



Journal of Museum Education Reader Guide
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“Green History: Reframing Our Past to Save the Planet”

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“Green History: Reframing Our Past to Save the Planet”

by Andrea K. Jones

The themed section of this latest issue of the *Journal of Museum Education* examines ways in which history museums are refocusing their interpretive and educational work to be more relevant to new and existing audiences, a struggle shared by museums of all disciplines. Educators frequently find themselves grappling with the issue of relevance. What does it mean to be relevant? And whom, exactly, should we be relevant to?

This Reader Guide explores an article that documents one institution’s effort to address relevancy, exploring today’s environmental issues through the lens of the past. The questions below were developed in conjunction with the author and are intended to foster conversation and dialogue among colleagues on personal, institutional, and community understandings of relevance and how the intersection of these varied perspectives can shape our work in enhancing the experiences of both those who visit and work in museums.

“...if we have any hope of making the past relevant for...people today we must meet them in their space, we must find ways of confronting the issues that they care about, and we should work toward finding a lens for them to understand how the past connects with their community today.”

— *From the issue introduction by Mariruth Leftwich*

Personal Reflection

1. How do you recognize relevance?
2. Where do you find personal relevance in your work as a museum educator?

Exploring the Article

3. The author describes a living history scene typical of many historic sites and then poses the question, “Exactly why do visitors need to know about historic butter churning practices?” Historical reenactment is physically engaging, but is this interactivity necessarily relevant? Do we simply include these types of hands-on activities in our programming because they are expected? How can we be more mindful in developing hands-on interactive experiences that are relevant?
4. Understanding of the past requires acknowledging many nuances, moving past the dichotomy of past/present, hard/easy, simple/hectic, etc. What examples in this article challenge the visitor to gain more complex insights?

(continued)

5. Making history relevant can also empower visitors, showing that history is about choices and their impact, and that our choices today also will have consequences. How does the “past-to-present” programming described in this article make that connection?
6. The author discusses the challenges of this approach in terms of visitor expectations, noting that the integration of history and environmental science is not always easy, “especially since visitors often expect a purely historical experience.” How do you manage visitor expectations when you make similar changes to a program?

Institutional Reflection

7. Is your department or institution working to be more relevant? Are there specific approaches you have identified? Implemented?
8. How do you identify audiences and determine what they might find relevant about your institution? What if reaching out to new visitors threatens your current audience? How do you balance the risk and reward that comes with change?
9. Can you think of an exhibit or program that seems to have been particularly relevant to an audience? Why? Can you identify factors that made this experience successful? Are they transferable?
10. How can you measure relevance?

