

## Museum as a Refuge: the case of a community project in La Tatacoa desert in Colombia

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# Museum as a Refuge: the case of a Community Project in La Tatacoa desert in Colombia

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## ABSTRACT

The Tatacoa Desert in central Colombia has been explored by scientists for about a century, but the role of its inhabitants in this endeavor has been limited. This is problematic because it prevents local inhabitants from benefiting from possible results associated with the process of scientific work. The development of the exhibit *Fossil Territory, Living Stories* is an ideal case study to understand the factors that may increase the chance of success of long-term outreach initiatives set in rural contexts where access to basic needs and to educational and cultural offers is limited. A process led by a local community from La Victoria, a small town in the Tatacoa region, brought together researchers and museum professionals to collaboratively develop an exhibit to improve local welfare and strengthen inhabitants' relationship with their territory.

## RÉSUMÉ

*Le musée comme refuge: un projet communautaire pour reconnaître et valoriser le territoire.*

Le désert de Tatacoa, dans le centre de la Colombie, est exploré par les scientifiques depuis près d'un siècle, mais le rôle de ses habitants dans cette entreprise a été modeste. Cette situation est problématique car elle empêche les habitants locaux de bénéficier des éventuels résultats associés au processus de travail scientifique. Le développement de l'exposition « *Territoire fossile, histoires vivantes* » est une étude de cas idéale pour comprendre les facteurs qui peuvent augmenter les chances de succès d'initiatives de sensibilisation à long terme dans des contextes ruraux où l'accès aux besoins de base et aux offres éducatives et culturelles est limité. Un processus mené par une communauté locale de La Victoria, une petite ville de la région de Tatacoa, a rassemblé des chercheurs et des professionnels de musées pour développer en collaboration une exposition visant à améliorer le bien-être local et à renforcer la relation des habitants avec leur territoire.

## KEY WORDS

Community museums,  
museum exhibition,  
Tatacoa Desert,  
social appropriation.

## MOTS CLÉS

Musées communautaires,  
exposition muséale,  
désert de Tatacoa,  
appropriation sociale.

## RESUMEN

*El museo como refugio: el caso de un proyecto comunitario en el desierto de La Tatacoa en Colombia.*

El desierto de la Tatacoa en el centro de Colombia ha sido explorado por científicos durante aproximadamente un siglo, sin embargo el papel de sus habitantes ha sido limitado. Esto es problemático porque impide que los habitantes locales se beneficien de los posibles resultados asociados al proceso de hacer ciencia. El desarrollo de la exposición *Territorio Fósil, Historias Vivas* representa un caso de estudio ideal para entender los factores que aumentan la posibilidad de éxito en iniciativas a largo plazo en contextos rurales y con acceso limitado a servicios básicos y oferta educativa y cultural. Un proceso liderado por la comunidad local de La Victoria, un pequeño pueblo en la región de la Tatacoa, reunió a investigadores y profesionales de museos para desarrollar colaborativamente una exhibición museográfica que incrementa el bienestar social y fortalece la relación de los habitantes con su territorio.

**PALABRAS CLAVE**  
Museos comunitarios,  
exhibición museográfica,  
desierto de la Tatacoa,  
apropiación social.

## INTRODUCTION

The Tatacoa Desert is one of the most touristic sites in Colombia and very famous for its astronomical and paleontological potential. It is located in the Department of Huila, 40 km from Neiva, its capital, between the eastern Andean mountain range and the Magdalena River. The Tatacoa is not a desert strictly speaking, but a tropical dry forest, a threatened and diminished ecosystem in the country (Olaya *et al.* 2000). The main municipality associated with the desert is Villavieja, consisting of five smaller towns which altogether add up to 7300 inhabitants (Regional Information System 2021). One of them is La Victoria (Fig. 1), located in the northern fringe of the desert with a population of about 2500 people.

