

KATE PHILLIPS

Foundations of *Our Wondrous Planet*: Guiding values and concepts for a new exhibition

Introduction

Our Wondrous Planet is a landmark biodiversity exhibition that opened in September 2025. With 1,800 square metres of exhibition space, it's the largest redevelopment since Melbourne Museum opened at Carlton Gardens in 2000. When we started developing it, the exhibition team faced the challenge of shaping an authentic approach to a vast and multifaceted subject. We advocated for an exhibition that invited visitors to see nature as a living entity of which they are a part, and to recognise their relationship with it as being grounded in care and respect. The exhibition experience would lean into a re-enchantment with the world by highlighting the beautiful, complex and 'magical' relationships that sustain life.

Our approach rested on a foundational commitment to ensure that the exhibition's content and its development process reflected our values — both institutional and personal. The exhibition would honour and communicate First Peoples' cultural knowledge and values, be grounded in contemporary natural sciences and remain firmly audience centred. By attending to the physical, social, cognitive and emotional dimensions of the visitor experience, we aimed to create an experience that was both powerful and motivating.

Here I outline some of the key concepts and values that the team brought into the development of *Our Wondrous Planet* and show how they were expressed throughout the exhibition.

From a First Peoples' perspective, we all come from Country. Country is everything we can see — the land, the water, the air — and is deeply interconnected. Our relationship with Country is based on integrity: respecting all forms of life, honouring ancestors and celebrating family and community. It is a way of moving through the world with reverence, grounded in the understanding that we are all one and that we share this home together. This relationship is reciprocal. To belong to Country is to recognise yourself as part of everything, not separate from it. When people truly understand this, the way they see the world — and the way they move within it — changes completely.

A contemporary natural science perspective recognises that life on Earth has evolved over billions of years. Life comes from a common origin and is interdependent. Life is a constant interplay between networks of living organisms in dynamic environments. Human activities occur within these networks. Humans are animals — one species amongst many — and not, as previously believed, at the top of a hierarchy as superior ‘masters’ with special status.

Contemporary science reveals a complex and compelling story — one that underscores the shared origins of all life, including humans, and our mutual dependence on one another for survival on Earth. Scientists have also been at the forefront of understanding and warning of the dangers of the climate crisis and of biodiversity loss: intertwined challenges that share many overlapping solutions.

The team accepted these two perspectives as complementary ways of understanding ourselves. Together, we hoped they could enrich visitors’ understanding of our relationship with the living world, drawing on the wisdom and knowledge of both traditions.

In the most important ways, First Peoples and natural science worldviews align in themes of interconnectedness, respect for other beings, mutual dependence and celebration of life. In particular, the idea of the connectedness of people and the living world is a strong shared theme. Both forms of human knowledge are built on close observation of the living world over time. However, they differ in some areas, such as origin stories (creation versus evolution) and the ideas of human purpose that flow from them. We also acknowledge that the history of science is enmeshed with the history of colonisation, and these echoes influence our relationships today.

At points during the exhibition development, we tried to integrate First Peoples’ and science perspectives into a single story or interactive. This worked well in some instances, but not in others. Despite our strong shared base, there were uncomfortable moments where the content did not fit together well and we had to find another solution. In these instances, we separated the content streams, allowing some exhibition elements to present a First Peoples perspective and others to present a science perspective, each retaining its own standpoint. This approach can be seen in the ‘Our moment’ area, where four animated stories are shown via a projected wall animation.

We know that many of our visitors have a strong passion for the living world, particularly for animals they know and love. Some past museum exhibits with messages of environmental degradation and extinction have left visitors feeling sad, powerless or inclined to disengage. Today’s news also bombards the public with evidence of the climate crisis, and eco-anxiety is on the rise — particularly in young people.¹

The exhibition team asked, ‘How do we inspire people to act for a better future for our threatened planet?’ and ‘How do we cater for our audiences, which include children?’ We were influenced by current research in psychology and behaviour change, which we combined with what we learned from in-house visitor evaluations to try a new approach. The research emphasises positive messaging:

¹ Fava, N., Gao, C. X., & Baker, D. (2023). Climate of distress: Responding to the youth mental health impacts of climate change. Orygen. <https://www.orygen.org.au/Policy-Centre/Policy-Areas/Social-and-environmental-factors/Climate-of-distress-policy-paper>