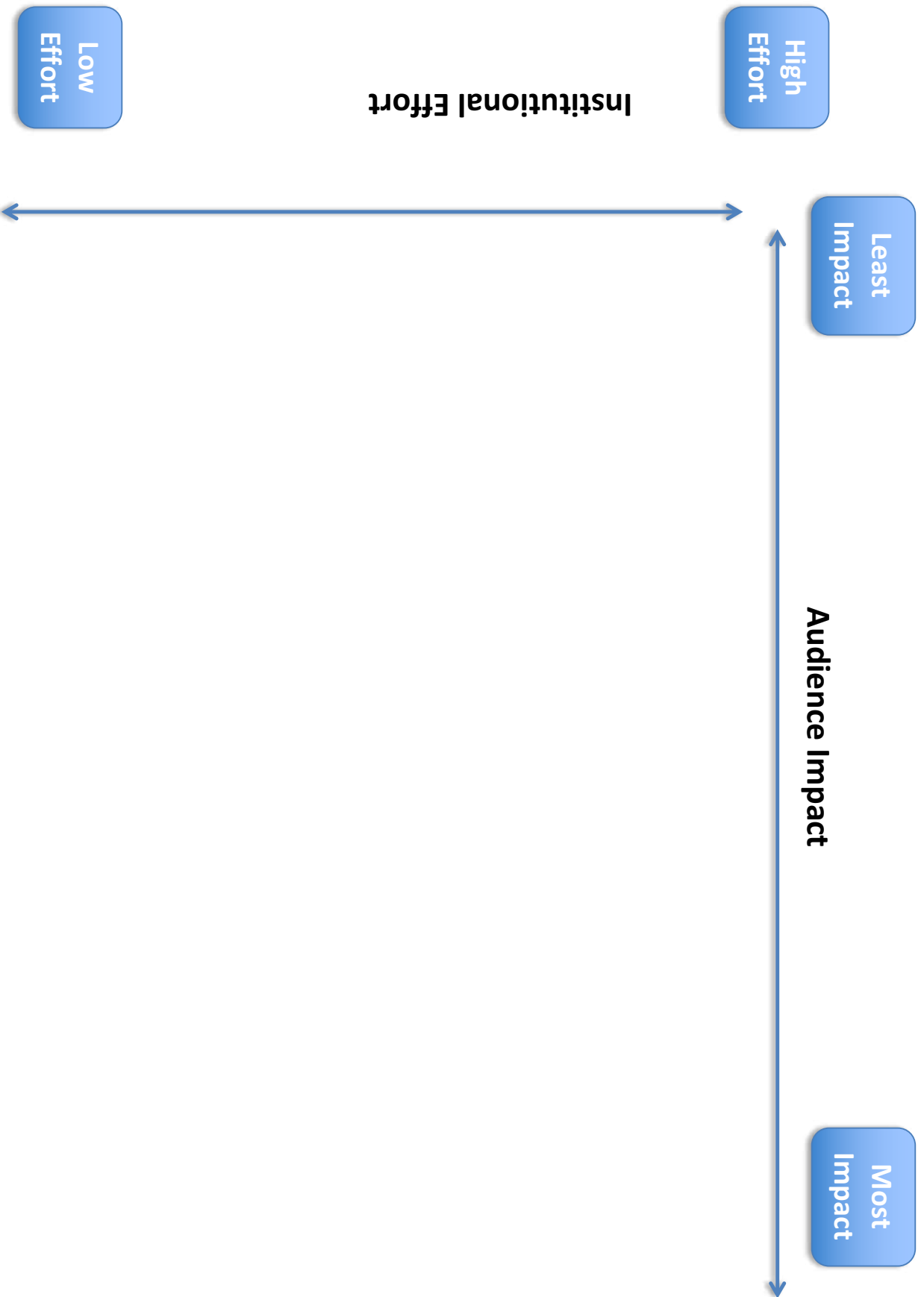
Action

11. Consider action steps that you (personally, departmentally, institutionally) could take to make your programs or exhibits more relevant to your audience. Use the attached graphic organizer to rank these actions steps according to those that are most easy to implement to most difficult, and also according to what would have the least and most impact on your audience.

Be sure to consider what you mean by “audience impact.” Is it about numbers served, time spent engaged in an activity, a specific action taken, etc.?

Then assess characteristics of the steps: for example, sometimes those items that are challenging to do ultimately will have the most desired impact. With those two continuums you can find the sweet spots for improving your institution’s relevance.

Program Impact Chart





Green History: Reframing Our Past to Save the Planet

Andrea K. Jones 

ABSTRACT

History museums sometimes struggle to communicate history's relevance to visitors. By reframing historic interpretation through the lens of environmental sustainability and by developing issue-based exhibits to bridge past and present, Accokeek Foundation (which runs the National Colonial Farm) has made colonial history more meaningful to visitors. This article describes the development of its initiative, Green History, changes made to the general visitor experience, and the creation of a school program, Eco-Explorers: Colonial Time Warp, which has stimulated an increase of student visitation by 48% in two years. Both successes and challenges of making history relevant through the lens of environmental sustainability are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Colonial history; interdisciplinary museum education; history museum; environmental science; participatory museum; relevancy

The birth of “Green History”

At a colonial farm museum like ours, parents and teachers alike are attracted by hands-on historic activities for their children such as pounding corn, churning butter, or candle dipping. Guided by the idea that doing these activities brings “history to life,” many historic sites now offer hands-on opportunities. These activities are fun, they help make history more personal, and they are more interesting than listening to a guide offer a verbal dissertation on eighteenth-century farm life. But could these activities have a purpose beyond just knowing how people lived in the past? Exactly why do visitors need to know about historic butter churning practices?