Like most rural areas in Colombia, the region faces social issues, such as poverty (40% of the population does not have their basic needs satisfied), illiteracy (11.02% of households have some level of illiteracy), and unemployment, among others (Calderón *et al.* 2017).

Given the abundance and importance of Tatacoa fossils, better known as fossils from La Venta, researchers from all over the world have studied them over the past 100 years to understand animal evolution in South America (McDonald 1997; Kay & Madden 1997; Kay *et al.* 1997; Croft & Simeonovski 2016). Members of Christian Schools of La Salle started expeditions in 1923, which were followed by those of the University of California Museum of Paleontology (1940-1949), the University of Kyoto (1977 and 1987), and Duke University (1985-1992) among others (Kay *et al.* 1997). Despite the intense fieldwork and the high number of related publications, up until 2009, local people had little contact with this valuable heritage and the science behind it.

Such disconnection is problematic because it excludes and prevents Tatacoa inhabitants from benefiting from the values that science may provide and, most of all, it limits the dialogue between science and civil society that may foster the solution of local problems (Daza-Caicedo *et al.* 2020).

However, in 2009, a group of ten inhabitants from La Victoria created an informal group to collect and preserve fossils. By 2016, this group acquired legal status as the non-governmental organization (NGO) “*Vigías del Patrimonio Paleontológico La Tatacoa.*” The initiative derived from a

national strategy led by the Ministry of Culture meant to “recognize, value, protect and disseminate cultural heritage by shaping voluntary brigades of citizens who ensure the protection of cultural heritage, and to expand the operational body dedicated to the valuation and the care of the heritage of the Colombian localities and regions” (*Ministerio de Cultura de Colombia* n.d.). The program aimed to increase participation and to promote creative-collaborative processes and management capacities, leadership, and bonding among members of the community.

The local enthusiasm for fossils was inspired by Andrés Vanegas, a natural leader and founder of the *Vigías* group. At a very early age, he found his first fossil in the desert and since then his interest in fossils and paleontology prevailed. Andrés has a high sense of belonging to his community and has led activities and projects, in conjunction with researchers and institutions, to promote conservation, protection and dissemination of all natural and cultural assets and values of their identity. Over the years, approximately 25 people ranging from 9 to 60 year old have participated in this group.

The group extended its objectives to include increasing local awareness of the region's geological and paleontological heritage, conducting science-outreach activities and forming partnerships with scientific institutions and universities. To accomplish this goal, *Vigías* identified the potential of museums to preserve the paleontological heritage and to be settings where science and the public meet in a variety of ways, such as exhibits, hands-on activities, workshops, maker spaces and learning communities, among others, in order to provide an opportunity for different levels of engagement.

*Fossil Territory, Living Stories* is an exhibit developed collaboratively to showcase the richness of fossils and the experiences of *Vigías*. The museographic project started in June 2019 and it was installed in the Planetarium of Medellín at the end of the year as a traveling exhibition. The total number of visitors to the exhibition while in the Planetarium (three months) was about 36 000. Unfortunately, in March 2020, due to Covid-19 restrictions, the exhibition was closed to the public and it remained closed from March 2020 until it went to the *Museo de Historia Natural La Tatacoa*, MHNT, in October 2020 as the first permanent exhibition for the MHNT, created and operated by *Vigías*.