Love messages ... speak to our 'biophilic' side — the part of us that loves nature ... And that feeling, used wisely, is the largest untapped motivator for biodiversity action and policy we have. As brand values go, you can't get more powerful than wonder, awe and joy. Wielded expertly, the love message can, quite literally, conquer all.²

And tangible psychological drivers:

Understanding what drives environmentally protective or destructive behaviour is important to the design and implementation of effective public policies to encourage people's engagement in pro-environmental behaviour. Research shows that a connection to nature is associated with greater engagement in pro-environmental behaviour.³

We started with the idea that people look after the things they love and feel part of. If visitors can really feel their connection to all living things, we can shift mindsets from curiosity to care. We identified that our primary role was to create an experience that inspired feelings of connection to the living world. And then, in a few key places, we sought to highlight meaningful actions for biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation.

Our approach integrated interpretive elements to create meaningful interactions within immersive worlds. Responsive projections, sounds and haptics allowed the visitors to both sense and influence their environment. Layered interpretive graphics and objects deepened this engagement and understanding. By combining films, lighting effects and soundscapes into large-scale sets, we created exhibition worlds thrumming with life. In the following examples, we show how this approach can generate feelings of wonder, love and motivation in an exhibition experience.

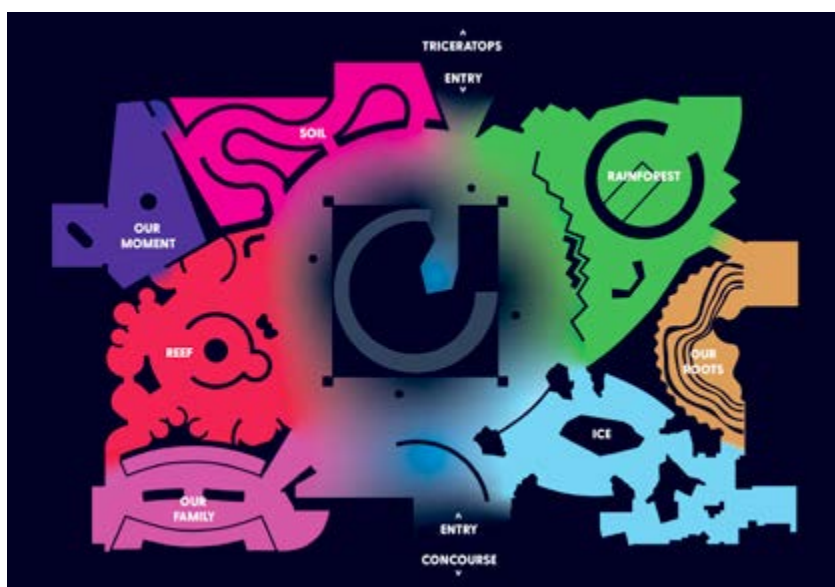


Figure 1: *Our Wondrous Planet* exhibition floorplan showing key areas, 2025. Gemma Field; copyright Museums Victoria.

² Futerra. (n.d.). Branding biodiversity. Futerra Think Tank. <https://www.wearefuterra.com/thinks/branding-biodiversity>

³ Whitburn, J., Linklater, W., & Abrahamse, W. (2019). Meta-analysis of human connection to nature and proenvironmental behaviour. *Conservation Biology*, 34(1), pp. 180–193. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.13381>

The exhibition includes four immersive 'biomes' — generalised environment types (reef, soil, rainforest and ice) — that were selected for their significant role in sustaining the health of the whole interconnected planet. Three additional areas were identified to create a deeper focus on human relationships with nature: 'Our family', which reveals the tree of life and the shared origins of all living things; 'Our moment', which explores tangible actions we can take for a more sustainable future; and 'Our roots', which embodies First Peoples-led connection to Country. A spectacular central projection joins the gallery together by telling stories of our planet's sweeping interlinked systems — from atmospheric and ocean currents to migration patterns and threads of First Peoples knowledge honouring life and interconnection.



Figure 2: The 'Our family' Orangutan showcase, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.

Feelings of connection

'Our family' shows that humans are part of an amazing family of life. *Our Wondrous Planet* includes more than 850 animals from the State Collection, with 'Our family' being the area of greatest concentration. Here, traditional museum taxidermy is presented in a new context — one that is inviting, respectful and created to inspire wonder. The design includes warm colours, curved showcases that gently embrace the space, intimate views of the animals (both models and taxidermy), a gentle wash of dappled lighting and carefully orchestrated animal sounds to bring a sense of vitality. Exhibition interpretation features short explanations of different animal groups, written in first person so the animals 'speak' directly to visitors. Visitors are invited to look more closely at the animals and explore their shared features. This approach invites curiosity and empathy while remaining grounded in science. This marks a clear departure from Melbourne Museum's previous biodiversity exhibition, *Wild: Amazing animals in a changing world*, which occupied a white, architectural space and took a more detached interpretive tone.



