

TRACES OF THE ANIMAL PAST: METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES IN ANIMAL HISTORY

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Creatures on Display: Making an Animal Exhibit at the Archives of Ontario

Jay Young

“Hello human! You aren’t the only species in the archives.”

This simple but provocative hook, accompanied by a slideshow of vintage photographs, posters, and other visual records, welcomes visitors to the Archives of Ontario’s onsite exhibit *ANIMALIA: Animals in the Archives*. Opened in December 2018 as the culmination of nearly two years of research and production, *ANIMALIA* draws on an array of records in the Archives’ collections to show how non-human species are documented in an archival repository, and how animals are remembered in other memory institutions.

Whereas past exhibits at the Archives of Ontario commemorated specific, well-known historical events, *ANIMALIA* takes a different, unconventional approach. It argues for the importance of non-human species in Ontario’s history by focusing on the records of five animal groups: fish, bears, dogs, horses, and birds. To foster diverse perspectives, the exhibit also features stories, records, and artifacts from other provincial memory institutions and organizations, including Deyohahá:ge: The Indigenous Knowledge Centre at Six Nations Polytechnic and the Royal Ontario Museum. In the months following its opening, hundreds of visitors—from



Fig. 16.1 Entrance to the Archives of Ontario's *ANIMALIA: Animals in the Archives* exhibit. Photo by author.

elementary students to seasoned researchers—have taken in the records and stories presented in *ANIMALIA*.

Animals have been interconnected with all human societies of the past, and so it is no surprise that they are an important aspect of public history. From living history museums to national parks, animals range from being front and centre or a secondary part of public history interpretation; they might be alive and require specialized veterinary care or be on display through taxidermy or photography and other forms of visual representation. At their best, public history projects communicate developments in historical research and introduce audiences to new ways of thinking about the past. Such is the case with successful public history projects about animals.

Surprisingly, only a handful of recent public history projects have focused on the role of animals within archival collections. As a historian

trained in academia working in outreach at the Archives of Ontario, I had the experience of curating the *ANIMALIA* exhibit. Here, I want to reflect on some key considerations professionals at one GLAM (Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums) institution faced as they created an exhibit about animal history for a broad public audience. I explore the exhibit's motivations, including the desire to reach new audiences who might have a greater interest in animals than history or archives per se. I then examine the research and content development process for *ANIMALIA*, with a focus on why the exhibit features particular animals, stories, and relationships, while excluding others. I also emphasize the importance of audience interactivity and strategies used to enliven two-dimensional historical records in a three-dimensional exhibit space. Creating an animal exhibit demands narrative choices about audience expectations, physical realities, and institutional dynamics.

The Terrain

The Archives of Ontario is the largest provincial archives in Canada and the premier source of information about the history of the land we now call Ontario and its people. Since 1903, it has been collecting, preserving, and making available the documentary heritage of the province. The Archives, part of Ontario's Ministry of Government and Consumer Services, is the official repository for records that document the decisions, functions, and activities of the largest provincial government in Canada. It also acquires records from individuals, businesses, and organizations that document significant political, economic, social, and cultural developments of Ontario. The Archives' vast collection includes 157,000 metres of textual records, 6.6 million photographs, 418,000 architectural drawings and maps, 84,000 library items, 39,000 hours of audio, video, and film records, and five terabytes of born-digital records. A wide range of researchers, from genealogists, students, and local historians to provincial policymakers, rely on our collections to better understand Ontario and its past.

At the Archives, we know that our records are more valuable if the public uses them. That is why the Archives has a robust outreach program, including facility tours, an active suite of social media channels, and educational programming for elementary, secondary, and post-secondary

students linked to the provincial education curriculum. Exhibits—ranging from online, travelling, and onsite displays—showcase the work, collections, and services of the Archives of Ontario and tell innovative and unique stories from our holdings. At the centre of the Archives' exhibits initiative is the Helen McClung Exhibit Area, located within the Archives' public facility at York University in Toronto. This 185-square-metre space features permanent vertical and mobile horizontal cases, and movable display panels that enable flexible spatial arrangements. Since exhibits are typically mounted for a year or more, the Archives displays reproductions instead of original records. This ensures the long-term preservation of the original documents, which researchers can view upon request in the Archives' reading room. Admission to onsite exhibits at the Archives is free to the general public. Researchers, the York University community, and especially students and educators are key audiences for exhibits at our facility.