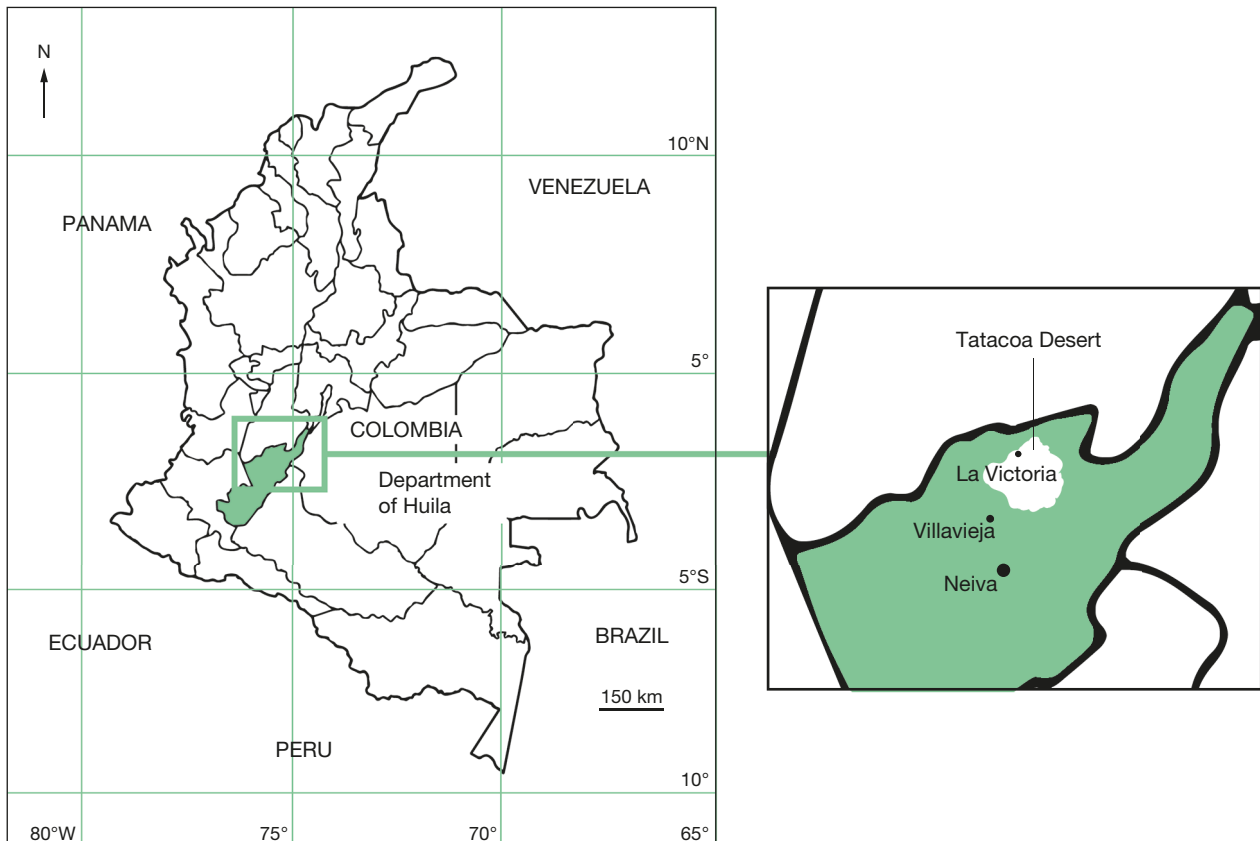


FIG. 1. — Location of the Community Museum (La Victoria, Huila).

So far, the exhibition has served as a trigger for the community of La Victoria to value their territory. A museographic experience seeks to stimulate exploration, reflection or conversation through its contents, stories and formats and allows for different learning environments. Furthermore, it intends to promote meaningful processes of interaction with communities, to provide them with elements to approach and transform their reality through creation, inquiry and experimentation. The museum has the ability to make the inhabitants participate in science-related activities and conversations, giving them the possibility to use time in a better way. In 2021, at least eight teenagers (approximately 17 years old), worked as part of the permanent team of La Victoria's museum. For them, and for many other young people who are still in school, the museum is a healthy pastime and the *Vigías* are role models. In La Victoria there are no libraries, no cinema and no cultural centers of any kind. The museum, on the other hand, offers a small library, interesting conversations and expeditions to the desert. The museum has also become a point of reference for other museums in the region and contributed to the community's awareness of the fossil richness of the territory.

