Enhancing Understanding of Science, Nature, and Human Culture

An Interview with Ellen V. Futter,
President, American Museum of Natural History, New York

Ellen V. Futter

EDITORS' NOTE *Ellen Futter has been President of the American Museum of Natural History since November 1993, and she previously served for 13 years as President of Barnard College. She is a Director of a number of for-profit and nonprofit organizations, a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a Member of the Council on Foreign Relations, and a Member of the Executive Committee of NYC & Company. The recipient of the National Institute of Social Science's Gold Medal Award and numerous honorary degrees, Futter graduated magna cum laude from Barnard College and earned her JD degree from Columbia University Law School.*

COMPANY BRIEF *The American Museum of Natural History (www.amnh.org) is a nonprofit, educational corporation, chartered in 1869. It is a member of the University of the State of New York and is accredited by the American Association of Museums. With a mission "to discover, interpret, and disseminate – through scientific research and education – knowledge about human cultures, the natural world, and the universe," the museum facilities consist of 45 permanent exhibition halls housed in 25 interconnected buildings, including the Rose Center for Earth and Space and the Hayden Planetarium, totaling 1.6 million square feet on an 18-acre campus on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Millions of people from around the world visit the museum complex annually.*

Does the general public have a sufficient understanding of the scope of the American Museum of Natural History's work?

The public probably knows us best as a beloved museum, and beyond that, for most people, the museum is a trusted guide – we take people through the story of life on earth, from the very beginning to the most frontier issues of our times. People trust that we'll present it to them straight, and that's very important. But the museum, since its founding, has been a scientific and educational institution. We do much more original research than many people realize. We have a staff of some 200 research scientists. Our scientists conduct over 100 expeditions across the globe every year. It's a highly international institution. We have one of the largest national history libraries in the world, as well as cutting-edge laboratories equipped with up-to-the-minute technology. We are also a very important educational institution. We are the first museum in America with the authority to grant PhDs, which we will do in comparative biology through our new Gilder Graduate School. In addition, we are training nearly 7,000 school teachers a year.

How is the museum using technology to collect and disseminate information?

We use supercomputers on the scientific side. We have the Beowulf Cluster – a group of 384 linked computers. It's quite spectacular. We use technology extensively in our exhibitions – to demonstrate everything from DNA sequences to how a dinosaur moved. We also use technology to educate and distribute our exhibitions outside our walls. So I would say technology is a mainstream tool for us and is emblematic of what a cutting-edge place the museum is, in general.

What are your priorities for the museum in the coming years?

This museum is focused very intently on enhancing the public's understanding of science, nature, and human culture – the world around us. Part of that is working with schoolteachers, children, and families across this great land and around the world and focusing our full arsenal of resources towards improving science education.

For example, we have been leading a newly formed consortium called Urban Advantage with seven other science-rich cultural institutions around the five boroughs of New York. The idea behind it is that whatever the special challenges and difficulties of urban education, we have an advantage in some areas, and one of them is science – through such resources as our museum, but also the zoos and botanical gardens. The consortium works with New York City public schools on what's called the Eighth Grade Science Exit Project, which eighth graders need to complete to be promoted to high school. To make it a better experience, the consortium trains teachers on how to work with their students on that project. Students then come to our various organizations and participate on-site. The museum provides their families with free passes. We have the partnership of the New York City Department of Education, and we've also received funding from the Goldman Sachs Foundation to take the program national – to scale it up and leverage what we've begun in New York to enhance science education throughout the country. Most importantly, studies show that the program works. Students who have participated in it have higher test scores.

The museum also opened a new hall in February.

Yes, the Anne and Bernard Spitzer Hall of Human Origins is the first major hall in the world to show the fossil record of human origins intertwined with genomic evidence. On one hand, it's an exceptional presentation of the origins of humanity, and on the other, it delves into the question of what makes us human and different from other species such as writing and language, creativity, spirituality, and self awareness. It's a very special addition to the museum, and it will be a major attraction for the public.

We're not trying to bring people textbooks. We're trying to bring them major topics, whether it's our origins, the ethical questions around the utilization of genetic material, or protecting the environment. The public looks to us for these topics of the times that concern and interest them.

I think the museum is leading the way for a redefinition of the role of museums in the 21st century. There was a time when museums were seen as passive, purely retrospective institutions – cabinets of curiosity that people went through. Today, we are offering such fresh material that the public is yearning to understand, doing so on-site and online; partnering with school systems; and working in cities and communities to transform the role of our institution and of museums in general. ●