Figure 3: The entrance to 'Our family', at the start of the exhibition, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2026. Museums Victoria; photographer: Thomas Breakwell; copyright Museums Victoria.

Animal spirits provide safe passage as visitors enter the space. For First Peoples visitors, the way we display taxidermy animals needed to consider cultural protocols and cultural safety. For some First Peoples community members, totemic systems require them to protect and honour particular animals, including some that are on display as taxidermy. Being mindful of this, the team came up with a few solutions. A sign at the entry to the gallery lets people know that there are preserved animal specimens inside, so First Peoples community members have a choice about what they see. And to honour the lives of the animals, an introductory wall of animated animal spirits leads visitors in with the accompanying text:

With each step, the spirits of these animals guide us in safe passage — as we honour their journey, they lead us through, echoing the rhythms of Country and the interconnectedness of all living beings.⁴

The flowing movement of the animated animals invites visitors to follow them into the space.

⁴ [Our Wondrous Planet introductory text]. (2025). Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.



Figure 4: The curving path of the 'Soil' biome, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.



Figure 5: The hand decomposition interactive in the 'Soil' biome, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.

Humans and nature are not separate

The exhibition uses immersion and interaction to support the idea that humans are embedded in the living world. 'Soil' is one of four immersive 'biomes' — generalised environment types — chosen for its significance to the whole globe. 'Soil' is a magical and dynamic display with models of soil fauna and props representing soil constituents such as minerals, water, plant roots and fungal mycelium bound together by a pulsing network of connectivity. Interpretive text explains these sophisticated and dynamic soil interactions, where lifeforms often work together in mutually beneficial relationships. The visitor moves through this environment along an 'earthworm pathway', interacting with elements on the curving interpretive plinth.

Decomposition becomes both real and enchanting in this interactive. Visitors are invited to '*see how soil recycles your gift of life*' by placing their hand on a digital handprint and watching it decompose as its particles move into the surrounding soil.⁵ Throughout the exhibition, every visitor action has the potential to benefit the environment or reveal a fascinating hidden strength in the environment. These interactives highlight processes viewed through the lens of natural sciences combined with First Peoples' values such as reciprocity and responsibility. Here, visitors contemplate their own bodies being recycled, sending nutrients through the mycelium network to plant roots.

In other interactions in the exhibition visitors remove invasive urchins, help coral to reproduce and feel a mother Okapi calling to its baby with vibrations below the range of human hearing. Each interaction reveals things we don't normally see and so has a sense of enchantment. They support positive feelings of understanding and caring for our living family, with physical touch and activation making visitors feel part of the spaces.

⁵ [Our Wondrous Planet, 'Soil' biome label text]. (2025). Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

Sharing First Peoples' deep connections to Country

First Peoples' knowledge and values underpin the exhibition. Exhibits in each area highlight First Peoples' stories and connections to Country. Figure 5 shows 'Our roots', a space where visitors are invited to relax and reflect inside the heart of an old tree. Old trees have been significant to generations of First Peoples over time, as described by the exhibition's First Peoples story shaper, Rhiannon Williams. In 'Our roots', which includes a soundscape, lighting sequence and text, the message is that connection to Country is as fundamental as breathing.

First Peoples from international communities were invited to participate in the exhibition, including representatives of the Sámi, Norway's indigenous people. Rhiannon Williams and Justice Nelson, head of First Peoples experiences at Museums Victoria, visited Norway to make this invitation in person. It was vital to Justice and Rhiannon that this process was done face-to-face, following First Peoples protocols, and with genuine exchange, listening and respect. As First Peoples working on exhibitions, Justice and Rhiannon invited input rather than translating the stories of other people. This way of working supports unity, trust and community among First Peoples across the globe.

In the film playing in the 'Ice' biome, Sámi man Nils Peder Isaksen Gaup talks about the intimate relationship between his people and their reindeer herds, the rhythms of their lives following the reindeer to their feeding grounds and how this is being impacted by climate change.



Figure 6: The 'Our roots' space, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.