We use the development of the exhibit *Fossil Territory, Living Stories* as a case study to understand the factors that may increase the chance of success of outreach initiatives set in rural contexts where access to basic needs and educational and cultural offers is limited. Thus, we described and analyzed: 1) the social context; 2) the methodological (top-down and bottom-up) approach; and 3) the role of stakeholders.

## THE EXHIBIT

It is necessary to characterize briefly the main components of the exhibit before going into the social context, methodological approach and the role of stakeholders.

The 40-square-meter exhibition showcases 85 fossils, 20 replicas and six reconstructions. It is composed of nine exhibits, distributed in three overarching topics that support content development:

**Fossils:** basic aspects regarding the definition of a fossil: what a fossil is, the process of fossilization and its importance.

**Tatacoa fossils:** the importance of La Tatacoa fossils, which describes a tropical forest surrounded by wetlands with a high diversity of organisms.

**Storytellers:** local paleontologists' experiences. Such stories generate interest in fossils, empathy with *Vigías* and – at the same time – promote protection of the paleontological heritage.

## THE EXHIBITS ARE:

### *Fossils*

**Fossil territory.** A display of real fossils to show the abundance and diversity of fossils found in La Tatacoa. This includes parts, such as teeth, osteoderm and scales.

**Tactile fossil.** Eight fossil replicas available to visitors to touch and to obtain an impression by placing a piece of paper over it and rubbing it with a pencil or crayon.

**More than a rock.** A series of useful questions to differentiate a fossil from a rock. There are four modules divided into two compartments: one for a rock and one for a fossil. By using a magnifying glass and the description of some basic characteristics, such as structure, shape, and patterns, among others, the visitor recognizes which of the two is a fossil in each of the four pairs.

#### *Tatacoa Fossils*

**From Green to Ocher** (see Fig. 2A). A representation of the landscape transformation from the Miocene era to the present day using a vegetation profile, illustrations, fossils and replicas. A map of Colombia is also connected to the vegetation profile for the visitor to observe the five main fossil sites in Colombia and a representative characteristic of each one.

**Among Giants** (see Fig. 2B). A display with a combination of replicas and real fossils and 3D-model reconstructions of six Miocene megafauna species. It also includes six large, life-sized prints in translucent fabric, using the estimated size of animals. Visitors are able to compare their height with a *Purussaurus neivensis* (Mook, 1941), *Boreostemma acostae* (Villarroel, 1983), *Huilatherium* sp., *Gryposuchus colombianus* Langston, 1965, *Pericotoxodon platygnatus* Madden, 1997 and *Granastrapotherium snorki* Johnson & Madden, 1997.

**A Long Story.** A timeline in the roof and walls to gauge the main events in the history of the Earth and life.

**Fossil Preparation Lab and Collection Room.** The exhibit integrated these two areas of the museum by making them available to visitors. As it is common in several other museums, the lab is fully viewable to the public through a glass window and door, so it is possible to see paleontologists, *Vigías* or visiting researchers using tools to remove sediment from fossils or making replicas. There are also two small windows to see the room where fossils are organized and stored.

***Purussaurus*** (see Fig. 3). The giant crocodile, *Purussaurus neivensis* is very representative of La Tatacoa and the museum. There is a full-scale model at the entrance where visitors can take pictures.

#### *Storytellers*

**Homemade Paleontology** (see Fig. 4). A *Vigías* room staged with various elements such as a desk, tables and shelves with photos, maps, tools, fossils, audios, and notebooks, among others, that tell different stories about *Vigías*. This section also includes a map showing the location of the collections and fossils under study that belong to La Tatacoa.

## SOCIAL CONTEXT

The idea of museums as particular settings to interpret reality is especially true in community museums, as the borders among exhibition walls and the “outside” are blurred. The

museum’s narrative provides the community with its own story that dignifies its life. Beyond the enormous potential that La Tatacoa Natural History Museum has in academic and research terms, it is its particular social environment that gives it special importance.

