

IMPACT: The Traveling Exhibit Industry and Sustainability

An awakening to today's environmental crisis is evident within the popular media. Nearly every sector of society has appropriated the terms *sustainable* and *green*, including the museum profession. Much has been published about the construction of *green* museums, but are the decisions being made within these spaces following similar ideals? How sustainable are museum practices? I attempted to determine how one museum practice, crating and packaging, measured against the ideals of sustainability. While developing what amounted to a list of alternative, green products and designs, I realized I was ignoring why crating and packaging is occurring in the first place, namely for loans and traveling exhibits. I realized that simply using bio-composite board for crate exteriors instead of traditional plywood would not reduce the amount of natural resources consumed and wasted by the museum field. It is the system in which crates are used that is unsustainable not crates in and of themselves.

In reference to the environment, *green* and *sustainable* share a similar objective: protect and conserve natural resources. However, the terms are often manipulated by businesses to legitimize inherently flawed processes, and it is important to understand how the terms differ. *Green* generally refers to an end-result--does this product or action have a benign or positive effect on the environment? *Sustainability* reviews an entire system and the relationship between systems; a more holistic, arduous approach. It is easy to be distracted by the false optimism that *green* products will remedy the negative impacts of an unsustainable system. Biodegradable plastic is a good example of a *green*, but *unsustainable* product. Currently more fossil fuels are consumed to manufacture plastic from genetically modified plants than most traditional polymers. Biodegradable plastic may be considered *green* because it degrades under certain conditions, relatively safely, but the product's complete lifecycle would disqualify it as *sustainable*. The forced reliance and over consumption of plastic continues, regardless of whether or not it is biodegradable.

One concise definition of sustainable is meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs. True sustainability is achieved when social, economic, and environmental elements are interacting in a mutually beneficial manner. This harmonious state is illusive in a society that places a disproportionate amount of importance on economics. Growth for the sake of growth at the expense of social and environmental well-being is often the status quo. Traveling exhibits are a major component of the museum field and have many social and economic benefits. They provide a means to share artifacts and ideas with a large audience, and are a source of income for many individuals and businesses. However, the current system of traveling exhibits is not sustainable. The industry's social and economic benefits do not always translate into environmental benefits. The museum profession should be asking why traveling exhibits are needed and how they can function in a manner that balances social, economic, and environmental needs, both now and in the future. The following will explore two components of traveling exhibits that inhibit them from being sustainable: the inefficient use of crates and overall transportation.

The annual magnitude of the waste generated from exhibition crating and packaging is suggested by noting the *Guide to Organizers of Traveling Exhibitions: 2003 Edition* lists 110 exhibit agencies serving museums nationwide. If one considers that the Smithsonian Institution's

Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) alone lists over 40 traveling exhibits totaling approximately 389 crates, the amount of materials consumed and discarded each year must be enormous.ⁱ Preliminary results of an online survey (scheduled to end August 1, 2007) shows that 27 museums ordered a total of 2449 crates in 2006.ⁱⁱ The museum profession must take responsibility for the products it directly and indirectly generates, from specialized paper goods to multi-million dollar exhibits. These commodities are not created, consumed, and discarded in a vacuum. Although there are museums practicing the *reduce, reuse, recycle* mantra, these green initiatives will not create a sustainable system. Until a more efficient, resource conscious system of crating is established--one that balances profits with the needs of the environment and society--traveling exhibits will continue to have a negative impact the environment. Museums and associated businesses must work collaboratively and welcome new ideas.

Typically the decision between storing and disposing of crates is based on economics. Museums that can afford storage are managing a selection of crates, while those with small budgets are forced to throw valuable resources away. Besides the occasional listserv posting, there isn't a viable system to readily share or exchange commonly produced resources such as used crates and exhibit furniture. Instead of creating a system to help one another, museums are trying to solve resource problems in isolation. A cooperative warehouse system could be developed and managed by local or regional museums. Monetary support for the space and management of items could be shared by the museums. Materials could be leased with the funds returning to the cooperative or to the proprietary museums. Another option would be for an independent third party to purchase, warehouse, and either lease or sell materials, similar to a construction salvage center. Art handling and exhibition companies could form similar partnerships, and devise ways of profit sharing when resources are needed by clients outside of the contractor's immediate service area. While such systems would not facilitate every situation they would reduce the production rate of new materials and provide a means for organizations to retain valuable resources. Collaborative actions that preserve and conserve the world's shared, natural resources will be look upon favorably by constituents and clients.

Alongside developing partnerships to share commonly used materials, the profession should review how exhibits are circulated. We must acknowledge that traveling exhibits equal greenhouse gas emissions. Just one SITES exhibit, *The Burgess Shale: Evolution's Big Bang*, traveled 20,044 miles producing 29.3 tons of carbon dioxide. If traveling exhibits are to continue, the field must develop alternative methods to rotate and transport exhibits. Where and when an exhibit travels is the outcome of variables presented by both the exhibit and the borrower. The content, cost, and size of an exhibit generally dictate the borrower and hence location; while the borrower's internal exhibit schedule, which may or may not be planned in advance, typically determines the dates. These variables often cause exhibits to travel great distances back and forth across the country. A new system where lenders direct how shows circulate based on geography not time could be developed. Exhibit companies often advertize works-in-progress to judge interest levels. This business strategy could be a means to establish schedules based on the location of interested borrowers.

In conjunction with improved scheduling methods exhibits could be transported using more energy efficient technologies. For example, low to moderate security exhibits could travel by train. Museum on Main Street, a Smithsonian and state humanities councils' exhibition program,

produces high quality, but low security exhibits. Each exhibit travels from Washington, D.C. in 15 to 19 crates to one state for approximately one month and then return to prepare for the next host state. Comparisons between highway and rail transport have shown there are environmental as well as economic benefits in using trains for distances beyond 500 miles.ⁱⁱⁱ Museums and art handling companies should consult with the railroad industry to explore current options, and encourage the development of equipment and services that would facilitate a variety of museum shipments. Art transport companies could expand their services to include intermodal transport. When highway transport is necessary, support should be given to companies that use energy efficient technologies such as vehicle idling reduction initiatives and auxiliary power units which reduce greenhouse gas emissions.^{iv}

Although some may cringe at the suggestion, the museum field could look to the corporate world for initiatives focused on sustainability. An increasing number of corporations are recognizing the importance of environmental and social stewardship. Environmental impact is being added to cost benefit analyses. Extended product responsibility is pushing design innovations, and entire processes, decades old, are being overhauled in the name of sustainability. Companies are even challenging one another in the eco-friendly arena. For example, Airbus and Boeing are competing to see who can achieve the higher percentage of material recycled from decommissioned airplanes. The public ought to, and will, expect more from our non-profit profession. It is vital that we become active participants in the pursuit of a sustainable future. We should take responsibility for the negative impacts caused by the traveling exhibit industry. If this museum practice is to continue, we must develop ways to use natural resources more sustainably in regards to not only crating and transportation, but also exhibit fabrication and publications. As stewards and educators of the past, present, and future we need to take a leadership position in the sustainable movement.

References

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Endnotes

ⁱ Smithsonian Institute Traveling Exhibition Service <http://www.sites.si.edu>

ⁱⁱ 2007 Survey on Crating and Packaging Materials: U.S. Museum Field being conducted by author
<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=q87MXItb4e3ETq0vXWO2Rw%3d%3d>

ⁱⁱⁱ H. Conlon, Hub Group, Inc., personal communication, April 5, 2007

^{iv} Environmental Protection Agency, SmartWay Transport Partnership
<http://www.epa.gov/otaq/smartway/index.htm>