Figure 7: Part of the 'Ice' biome, featuring Sámi man Nils Peder Isaksen Gaup, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2026. Museums Victoria; photographer: Thomas Breakwell; copyright Museums Victoria.



Figure 8: The interactive actions table in 'Our moment' showcases actions to support biodiversity and reduce climate change, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.



Figure 9: The 'Forever world' interactive in 'Our moment', Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2026. Museums Victoria; photographer: Thomas Breakwell; copyright Museums Victoria.

Highlighting sustainability and supporting motivation to act

We understood that the exhibition itself must align with its message. In addition to showcasing actions to support biodiversity,⁶ we needed to embody them with sustainable exhibition design and construction. The environmental impact of materials was considered throughout the exhibition development, prioritising either highly durable materials to last the life span of the exhibition without requiring replacement or those with a sustainable material life cycle. One example of this is in the 'Our moment' area. The table is made of recycled plastic and houses an interactive exhibit of current sustainable actions, technologies and social changes. The table shows that everyone is shaping the future through their actions today, and that these diverse contributions can take many different forms. Visitors see and read about inspiring examples of action and then are prompted to think about how they might implement related actions in their lives, bringing their own skills and interests to work for positive outcomes. Actions can be 'collected' on a phone to act as a reminder after the visit.

⁶ Selinske, M. J., Garrard, G. E., Gregg, E. A., Kusmanoff, A. M., Kidd, L. R., Cullen, M. T., Cooper, M., Geary, W. L., Hatty, M. A., Hames, F., Kneebone, S., McLeod, E. M., Ritchie, E. G., Squires, Z. E., Thomas, J., Willcock, M. A. W., Blair, S., & Bekessy, S. A. (2020). Identifying and prioritizing human behaviors that benefit biodiversity. *Conservation Science and Practice*, 2(9), e249. <https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.249>



Figure 10: An Asian Elephant in the 'Rainforest' biome, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Tim Carrafa; copyright Museums Victoria.

'Forever world' is an interactive wall where visitors bring vitality back to a marine environment, a rural area and a cityscape. By moving their hand across the wall projection, they reveal a series of changes that support biodiversity and reduce human impacts. Visitors are encouraged to transform each scene. When the whole landscape is revitalised, they see a message of success: '*We made it all happen; life is buzzing.*'⁷ It was important that this exhibit showed positive change on a landscape-scale, including both societal shifts and individual actions. In the process of making changes to produce thriving, biodiverse environments, we wanted visitors to see themselves as active participants in the world, with the power to influence it positively.

We were sensitive to the idea that gamification of an exhibition dealing with serious themes could be viewed as trivialising the situation we face (in terms of the joint issues of biodiversity loss and climate change), but the power of interactive elements to connect with our core exhibition audiences created another avenue for engagement. Throughout the exhibition we deliberately resisted the urge to start with messages of loss and crisis or calls for urgent action, even though this is ultimately how we want people to respond. Instead, we hope that exhibits like this one will inspire visitors to see what is possible and envision themselves being active in biodiversity restoration. This approach reflects contemporary research on the psychological dimensions of conservation message framing — that the most effective methods activate visitors' love of nature and inspire positive emotions and hopeful energy.^{8 9}

Evoking the living world, not replicating nature

Rather than replicating nature through dioramas, the gallery evokes living ecosystems in an abstracted way. Using spatial and lighting design, illustration and multimedia, each specimen is surrounded with an immersive sense of place inspired by sounds, hues and forms of nature. The result is a gallery infused with life. In the 'Rainforest' biome an Asian Elephant is surrounded by illustrated vignettes of the many other lives that elephants influence, from tiny dung beetles to the tall trees of the forest itself.

The 'Ice' biome features unique and charismatic animals adapted to life in the cold. A polar food cycle plays out before visitors' eyes as an animation of a Blue Whale swims past. Its pink poo becomes fertiliser for algae, which in turn feeds krill, which in turn feed the Blue Whale itself. A visitor watches as polar ice freezes and generates slow-moving currents. This initiates a massive circulation of ocean water on a global scale, overturning and refreshing the oceans. This circulation is vital for ocean life, including fish populations, and is just one of the many reasons why Earth's icy polar regions are valuable to humanity.