Museums are “knowledge brokers” (Meyer 2010) that catalyze relationships in society. According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM), “A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.” (ICOM 2022). Based on this definition, there is a need to emphasize the social role of museums and how they impact their communities (Sandell 2003; Brown & Mairesse 2018). Community museums are defined as those born in, created, run and managed by the community to portray, recreate, and build their stories to “enrich their relations, to develop awareness of their history, to foster reflection and critical analysis, and to create projects to transform their collective future” (Ocampo & Lersch 2010).

This experience is a suitable example related to Social Appropriation of Knowledge (known by its acronym in Spanish ASC), a concept mostly developed in Colombia, which fosters a dialogue between scientific knowledge and local perspectives, and promotes scientific practice that focuses on the solution of local problems with the inclusion of civil society (Daza-Caicedo *et al.* 2020). The fact that the exhibit was developed according to the needs and interests identified by community leaders may explain its acceptance and impact.

#### MUSEUM AS A REFUGE

MHNT is a space that is considered a refuge. This is a very important part of the social context of La Victoria and one of the main reasons the museum has been able to continue after it was implemented. The museum offers a possibility for young people to be part of something in a place with no cultural offering, many social issues and limited possibilities.

There are three characteristics posed by Croke (2013) in the museum-community relationship that are materialized in La Victoria: 1) MHNT installations provides a tangible sense of place and history; 2) it is recognized as an institution with the potential to strengthen the identity and experiences in the community as people are able to actively participate and reflect in the exhibits; and 3) it is a tool for social change that permeates beyond the museum by mobilizing, for example, touristic infrastructure such as restaurants, hotels and local guides.

By having participated in the construction of the museum, *Vigías* become actors in their own history and heritage, which they keep on enriching. A community that has developed its own museum has more tools to defend and define its interests and projects, reflect on its own reality, and “create projects to transform their collective future” (Ocampo & Lersch 2010).



FIG. 2. — Photos of the exhibition: **A**, from Green to Ocher exhibit; **B**, among Giants exhibit. Photo credits: Parque Explora.

MHNT is a space with peers that share a common interest, and an escape from a difficult home life. The young people dedicated to mediation within the museum, improve skills such as oral and corporal expression, reading comprehension and investigative skills. "If I weren't here, I'd be in the park drinking beer and riding a motorcycle," says Diego, one of the museum's mediators in a conversation with one of the authors of this paper. Along with Diego and the other seven museum mediators, 25 young people provide social service in the museum, which is mandatory for their graduation from high school. On weekends, these 25 young people spend their time in paleontology trainings, watching movies, going on field trips, helping to organize, mark and label the fossils,

and embarking on tasks that improve everyone's coexistence, such as collecting garbage on the outskirts of La Victoria and covering potholes in the country roads.

Museums on this small scale, with initiatives within the community, play a fundamental role in their self-esteem. As stated by Brown & Mairesse (2018), the community museum is an increasingly important concept and practice as local communities in many parts of the world are experiencing the need to strengthen and celebrate their connection to their own collective memory and heritage; not as a nostalgic memory of the past, but as an affirmation of their collective rights and a meaningful anchor for their lives today. Often, this connection is essential for communities to resist and sur-



Fig. 3. — Photos of the exhibition: *Purussaurus*, the giant crocodile in La Victoria. Photo credits: Vigías del Patrimonio.

vive the discrimination, violence and dispossession of their resources that they have suffered and to which they continue to be subjected (Brown *et al.* 2019).

#### TOWARDS A DECOLONIZED MUSEUM

The last idea we highlight in this section is key in understanding the uniqueness of this experience. As opposed to the traditional concept of museums being “institutions in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM 2007), community museums respond to the willingness of sharing a local reality in an also local voice. They do not respond to the need of telling a foreign reality as in the more colonialistic approach of early museums, which are motivated by concentration of power and wealth while community museums create new knowledge and prize their own stories and values (Ocampo & Lersch 2010).

