

VIEWPOINT

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The Sedgwick Museum of Earth Science has embraced digital opportunities



COLUMN

A digital recovery

Necessity is indeed the mother of invention, suggest Douglas Palmer and Rob Theodore

Museums and their staff have suffered like everyone else during the Covid pandemic and lockdowns. However, many museums have been able to turn a challenging situation

to advantage and actually increase accessibility thanks to the present digital revolution.

The Sedgwick Museum of Earth Science in the University of Cambridge has been lucky in having the staff, financial

support and at least some of the technical means to make the best of a difficult situation. But it is one thing to have the technology; it is another to achieve the desired connectedness, and to have content that people want to see and will encourage them to return to the museum.

Like many other museums, the Sedgwick was already experimenting with a range of digital resources for the public and using social media as an immediate means of connecting and interacting with a new generation.

One way that we have been able to maintain the dynamic of discovery is through our connections with students and researchers. For example, the University of Cambridge's Department of Earth Science recently collaborated with the museum in building a Deep Earth Explorers Online Exhibition. This digital resource complements an exhibition in the museum and we have encouraged engagement via virtual talks. Such talks are easy to arrange and regularly attract between 50 and 100 participants. Now we are out of lockdown, we combine online sessions with group tours in the museum.

Lockdown curtailed public access to some new exhibits, such as 'Dawn of

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Wonderchicken', on Daniel Field's exciting work on one of the best-preserved fossil bird skulls. However, the exhibit was reconfigured by the museum's Exhibitions Coordinator, Rob Theodore, to produce an accessible online display.

The success of such illustrated storytelling technology prompted further online outreach work directed towards local communities. For example, the museum's Gravel Hunters project encourages people of all ages to look for fossils in the flint gravel that is ubiquitous in the area, and to reconnect with the still essential 'in-person' experience in the museum.

Whilst Covid has shown that a museum can have 'digital-only' visitors from anywhere in the world, in-person visitors are still our lifeblood. Hopefully, we will emerge into a hybrid, more digitally connected world with more widely available 'cathedrals of knowledge' to which visitors will return. There is nothing like seeing the 'real thing'.

DOUGLAS PALMER & ROB THEODORE
Douglas is the Information Coordinator and Rob is the Exhibition and Displays Coordinator at the Sedgwick Museum, University of Cambridge