Before launching its *ANIMALIA* show, the Archives had mounted seven exhibits since its Helen McClung Exhibit Area opened in 2009. The three most-recent exhibits each commemorated an anniversary in Ontario's history: the beginning of the War of 1812, the start of the First World War, and the 150th anniversary of Confederation in Canada. *Perceptions of 1812: Identity, Diversity, Memory* highlighted records and stories in our collections about how the War of 1812 and its aftermath shaped the character of Ontario. *Dear Sadie: Love, Lives, and Remembrance from Ontario's First World War* explored the lives of four ordinary Ontarians who witnessed the conflict either on the battlefield or on the home front. *Family Ties: Ontario Turns 150* looked at how the experiences of four families living in Ontario around the time of Confederation intersected with larger trends of the era. These exhibits increasingly demonstrated the value of collaborating with other institutions, integrating diverse voices, highlighting captivating visual records and succinct textual interpretation, designing interactive activities to engage visitors, and directly aligning content with the provincial education curriculum.

As we began to plan our next project, the exhibit team at the Archives sought a new direction away from the anniversary model of past displays. We wanted greater freedom to explore a unique topic that had not been showcased at the Archives. At first, we thought big with current relevance

in mind. We considered mounting an exhibit about the environment in some form, as climate change has made the natural world that sustains humanity a key issue for many Ontarians. Of course, “the environment” was too broad and impractical; we needed a more focused topic.

As with our last exhibit, *Family Ties*, the Archives collaborated with York University’s public history program for an undergraduate student to work with the Archives—as part of their course practicum—to narrow the exhibit topic and explore whether we had records in our collections to make the topic feasible. A turning point came during an early meeting with our practicum student, Emma Kuzmaski. She suggested a focus on animal history. Along with her personal interest in other species, Emma was well-versed in the growing field of animal history, having enrolled in Sean Kheraj’s upper-year animal history seminar at York. As soon as Emma shared her idea, I knew it was a promising one.

An animal exhibit offered many opportunities to showcase the Archives’ government and private collections in a new way and engage new audiences. It enabled an exploration of environmental issues, but also of other political, social, economic, and cultural themes. The Archives constantly strives to interest those who might be unaware or even indifferent to our collections and services. To the general public, an animal topic could challenge the stereotype of archives as mere repositories of dusty, irrelevant documents. If animals intrigued prospective visitors, then they could be exposed to our records and hopefully the value and intrigue of archival collections. This would be especially true for the thousands of students who come through our doors for educational programming, who might have little interest in archives otherwise but who are passionate about pets, wildlife, and other creatures. I envisioned young people adoring cute historic puppies, and thus becoming engaged with and learning from archival records—even if they did not realize it at first! An exploration of animals in the archives could be an effective topic to underline the historicity of everyday life: how continuity and change define our world, from the rise and fall of species’ populations to the shifting practices of what animals we chose to keep as companions. Our current research audience, who often explore our exhibits during visits to our facility, would appreciate an introduction to the growing field of animal studies within the humanities. Ultimately, the topic rested on the element of surprise and

a new way of looking at archives: other species are important to Ontario's pasts, and these histories are documented in our collections.

The Hunt

Once the exhibit team had initial support for the topic from management at the Archives, I continued the research process that Emma, our practicum student, had begun. In many ways, research for archival exhibits shares similarities with academic research. Exhibit creators often begin with a list of key questions that drive research, and then they search databases and view large amounts of records. Slowly, a skeletal narrative emerges, which leads to more concentrated research. Following discussions with archivists and other professional staff, I started to get a sense of promising collections to highlight in the exhibit.