In the act of collecting, classifying and exhibiting, although distances between objects and audiences are established, and – therefore – the sovereignty of the museum as an institution is affirmed, community museums subvert the story and endow it with a political dimension. The collective curatorial act calls into question the notion of heritage imposed by the Nation-State, which defines what should be patrimonialized, and protected, and who should do it (Rufer 2018). In this experience, the innate collective of people goes through poetics of memory and affection that precede any exhibition pretense. Thus, a piece or an object – in this context – acquires value and meaning as it represents the appropriation and construction of community narratives.

The museum has become a point of reference for other museums in the region, and the *Vigías* staff themselves pro-

vide museological support for similar initiatives. This is the case of *La Tormenta* Museum in the village of El Líbano, in Villavieja, where they helped with the organization of the collection. The museum also supports research projects at the local school, such as one on garden plants for dry-forest bees; and builds alliances to promote small businesses, such as the beginning of an agreement with the Tatacoa Brewery Plant to design a space at *La Tormenta* Museum to sell souvenirs in order to promote a productive, youth-led unit. This way, the museum has begun to weave alliances and promote community initiatives that make La Victoria visible as a touristic and economic site in the near future.

#### METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Due to the nature of its context – amply described above – MHNT required an exhibition that went beyond the strict scope of paleontology. The insertion of this paleontological wealth in the town of La Victoria was as important as the history of the *Vigías* and their relationship with the fossils.. An example of how the context is integrated in the exhibition – thus making it more meaningful to visitors – is its overarching idea. Through fossils and replicas of crocodiles, turtles, giant sloths, and other species, the display portrays the change in ecosystems that occurred in the Tatacoa Desert 13.5 million years ago. To this fossil richness, the experiences of young empirical paleontologists, who are inhabitants of the Desert committed to the protection of this heritage, are added. In this exhibition the stories told by both science and locals give value to the fossils.

The curatorial decision on the exhibition’s content is an example of the importance of comprehending the intended audiences’ needs and building a collaborative process in





Fig. 4. — Photos of the exhibition: home-made Paleontology exhibit. Photo credits: Parque Explora.

science-outreach endeavors. To increase chances of success, the design of communication and outreach strategies must include an understanding of the groups of interests and take into account their perspectives, knowledge, attitudes and values (Fischhoff & Scheufele 2013; Varner 2014). Thus, in suitable environments for the communication of science, individuals are able to adapt information that is relevant to their context to “address values, politics, culture and other social dimensions” (Baram-Tsabari & Lewenstein 2017).

By giving ideas on the exhibition’s main themes, selecting and organizing fossils and objects, taking photos, building models and recording stories, *Vigías* are expanding its own notion of territory. Participation in such activities helps them to build “a collective interpretation of their reality and their history” (Ocampo & Lerch 2010). Similar initiatives have increased a sense of belonging and also motivation for local heritage conservation (López-Otálvaro 2019).

We consider this bottom-up approach as a factor that sets this experience apart from other experiences developed that were based on foreign interests unrelated to local communities, thus risking their continuity.

The conceptualization and design of Fossil Territory, Living Stories emerged as a result of the following participatory actions:

Visits to La Tatacoa: Aimed to understand the social context, as well as the needs and requirements to develop the exhibition, conversations and workshops were carried out among the group of *Vigías*, Parque Explora museum professionals and researchers to define the project's big idea and main topics of the exhibit, and to select fossils, replicas and objects, along with the *Vigías* personnel in charge of the paleontological collections. The co-curatorial process also involved researchers.

