

Land of Extremes

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SAN DIEGO NATURAL HISTORY MUSEUM

'Coast to Cactus' exhibit

Immersive experience in regional habitats' changes

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

Michael Field began his career working at the San Diego Natural History Museum in 1984. Some say he was born to complete the "Coast to Cactus" exhibit, the project that has consumed his last three years.

Michael Field loves the desert. On many weekends he can be found camping, hiking and shooting photographs of the vast natural surroundings of our area.

His photographs will be the backdrop for most of the new Land of Extremes exhibit at the Imperial Valley Desert Museum.

In fact, our exhibit would not have been possible without his work and generosity. When he is not hiking around the back country of Imperial County, he is leading the exhibit design department at "the NAT."

His latest project is the new permanent exhibit, "Coast to Cactus," an interactive, immersive experience that generates awareness of Southern California's unique biodiversity and aims to foster caring and stewardship of Southern California's natural places.

The exhibit had its grand opening last weekend, and this week the staff at the I.V. Desert Museum got a private tour.

The exhibit begins with a life-sized statue of a great grizzly bear.

Much like the California condor, the grizzly was a remnant of the mega fauna that inhabited California in a different era.

The last grizzly was killed about 100 years ago near where Camp Pendalton is today.

The bear can be seen from everywhere on the first floor and is a fitting icon for the entrance of an exhibit that is really about the fragility of the ecosystems that we experience everyday in Southern California.

The exhibit is laid out with a very open floor plan. Visitors can move self-directed between the different exhibit areas:

Canyon and Streams, Mountains, Chaparral, Desert, and Coast.

Every area is designed to have something for kids and something for adults.

The exhibit is a very inclusive family experience.

Exhibits don't just happen; they take years of planning

Conceptual discussions about the exhibition began in 1998 when a building addition was being planned.

The exhibit planning began in 2003 when a new master plan for the NAT was written. The area for the exhibit was set aside and concept designs were developed.

Three years ago, the exhibit became a reality with the award of a Proposition 84 grant for \$7 million.

The idea of the grant was to create an exhibit that inspired people to visit state parks. "Coast to Cactus" moves a visitor through ecosystems beginning at Torrey Pines State Park and ending at Anza-Borrego State Park.

The most challenging aspect of the project was that there was just so much to interpret in the exhibit space, according to Michael Field.

"If you look at the coast, the mountains, and the chaparral — it is just too much to do," Field said, "the real work was in editing all the good ideas."

"It was like starting a restaurant where you want to have Chinese food, Mexican food, Italian food and hamburgers, and then people can bring in their favorite recipes and you will add those to the menu as well."

"My editing filter," Field said, "was 'Attract; Engage; and Deliver.'"



Michael Field, lead exhibit designer at the San Diego Natural History Museum. PHOTO COURTESY OF NEAL HITCH

Attract; Engage; Deliver

Attract Every part of the exhibit had to look good and attract attention to that area. The coast area, for example has an exaggerated, extra large section of ground containing giant worms, clams, and crabs.

Engage Every individual component had to do something. There are multiple interactives, hands-on stations, and drawers that you can open to "explore more."

Deliver In every component of the exhibit you have to learn something.

This all comes together clearly in one of the more active areas — a canyon habitat designed to look like the backyard of a mid-century modern home. Here a visitor can sit in patio chair and look out over a diorama including several of the wild animals that have learned to live in and around our urban habitats.

Included here is a giant version of a "See and Say" that you can spin to images of the various animals and hear what they sound like.

This part of the exhibit came about through extensive visitor testing.

Hundreds of surveys were sent out asking people two questions: "What does habitat mean to you?" and "What does



The streams and canyons area is designed to look like a back porch. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL FIELD



The desert area includes a full-size camping trailer where you can sit and read or talk to an interpreter about the animals in the desert. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL FIELD

nature mean to you?"

"For most people, the answer was their neighborhood," Field said. "The canyon at the end of

your street or an empty lot that had become overgrown — this is where most people experience wild animals. The answer was seldom the mountains or the desert."

So, as the exhibit designer, Field spent a lot of time thinking about how to represent this urban habitat.

There are plenty of surprises and opportunities for a visitor to think about what lives right outside of their door.

"Coast to Cactus" sheds light on our impact on native flora and fauna in our region and how these habitats have changed over time.

It is also the first new permanent exhibit to open in Balboa Park during the Centennial.

It offers a venue where visitors and students can learn about and interpret the comprehensive picture of the biodiversity of the Southern California region — one of only 35 global biodiversity hotspots.

The exhibit is designed to pair with "Fossil Mysteries," a prehistoric look into Southern California's paleontological and geologic past.

As such, it is a great addition to a great museum.

Neal V. Hitch is director of the Imperial Valley Desert Museum in Ocotillo.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NEAL HITCH



Tiny creatures appear super large in the coast area at the "Coast to Cactus" exhibit in this detail of the beach ecosystem that you can get inside. PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL FIELD