⁷ [Our Wondrous Planet, 'Our moment' label text]. (2025). Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

⁸ de Lange, E., Sharkey, W., Castelló y Tickell, S., Migné, J., Underhill, R., & Milner-Gulland, E. J. (2022). Communicating the biodiversity crisis: From "warnings" to positive engagement. *Tropical Conservation Science*, 15, pp. 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19400829221134893>

⁹ Jacobson, S. K., Morales, N. A., Chen, B., Soodeen, R., Moulton, M. P., & Jain, E. (2019). Love or loss: Effective message framing to promote environmental conservation. *Applied Environmental Education & Communication*, 18(3), pp. 252–265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533015X.2018.1456380>



Figure 11: A visitor takes in the 'Ice' biome, Melbourne Museum, Melbourne, 2025. Museums Victoria; photographer: Dianna Snape; copyright Museums Victoria.

Conclusion

Our Wondrous Planet's underlying philosophy, imbued with First Peoples' values, aims to foster a deep, empathetic connection to the natural world and to encourage immediate action, claiming a role for the museum as both an educator and an agent of change.

An extensive two-year audience research programme was integrated into the project during development and directly after opening to test concepts against visitor outcomes. The success of the gallery has partially been measured through visitor numbers, indicating reach, but primarily through analysing visitor impact surveys to evaluate the gallery's effectiveness in raising awareness and inspiring hope.

In the first six months after opening, *Our Wondrous Planet* welcomed over 334,000 visitors, including over 14,000 school children. The gallery is already the most frequently chosen 'favourite exhibition' at Melbourne Museum, underlining the degree to which it is appreciated by our diverse audiences. Engagement from educational audiences has been particularly strong. Initial feedback led to the school visit length being doubled, as the first school groups reported that their students didn't want to leave and needed more time for exploration and discovery — a wonderful indicator of engagement and connection.

Visitor impact surveys of over 470 visitors reveal that the gallery has had a significant effect in relation to its objectives of inspiring wonder and interconnection, as well as increasing understanding of meaningful actions for a sustainable future:

- *'This exhibition helped me appreciate how wondrous and extraordinary the natural world is': 89% strongly agree.*
- *'I feel more aware of how all living things are connected, including myself': 78% strongly agree.*
- *'I learned that many people are already taking meaningful action to protect our planet': 70% strongly agree.*
- *'I feel hopeful about the future of our planet': 59% strongly agree.*

And this visitor comment summarises one person's impressions after visiting with her family:

Visiting the Our Wondrous Planet museum exhibit was honestly such a highlight of my week. I loved how immersive and thoughtfully designed each section was. From the moment I entered, it felt like I wasn't just looking at displays — I was travelling through worlds. The way they combined visuals, sound, light and interactive elements made the experience engaging not just for adults, but for kids as well. It brought back that childlike feeling of curiosity, where every corner had something new to discover.

What I appreciated most was how educational it was without feeling heavy. I have my hubby and twins with me (1yo). The information was explained in a simple and interesting way, and it made me realise how incredible our planet truly is. I walked out with a deeper appreciation of Earth, and even found myself thinking about how I can contribute to preserving its beauty and diversity. It was both inspiring and grounding. Overall, the exhibit was not just beautiful — it was meaningful. I truly enjoyed my visit, and I would recommend it to anyone who wants to learn something new while being amazed at the same time. I hope more people get to experience this because it's the kind of exhibit that leaves you with wonder in your heart long after you've left.¹⁰

Grounding our exhibition development in shared values and a deep attunement to visitor perspectives has transformed our approach. Early evaluation shows this strategy genuinely connects with visitors — school students and families alike — leaving them inspired, uplifted and ready to act. We will continue to evaluate the exhibition's effectiveness by exploring visitor experiences and what they learn and do. We will also strengthen visitors' knowledge and connection to the living world — and to the museum's conservation research — through talks, articles and online films that add current perspectives to a long-term exhibition. Together, these additional offerings will ensure the exhibition stays relevant, dynamic and impactful over time.

¹⁰ Museums Victoria. (2025). Visitor comment. Visitor impact survey.

Acknowledgements

Everything in exhibition development is a team effort, and the talented and diverse team who brought *Our Wondrous Planet* to life deserve thanks. In particular I would like to recognise the work of Rhiannon Williams and Justice Nelson, First Peoples members of the exhibition team, who ensured that this perspective was at the heart of the project, led First Peoples engagement and supported communities in sharing their stories in the exhibition. I would also like to thank Tracey Taylor and Miriam Capper for their leadership and development of the exhibition content, and for their feedback on this paper.