Visit to Parque Explora: Three members of *Vigías* visited Parque Explora with the two-fold purpose of being trained

as mediators and to train mediators in the contents of the exhibition. Here, mediation is defined as “a set of strategies, tools or activities that favor, beyond the physical space, the relationship of citizens with the contents of the museum” (Arango-Tamayo & Muriel-Delgado 2020). They participated in public talks and events as a way to promote visits to the exhibition. Their visit was an opportunity to allow them to meet with representatives of all departments (Marketing, Finance, Communications, Operations, Innovation) as well as with some of Explora’s stakeholders, with the goal of understanding the Science Center’s organization and sustainability of a Science Center while fostering more relationships.

## DESIGN

The design of the exhibit included three main characteristics, given the nature of the project: 1) The exhibition had to fit in both the temporary exhibition area of Parque Explora’s Planetarium and in the house built in la Tatacoa, so it had to be suitable for different temperature and humidity conditions; 2) it had to be light enough to travel and secure enough to exhibit and conserve important fossils; and 3) the overall maintenance had to be easy and inexpensive to ensure that, if required, the maintenance and replacement of materials would be relatively easy.

Interdisciplinary teams produce more diverse and critical results, by providing a particular vision from their own professional fields. Designers do not adapt information coming from researchers, but rather produce experiences by simultaneously providing all kinds of knowledge. Both designers and researchers contribute, in turn, from various disciplines: architecture, industrial design, graphic design, computer

TABLE 1. — A comparison of top-down and bottom-up approaches in science outreach.

	Top-down approach	Bottom-up approach
The public	The public is seen as passive and a recipient of information (Gross 1994; Miller 2001).	The public is active (Gross 1994; Brossard & Lewenstein 2011).
Communication	Communication is a transmission and translation of information (Felt 2000).	Communication is an intentional social process (Franco-Avellaneda & Pérez Bustos 2010).
Needs	The public's lack of scientific knowledge is seen as ignorance and as a deficit that needs to be overcome by providing such knowledge (Ziman 1991; Besley & Tanner 2011).	Actors' needs, concerns and interests are valued and taken into account (Rogers 2000; Field & Powell 2001; Rennie & Stocklmayer 2003; Weigold & Treise 2004; Nisbet & Scheufele 2009).
Context	There is a gap between 'producers' of knowledge and 'receptors-users' (Daza-Caicedo <i>et al.</i> 2020).  Focused on knowledge and on scientific community interests (Lewenstein 2003).	Individuals receive information in particular contexts, which then shape how they respond to that information (Lewenstein 2003).  Knowledge is applied and enriched into particular contexts and concrete realities (Franco-Avellaneda & Pérez Bustos 2010).

engineering, biology, physics, humanities, art. This bottom-up approach is beneficial to complex processes such as the making of this exhibit. In contrast, in a top-down approach, “producers” of information, scientists or other particular groups are only providers of information.

Formats, contents and conversations depend on the diversity of team members, who balance and feed results from a wide range of perspectives. The quality of the assembly of these three components determines the interactions proposed by the museum. Such conjoint work should be present at all times of the project; outreach should not be considered only at the end of scientific research; and communicators and museum professionals may offer useful insights at different stages.

## THE ROLE OF STAKEHOLDERS

The need to make visible and consolidate both the work carried out empirically and *Vigías'* interest in paleontology was reflected in the idea of a museum that later became a tripartite alliance among *Vigías*, a Science Center, Parque Explora, and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute (STRI), a research entity. STRI was “founded with the purpose of increasing and sharing knowledge about the past, present and future of tropical ecosystems and their relevance to human welfare”. Parque Explora is a Science Center whose mission is “to inspire, communicate and transform through interactive scenarios that contribute to the public appropriation of the scientific, technological and social knowledge necessary for the construction of a better society”

The increasing interest and need of researchers to participate in communication and outreach endeavors matched perfectly with *Vigías'* interests of making a public museum exhibition to increase awareness and social appropriation of the local fossiliferous patrimony. This desire was also suitable to the museum's interest in strengthening its social role, pointing to the most ambitious goals of science engagement, by combining close work with a community and, at the same time, expanding the impact of Explora's geographical limits (Acero & Oviedo 2020). Thus, the same goal convened different stakeholders, triggering the development of the exhibition.