When researching and conceptualizing a physical exhibit, however, curators must think in three-dimensions, which is different from a dissertation, journal article, or monograph. I am constantly considering the possibilities and limitations of the physical space, which is less of a concern when the ultimate product is pages of text. Similarly, we have learned from surveys and anecdotal feedback from previous exhibits that visitors prefer seeing more visual records and minimal interpretive text. Since our exhibit is free, "dwell time" (the length of time visitors spend inside the exhibit) is often short, so captivating visuals make a stronger impact than designs that are heavy with text. Our emphasis on dynamic visuals continued as we worked with Context Creative, our graphic design vendor responsible for the design of exhibit panels, wordmark (a text-based logo), and brand identity. We stressed an immersive experience filled with colour and other tactics that could energize the space for students and other visitors.

As my research progressed, an exhibit outline emerged. Initially, we contemplated different sections for various animal-human relationships, such as companionship, food, and work. Yet we felt this structure might cloud the narrative for visitors and lead to a repetition of species that fit within more than one category. Instead, we decided to focus on specific animal groups—a subtle nod to the spatial arrangement of zoos. Although any decision involves trade-offs, we felt our focus aligned best with our exhibit goals.

A key question remained: what animals would be featured, and how many? Which animals would be excluded? Mounting any exhibit involves choices, and some visitors might be unsatisfied. A major consideration was that the animals had to be well documented in our collections in order to showcase multiple record types. After all, creating greater public awareness of the records in our collections is at the foundation of our mandate. We also wanted to feature animals that represented varied relationships with humans, which translated to different motivations for their documentation. For example, animals living outside of captivity are typically documented in different ways in archival records than those with whom humans share companionship. Being a provincial institution of a large geographic territory, it was also important that we select animals found in diverse habitats across Ontario.

We decided to feature records and stories about five animal groups, an appropriate number based on the exhibit area's size and visitor enjoyment: fish, bears, dogs, horses, and birds. Admittedly, there was some debate about the inclusion of dogs and not cats, but canines won out. We simply had more, varied records of dogs in multiple formats than their feline counterparts. Dogs also allowed us to explore a greater number of human connections; in this case, their companionship and their significance as guide dogs, hunting aids, and other forms of work. Other animals chosen for the exhibit also promised an array of stories rooted in diverse relationships with humans. A number of factors influenced the animals that are the focus of the exhibit, from how comprehensively species are documented in our records to the ability to cover wide swaths of Ontario's geography.

The Specimens

The selection of specific animal groups and other considerations determined the stories we told, and those we excluded. A dramatic range of emotions marks the historical relationships between humans and other species. Given the Archives' role as a memory institution and a government organization, mounting any exhibit must be sensitive to our role as a public body and the expectations of our audiences, some of whom are young children. The unique nature of the visitor experience in our exhibit space also influences the subject matter. Most visitors see our

exhibits as part of educational programming or a stop on a wider tour of the Archives' public facility, during which there is insufficient time to properly discuss and contextualize sensitive material. Our exhibit content does not shy away from exploring difficult moments of the past, but controversial topics must be approached delicately. *ANIMALIA* spotlights complex historical themes, like conservation, species extinction, animal welfare, animal labour, and hunting. One obvious exclusion is the massive impact of the livestock industry on Ontario's development, which is only highlighted indirectly in a handful of records scattered throughout the exhibit. This might at first seem like an oversight for a province whose capital city, Toronto, is nicknamed "Hogtown"; nonetheless, our exhibit team felt visitors—especially young students who make up a substantial segment of our exhibit audience—would likely be turned off by multiple visual records of holding pens, slaughterhouses, and other spaces related to animal processing. These tough choices made by the Archives of Ontario's exhibit team speak to the theoretical and practical challenges memory institutions face when creating animal history products for a wide public audience.

