

BACK TO NATURE

ALICE CARTER gets to grips with reality

Forget virtual reality; give me the real thing any day. Forget being surgically attached to a smartphone or glued to a screen; give me face-to-face contact with a person, a real object with a tale to tell - or a natural wonder.

You don't need to be a celebrity in the jungle to experience the natural world. One of the most appealing museum exhibitions I have been to recently was the revitalised Vivarium at Manchester Museum.

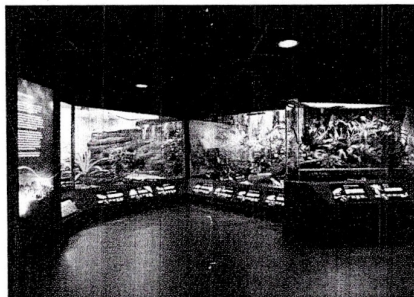
The university museum is one of the few in the country to have a licence to exhibit live creatures and its collection of exotic and often poisonous frogs is particularly popular with children. Many of the creatures in its collection are endangered in the wild, partly because they come from endangered habitats such as the Brazilian rainforests, and the university has decided to increase the visibility of its important conservation work in the Vivarium.

“The Museum is really trying to engage its visitors in conversations”

Just one example of this is the Museum's involvement in a consortium of institutions worldwide that are working to save one very rare amphibian, the Lemur Leaf Frog (*Agalychnis lemur*). Within Costa Rica, this small frog is found only in one last remaining area.

As well as supporting the frog's survival in the wild, Manchester Museum is responsible for establishing the international captive breeding programme for the species to ensure its long-term survival.

For those entering the Vivarium, a visit to the frogs takes you into the dripping and lush jungle, and the arid landscape of some of the reptilian displays might make you yearn for the museum cafe; however, the stars are the inmates - some absolutely tiny or brilliantly coloured: one can but gaze in wonder at them.



The Vivarium at Manchester Museum



Herpetology curator Andrew Gray helps a young visitor release specimens into the museum's new butterfly house



Find the frog in the foliage

The most spectacular have to be the chameleons - not digitally created illusions, but real living creatures changing colour before you. Through a glass pane, visitors can see biologists from the University of Manchester at work in a laboratory, with tanks containing tadpoles at various stages of development.

Attending the opening, I was able to see a small boy releasing enormous tropical butterflies with herpetology curator Andrew Gray into the museum's new butterfly house. Beside it, an array of chrysalises were waiting to hatch - more wonder in store.

Listening to activist Lee Durrell speak of the importance of the university's work brought to mind its benefits not only for the planet's endangered creatures, but also for the museum's nature-starved urban visitors.

Adjacent to the Vivarium lies the Museum's recently redisplayed natural history gallery, 'Living Worlds'. Based on a large Victorian taxidermy collection, the designers Villa Eugenie (crossing from the world of fashion to take on this project) have taken some of the old specimens and displayed them in striking new ways.

Set within the university's original multi-level galleries, first designed by Alfred Waterhouse, the display cases look very traditional before closer inspection.

Each case has a theme to inspire debate, whether it is resources, disaster, peace, conflict, bio-diversity or genetic science; how animals and humans achieve domination; or the symbolic meanings they have acquired and why.

The Museum is really trying to engage its visitors in conversations - giving the long-dead animals a vibrant new role to play, too - and uses modern portable idioms to encourage interaction.

But if all that is just too earnest for you, think of visiting Froggyland in Split, Croatia, where taxidermist Ferenc Mere's collection of 507 stuffed frogs appear in anthropomorphic tableaux playing tennis, performing circus skills and all manner of household tasks.

Personally, I prefer to see them in their natural environment.