

Educating the Public with Maps and GIS in Museum Exhibits

Daniel Cole

ABSTRACT: This presentation will cover the use of maps and GIS in Smithsonian exhibits over the past 25 years. As such, this discussion will present maps and GIS on display that provide the opportunity to educate the public on a variety of themes (oceanography, biogeography, paleobiology, physical geography and geology, environment, history, human origins, and ancient cultures). These exhibits provide maps in several different formats: generalized maps from which visitors can glean spatial information from as they walk by; detailed maps that require visitors to stop and study so that more can be learned; along with interactive maps, story maps, and GIS. Maps and GIS help us navigate, but they can also be abstractions, as mediums of relationships or interactions over time. At the basic level, cartographic displays provide geographic context to collections and photographs within the exhibit. While at the same time, the maps cannot be distractions to the main exhibit; rather, they must add to and enhance the learning experience for museum visitors.

KEYWORDS: Museum, Education, Cartographic generalization

Daniel Cole, GIS Coordinator, Smithsonian Institution, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, DC 20013