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, after some 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 existing parts of the exhibit based on what we have learned. Stallation of Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the exhibit and will tweak August, Weldon Exhibits will be returning to complete the installation of Phase 3 and Phase 4 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 in Life” visitor interactive. At the edge of the Lake Cahuilla diorama, this interactive, made possible by a donation from the Imperial Valley 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. For 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 programs in several field trips with great success. The kids – mostly fourth-graders, but some younger and older students as well, have been fasci- nated, not only with the new way to look at the Imperial Valley but with the map itself. The projection makes the map look almost like a holograph, 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 experi- ence it as a group. This makes it im- portant 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 an- swer questions about what they learned and what they liked best with statements like: “I really liked the lyrics of the moun- tains 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 what happened at the Colorado River and the Salton Sea.”

The map has even been featured in and around our school: drawn thank you letters kids have sent us after their field trip, hanging on the walls, people ask about it during field trips, and on our young visitors.

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Seeing stars

The Cosmology Niche was origi- nally designed as a quiet, contemplative corner for visitors who want 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 ex- pected. They enjoyed the LED envi- ronment display mimicking the night sky and we heard many comments like: “I want one of those in MY room!”

But visitors rarely stayed in the niche for very long. Before one of the songs, it is ex- plained that in Kumeyaay cosmolog- ical stories three higher sheep are seen in the stars. This became one of the most talked-about ideas among the kids we had brought, 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 this idea that we could develop different programs if the community was interested sometimes in the future. We were thinking years in the fu- ture, 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 build- ing a successful exhibit not only start long before the construction begins, but perhaps even after a niche has settled. A good exhibit is never finished, but is always the jump- ing-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 pro- grams we develop. We are always looking for input – possi- bly even more than our visitors are helping to provide it!