I was searching for a way to shift the paradigm for interpretation at the National Colonial Farm (run by Accokeek Foundation) when I overheard a mother interacting with her child. “See,” she said “aren’t we lucky we have electricity and cars, and all the things we have today.” I wondered if I had just discovered the underlying motivation for parents to bring their children to historic sites. Do they just want their kids to understand how privileged we are now? To not take their lives for granted? If that is the goal, we are doing a terrible job. While visitors may enjoy participating in farm chores for a very brief amount of time, their experience does not begin to illuminate the real hardship that living off the land presents. In addition, historic interpretation must have more meaning than simply to illustrate how much labor was involved. I thought about what the mother said and looked at the Styrofoam cup she was holding. Yes, life is more convenient today, but through the lens of environmentalism, convenience has come at a great cost.

What if the colonial era was the starting point for an examination of the most challenging environmental issues today? This interesting thought experiment led to a

restructuring of all of the interpretive programs at the National Colonial Farm. In an initiative we call “Green History,” the interpretation of our colonial farmstead is now framed through the lens of environmental sustainability. This new perspective has given our visitors an answer to the question “Why does history matter?” Additionally, this new perspective has sparked new and interesting internal discussions among staff about an era that seemed so familiar.

Take the example of that Styrofoam cup in the mother’s hand. Today, we know that products made of polystyrene are very harmful to the environment, from production to disposal. This substance washes up every day on along the shores of the Potomac River, where our site is located. The devastating effect of Styrofoam on sea creatures that accidentally ingest it is heart-breaking. Yet the use of foam carry-out containers and coffee cups is still widespread. Why? What does this say about us and whether we can change? Perhaps the answers could be found by tracing our values and habits back through history.

If a person traveled back in time and offered a Styrofoam cup to colonist, he or she might scoff at its weak construction. The sturdy metal tankards used in that era were washed and reused for many years. The idea of buying a disposable, one-time use product was first introduced in 1827 with the advent of the disposable paper shirt collar.¹ On the other hand, perhaps convenience could win over a colonist, just like it does for many Americans today. If the cups were inexpensive enough in comparison to a colonist’s income, an exhausted farm wife might find the convenience appealing, to save time on dish washing.

Now add another layer. If you had the choice of introducing this invention to a colonist, would you? After explaining the environmental impact of Styrofoam to a group of teachers, I asked them this question. One said, “That’s an easy one. No way.” I challenged back, “So *you* don’t ever use Styrofoam products?” She smiled sheepishly. Clearly, we have a real disconnect between the people of the present and the people of the past. It’s ok for us, but not for them. We proceeded to have a robust discussion that included the idea that disposable products can stifle the spread of germs in public places. In addition, conveniences related to chores typically performed by women or the enslaved may provide a measure of freedom to pursue other interests or lessen the burden. Fascinating discussions like these led to the creation of our first Green History program, “Eco-Explorers: Colonial Time Warp.”

History + environmental science = adventure!

Eco-Explorers is a school program that integrates history with environmental science and is designed as a role-playing simulation that requires on-the-spot decision-making. As members of a specially appointed Eco-Explorers team, students are engaged in an important mission to save the earth and change the course of history. A problem arises in real time when the Eco-Explorer team learns that a well-meaning time traveler has recently traveled back to the year 1770 to give one family several modern objects to make their lives easier (including a Styrofoam cup). If left on the farm, some of these objects could set in motion a chain of events that destroys the environment for future generations.

It’s up to the Eco-Explorers team (with the help of its Eco-Explorer Captain) to zoom back to 1770 to find these items and weigh their convenience and relative value to the colonials with the environmental threat that they pose. For example, how would introducing

toilet paper 200 years before its time affect deforestation? Is the discovery of synthetic pesticide and its potential reduction of farm labor for the enslaved people on the farm worth the possible loss of bee colonies or bird species (Figure 1)?

The goal is not to present a doomsday scenario that leaves students depressed about the state of the planet – in fact, quite the opposite. History is often presented as a static set of facts, as if every event was inevitable. During the Eco-Explorers program, we emphasize the power of individual decisions to *change* the course of history. At the end of one of our first tours, a fourth grade student held up her plastic water bottle and said, “So if I recycle this bottle, I could actually change the future?” This was evidence that the message of empowerment seemed to be working.