The role of each of the stakeholders, with their different fields of expertise and approaches, allowed for a more interesting project. The alliance of a local community, a research institute and a Science Center is a successful example to show that collaborations and real participation of stakeholders in every step of the project are a great and strategic asset (Acero & Oviedo 2020). As Doctors & Carter (2021) state, “partnerships are crucial for museums to reach new audiences, expand their approach, and simply survive in these uncertain times”.

In developing countries – where there is limited funding for scientific research and, moreover, for outreach initiatives – finding stakeholders is a must. It is possible to leverage resources from institutions with similar and complementary goals, such as universities, research institutes, the private sector and public projects. Besides financial support, the work of a variety of professionals results by having input from fields, such as education, the arts, evaluation, and design, among others. Multiple partners also amplify the impact of the project in outlets like social media or with their own allies.

Community museums promote the development of horizontal relationships among its members and allies in order to reach autonomy and sustainability, as well as to find ways to strengthen abilities by partnering with others (Ocampo & Lersch 2010). A science or cultural institution should be able to understand opportunities and challenges imposed by changing political, social, economic and environmental contexts at the local, regional and national level, and act accordingly depending on its possibilities (Davies & Wilkinson 2008).

Thus, the exhibition's development resulted in an opportunity for partners to reach and expand their goals. STRI's mission to “increase and share knowledge about the past, present and future of tropical ecosystems and their relevance to human well-being” materialized in a common goal set in 2017 in collaboration among *Vigías* and researchers to reconstruct tropical middle Miocene landscapes: flora, fauna and climate, which consolidated field work, collection, preservation and cataloging of specimens. The work started by *Vigías* is now the most complete collection of fossils in La Tatacoa with more than 2500 pieces.

## CONCLUSIONS

Even though the exhibition was opened in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the *Vigías* group worked together to improve the museum's infrastructure, to design and execute workshops for children, and to make products to sell to tourists and visitors. From November 1, 2020, to June 2022, about 7600 people have visited the exhibit in La Victoria. These facts show that the installation of the exhibit at MHNT triggered and strengthened community activities related to the protection of fossil heritage.

The museum has also contributed to the community's awareness of the fossil richness of its territory. Nowadays, when people find fossils, they report them to the museum, and if they are found on their private property, they donate them. These donations contribute to the community construction of the collection and to local heritage. Furthermore, the locals generate a sense of belonging and are a source of pride: many bring family members to visit the museum as well as their personal contributions to the collections.

After the exhibit was developed, one of *Parque Explora's* stakeholders, *Fundación Argos*, supported the work of the *Vigías* Museum by making it part of a tutoring program with volunteers focused on developing a financial and sustainability model. Researchers from *Universidad del Rosario* have also worked with *Vigías* for a while, and they recently developed a public-funded project (the Ideas for Change grant – Colombian Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation) to certify training in four modules: geology, paleontology, scientific tourism and museography, with professionals from *Parque Explora* leading this last module.

The idea of museums as platforms for people to be creators, critics, collaborators and prosumers are places where visitors can establish affective ties with the world. In La Victoria, the museum modifies the environment and are catalysts of social processes.

In this experience, local needs and interests have used the versatility of museum spaces to host parallel processes with different objectives that nurture each other. On the one hand, there is the possibility of housing collections and streamlining research processes, and on the other, of developing public exhibitions with content connected in the essence of the museum. Objects and knowledge that arise from the collections are inputs for the exhibitions, and these – in turn – make the research work visible so that it does not remain in academic settings.

Experiences and exhibitions should have the purpose of being participatory and useful for the community, in which the visitor is the center. Beyond the collections or the description of the phenomena, it is sought that they are open places for communication, debate and social encounter: settings where the construction of meaning takes place.

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