Stories in the exhibit examine the impact of humans on animal habitats, and the unpredictability of other species. A spotlight on sea lampreys in *ANIMALIA*'s fish section introduces these concepts and highlights how government records document ecological challenges. Lampreys are a parasitic invasive species to Ontario that kill their prey via a sucker-like mouth filled with sharp teeth. Originating in the Atlantic Ocean, they were first seen in Lake Ontario in the 1830s after completion of the Erie Canal. After expansion of the Welland Canal in 1919, the species spread to Lake Erie and eventually to the rest of the Great Lakes. By the 1950s, lampreys had devastated populations of lake trout, a popular species for commercial and recreational fisheries. One solution—mechanical barriers—did not work. By 1962, the lamprey crisis had subsided in the public's consciousness, following the application of a chemical that killed lamprey larvae. The story is told through photographs, graphs, slides, and other records from the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry's predecessors that bring awareness to the complex field of invasive species management. To help animate these records, the exhibit team commissioned a touchable

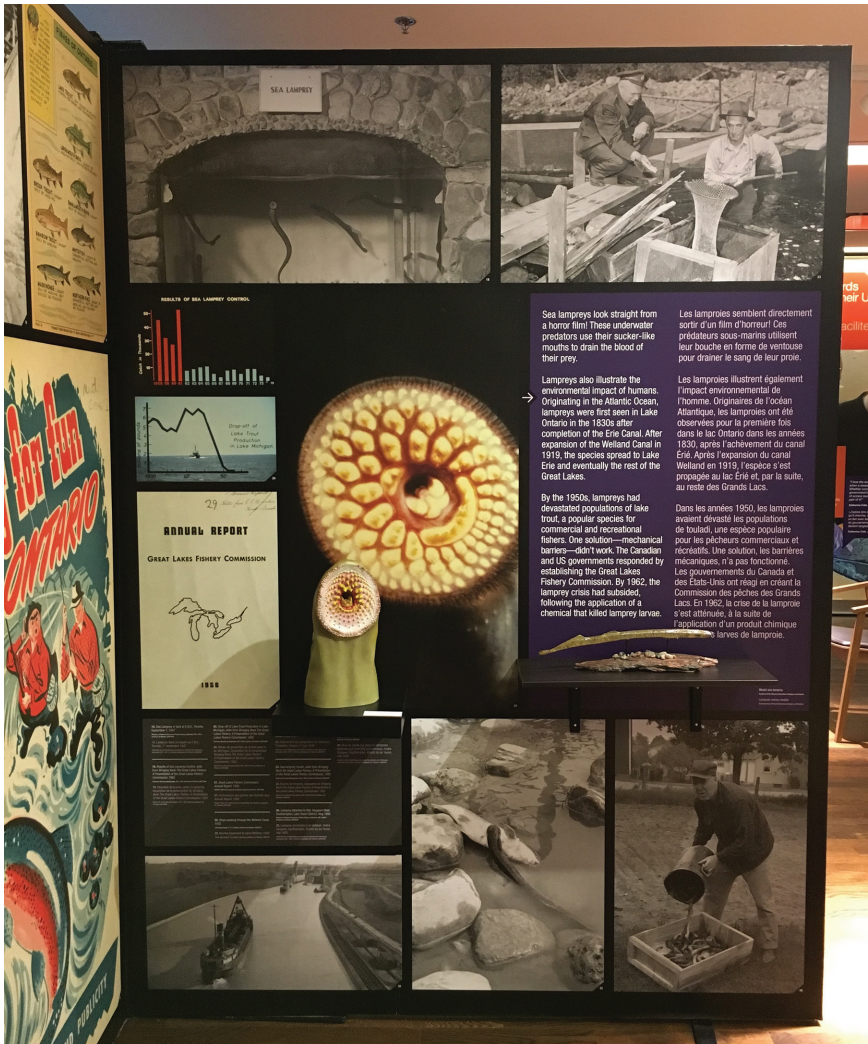


Fig. 16.2 Sea lamprey panel in the exhibit's section on fish. Photo by author.

three-dimensional model of a lamprey's ferocious mouth—a big hit with students!

