The program shows how the Colorado River has filled the Imperial Valley up to 39 feet above sea level in a regular cycle for the last 4.5 million years. In just the last 1,000 years, this process has been repeated four times, with the current Salton Sea being the fifth lake in this millennium.

We've now used the topographic map and water program in several field trips with great success. The kids — mostly

fourth-graders, but some younger and older students as well, have been fascinated, not only with this new way to look at the Imperial Valley but with the map itself. The projection makes the map seem almost like a hologram, making the topographic map come alive. The map was originally designed to be seen from one direction and used by one visitor at a time. Testing the interactive, however, reveals that people always experience it as a group. This makes it important that we create an environment where people can talk about what they are seeing.

When asking teachers and students to tell us what they liked best about the new exhibits, the topographic map seems to have made a big impression. They answer questions about what they learned and what they liked best with statements like:

"I really liked the replica of the mountains and Salton Sea."

"I admit, I did not know that we were once covered with water and that the Salton Sea was shrinking. It was really good to know."

And, "Thank you for making me learn

about the what happened to the Colorado River and Lake Cahuilla."

The map has even been featured in several of the hand-drawn thank you letters kids have sent us after their field trips. Seeing the details of what they remember days later, helps to show us the impact that the map has had on our young visitors.

Seeing stars

The Cosmology Niche was originally designed as a quiet, contemplative corner for visitors who wanted to listen to Kumeyaay bird songs and see a starry night's "sky." When we premiered the niche during a FriendRaiser star gazing party, our visitors reacted to it as we had expected. They enjoyed the LED ceiling display mimicking the night sky and we heard many comments like:

"I want one of these in MY room!"

But visitors rarely stayed in the niche for very long.

Very soon after the initial installation, we re-contacted the Campo Kumeyaay Nation, who had recorded the bird songs, and asked if the audio presentation could be re-done so that each of the three bird songs included a brief oral history of the meaning and tradition behind the songs. This now has completely changed everything about the niche.

Our biggest surprise came when we tried the niche out on field trips. We hadn't expected a large group of fourth-graders to be interested in it at all, or at most only for a few seconds. But sitting on the floor, their eyes closed, imagining they are around a campfire at the shore of Lake Cahuilla, the niche has become one of the favorite experiences of the field trip.

To our surprise, the kids all fell in love with the niche experience. They became far more engaged than most adults we've watched there, wanting to actively listen to the entire loop, and talking about

what they heard afterward:

"I really liked the miniature planetarium with the music."

"I liked when we all closed our eyes and listened to the music of the Indians singing. It actually felt good and peaceful."

"My favorite part was when we sat in a circle and looked at the stars and listened to the songs."

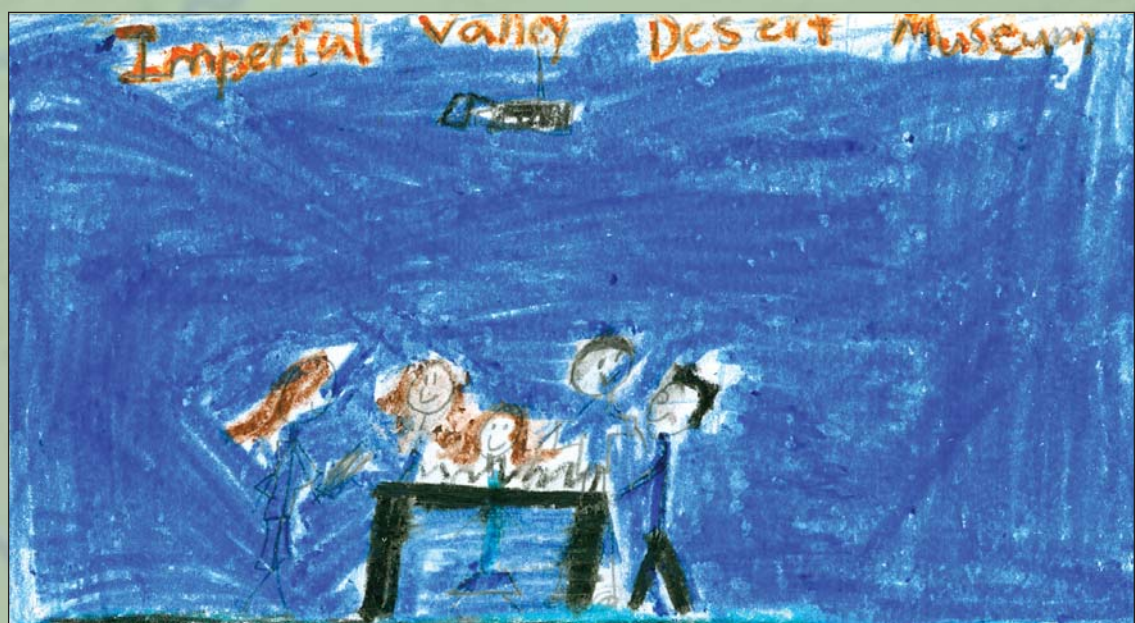
Before one of the songs, it is explained that in Kumeyaay cosmology stories three bighorn sheep are seen in the stars. This became one of the most talked-about ideas among the kids over lunch, and many of them, on seeing our sheep statue, made the connection that this was the sheep talked about in the niche.

We designed the niche with the idea that we could develop different programs if the community was interested sometime in the future. We were thinking years in the future, but thanks to the interest we've seen on field trips, we have already begun to look into grants that might help us develop programs melding science, astronomy and Kumeyaay cosmology.

In many ways, the steps to building a successful exhibit not only start long before the construction begins, but last long after the dust has settled. A good exhibit is never finished, but is always the jumping-off point for the next idea. What we at the Desert Museum hope our visitors know is how integral they are to the ideas, exhibits and programs we develop. We are always learning from our visitors — possibly even more than our visitors are learning from us!



The Cosmology Niche quickly became one of the favorite parts of a museum field trip.



A thank you letter from Gil, fourth-grade student at De Anza Magnet School, shows the topographic map and even its ceiling projector.