The practical application this student took away from the experience illustrates another way that our new programming is designed to be relevant. She did not have to translate an abstract concept to make it relevant to her own life. Rather than merely explaining, for example, that landfills are filling up at an alarming rate, the program is designed to make the explicit connection between individual action and the effects of those actions. The entire experience is built to inspire students to take their new Eco-Explorer “powers” home with them and to ask: “What modern inventions in my own home are worth their environmental impact?”

Green History for general visitors

After Eco-Explorers was launched, our next challenge was to apply the Green History lens to the weekend general visitor experience. This time, instead of focusing on objects, we focused on environmental issues.

In studying environmental history, one thing that becomes obvious is our loss in connection, over time, to the source of our own survival – the land. Our water comes from a tap and our food comes from a grocery store. No wonder environmental problems seem so impersonal. In 1790, 90% of Americans were farmers.² Today, only 2% of Americans grow food for the rest of us.³ Our staff started thinking about how our colonial setting could help



Figure 1. Students plead with Cate Sharper (enslaved historic character) not to use modern-day pesticide on the colonial tobacco crops.

to reconnect the modern visitor with the value of our planet's resources in a meaningful and explicit way.

Four issue-related themes were chosen: soil health, water conservation, food waste, and energy conservation. Programming around each theme lasts between 8 and 10 weeks and correlates with the natural rhythm of the seasons. For example, soil health is particularly crucial during the spring planting season, so it makes sense that the colonial narrative revolves around the family's struggles to raise tobacco in nutrient-depleted soil. But since we use first-person interpretation on the colonial site, we had to determine how to reference the present day and environmental issues so that the interpreters could remain in character.

To solve this problem, each of our Green History themes is communicated to visitors through a small exhibit that introduces a current-day issue. The theme is then brought to life in the past on our colonial farm. Visitors usually encounter the current-day exhibit first, which provides a great way to frame their experience in 1770. Since the exhibits are staffed by an interpreter, the area becomes a center for addressing questions that cannot be asked of a first-person colonial character.

During our Food Waste theme weeks in the fall, we created a sight rare to most colonial farms – a bicycle rigged to a compost tumbler (Figure 2). The odd contraption prompted visitors to talk to our staff member about compost and the history of food waste in America. They could take a spin on the “Hot Rot” (as we called it) and also play a compost sorting game to win \$2200 in fake money, which is the cash value of the food wasted by the average American family of four each year.⁴ Visuals illuminated the extent of the food waste problem as well as its alarming contribution to greenhouse gas. However, the main focus of the exhibit was teaching practical solutions.

Visitors were then invited back to 1770, to help the Bolton family do some fall food preservation (Figure 3). The living history interpreters on the farm taught visitors preservation methods that have been lost in recent generations, for example, pickling, drying, repurposing bruised apples into apple butter, etc. The characters also made efforts to communicate a deeper message – what the true value of food means when you are the human who has grown it from seed. Wasting is not so easy when agricultural plants are precious



Figure 2. The “Hot Rot,” a compost-turning bicycle, was constructed to increase awareness of current-day concerns about food waste.



Figure 3. First-person colonial interpreters teach visitors forgotten food preservation techniques on the pastoral grounds of the National Colonial Farm.

and cared for over many months. Although most of the visitor interaction is improvised, interpreters are given a few scripted lines to work into the conversation:

What a wonderful time of year. We have been blessed with a truly plentiful fruit harvest – dozens of apples and paw paws – more than we might eat before it spoils. How is your food supply as winter approaches? Well, then you know ... to let good food spoil ... well, I just think of the hours I spent chasing the squirrels, hogs, and birds out of that paw paw tree. So tasty, though. Well worth the trouble. 'Tis also common sense to put something away for more meager times, when food is less plentiful. I'm sure you recall last winter. I don't know if you were prepared but we nearly starved for want of adequate supplies. Oh, come spring, we sure did appreciate those first greens.

What do you do with your fresh food that is about to go bad? Do you dry your food? What drying method do you use? You don't dry them? What will you do if it ... well ... turns? Would you be interested learning how (or helping us) to dry some foods? We're making fruit leather. You could try this at your homestead too.

The combination of the exhibit and the colonial experience bridges past and present so that visitors can see the relevance of historic practices in their lives. The hands-on activities have a deeper meaning. They also give a fuller picture of a specific current-day issue – that it did not appear from nowhere. Tracing the trajectory of an issue leads to interesting inter-generational discussions between family members. Grandmothers remember their own family traditions of pickling and making the most of every part of a chicken. Grandchildren and parents may find that they have a resident expert in forgotten skills and these skills are reframed, from old-fashioned to planet-saving.

It is important to note that Green History interpretation is not meant to romanticize the past. Through the dialogue we bring out the ways in which the 'old ways' were less sustainable under some circumstances. The invention of refrigeration, for example, contributes much to the reduction of food waste.

The past-to-present programming also helps visitors recognize how recent some of our environmental problems are. Food waste, for example, has increased by 50% since the 1970.⁵ The relative brevity of the problem, when featured in this way, can give visitors hope that we can alter the path of this course. We want to pass on this feeling of hope and empowerment that the context of history provides. Of course it is naïve to think that the problem of food waste could be solved without changing corporate practices or

national food policy, but starting with individual awareness and action is an important part of the equation. The future of history is not pre-determined.

With experiment comes challenge

Seeing history through the lens of environmental science has been hugely impactful and perspective-changing for our institution. However, getting everyone onboard with the integration of history and environmental science is not always easy, especially since visitors often expect a purely historical experience.

We work continually to try out different scripted conversation starters to help visitors to think of themselves as current-day environmental decision-makers, while surrounded by the past. Part of the challenge is branding the National Colonial Farm as a site known for this kind of interpretation. Branding is key; we want visitors to come because they are attracted to the theme of environmental conscience rather than colonial history alone. Setting expectations is a key part of visitor satisfaction.

Eco-Explorers has seen a 48% increase in student visitation during the two years of its existence. Additionally, the program recently won the American Alliance of Museum's new Innovation in Museum Education Award. However, the shift from a purely history-based tour has resulted in a few complaints from loyal teachers who have brought their classes to the site for more than a decade. Teachers were not the only ones unhappy. Several tour guides quit their jobs due to the changes in content and the added focus on theatrical role-play. We faced these same issues when I made changes to school programming at the Atlanta History Center in 2012. Museums intending to dramatically re-invent their programming should expect some uproar. Most importantly, however, know that once the initial uproar calms and new staff is hired, new audiences will arrive, and attendance will increase – signs that the programming is working.

The improvement and marketing of Green History weekends for general visitors will be the focus of the 2016 season. Since quietly piloting the themes last year, we will begin to evaluate them more formally and explore options for community engagement to build new audiences who are interested in the environmental content. Green History is still an experiment, and it is one that continues to inspire us to grow as an organization.

Along the East Coast, where we are, you cannot throw a stone without hitting a butter churn or a spinning wheel. There is no shortage of historic farms to get your colonial fix. But attendance for historic sites is declining across the board, and especially for adult visitors under the age of forty-four.⁶ Using history to look at today's environmental issues may not be the answer for every struggling site, but adapting to today's learners is crucial. No visitor should be asking, "What does history have to do with me?" The good news is that it is not too late for struggling museums. We can change the course of history one decision at a time.

Notes

1. Urban Museum Collaborative, *Detachable Collar*.
2. Morris, "Chapter 1: The Emergence of American Labor."
3. American Farm Bureau Federation, *Fast Facts About Agriculture*.
4. Bloom, *American Wasteland*, 24.

5. Ibid., xi–xii.
6. Humanities Indicators, *Historic Sites Visits*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

About the author

Andrea Jones is an educator with 15 years of experience engaging learners. Starting as a high school social studies teacher she followed her interests in experiential education to a career in museum education. At the Atlanta History Center, Jones was part of an award-winning team that created a new framework for a more immersive visitor experience. Andrea Jones now serves as the Director of Programs and Visitor Engagement at Accokeek Foundation in Maryland. She holds a BA in Communications from Purdue University and an M.Ed. from Georgia State University.

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