Collaboration has been key to the success of *ANIMALIA*. Working with other institutions allows the Archives to enhance displays through



Fig. 16.3 G. D. Atkinson Flour & Feed: [street scene], Cornwall, Ontario, [ca. 1900], Marsden Kemp fonds, Archives of Ontario, I0013581.

artifacts, videos, and other sources and assets not present in our collections. Importantly, it enables the exhibit to include a wider range of voices and perspectives and leverage other institution-wide priorities. Doing so also brings further exposure to our collaborators and offers an opportunity for their holdings to be interpreted in a different setting with new audiences. The exhibit's section on bears features video of staff from Deyohahá:ge: The Indigenous Knowledge Centre at Six Nations Polytechnic in Ohsweken, Ontario, reciting stories that show how bears play a central role in many narratives of the Six Nations of the Grand River, shaping Haudenosaunee spiritual beliefs and illustrating their deep-rooted connections to the natural world. The Indigenous Knowledge Centre is collecting these stories as a way of preserving and nurturing Indigenous knowledge and wisdom. For the Archives, collaborating with the Centre has furthered our goal of working with Indigenous communities across Ontario. These videos—like

display cases featuring horse-related artifacts from Black Creek Pioneer Village, a living history museum within walking distance of the Archives, and three specimens from the world's largest collection of passenger pigeons on loan from the Royal Ontario Museum—help us to show how animal memory is preserved in other ways beyond archival records.

The work of archivists and other subject-matter experts is another theme throughout the exhibit. One of my favourite records in *ANIMALIA* is a photograph from circa 1900 of a main commercial street in Cornwall, Ontario. In the foreground, a dog looks away from the camera. Inspired by Susan Nance's poignant discussion of the often hidden presence of other animals in archives, we feature a large reproduction of the photo in order to stress the process of archival research, and the essential role archivists play in describing collections to enhance their usefulness for current and future generations. "This photo prompts many questions about the place of animals in archives, and how they are present throughout the process of recordkeeping," notes interpretive text that accompanies the photo. We are neither aware if the photographer meant to document the dog (likely not), nor do we know much about the dog or its life. Luckily, when the Archives digitized the photo, staff listed "dogs" as a keyword for the record's metadata, which meant I was able to find this photo during research for *ANIMALIA* and include it as a useful—if ordinary—snapshot of one dog's experience in turn-of-the-century Ontario.

The Archives of Ontario believes that interactive activities help visitors better engage with content in exhibits that consist mostly of two-dimensional documents. Over time, our exhibits have increasingly featured elements involving touch, video, audio, searching, and trivia. Years of witnessing audiences of different ages, reading abilities, levels of historical knowledge, and other considerations have shown the Archives exhibit team that interactive activities make for a more active visitor experience. Engagement is the first step in inviting students to learn. Many interactives fill *ANIMALIA*. The exhibit team sought to design interactives that would be fun for visitors, but also introduce them to different historical and ecological concepts. One activity draws on information from a 1965 telephone survey report about dog breeds in the Archives' Elliott Research Corporation fonds (F 245) to urge visitors to think about continuity and change over time. An upright panel asks visitors to discover the most



Fig. 16.4 Interactive panel in exhibit's section on dogs. Photo by author.

popular dog breeds in 1965 and the most current data in 2017 via flip tabs. Not only does it prompt questions about sample size and data reliability, but also about why some breeds have fallen out of favour (Dalmatian) while others have remained on the list (golden retriever) or have become more popular (poodle and Shetland sheepdog). The exhibit's largest interactive feature is the last stop for many exhibit visitors. Oversized reproductions of historic photographs and artworks from the Archives representing diverse habitats within the province wrap across five large glass walls. Here, visitors are encouraged to draw their favourite animal in Ontario and place the paper sketch onto the animal's associated habitat represented on the wall. The interactive urges visitors to think about the diversity of animal life in the province, while giving them an opportunity to become part of the exhibit (and hopefully satisfying those who wish other animals were featured). Interactives bring archival records to life, increase dwell time, play to different learning styles, and foster a more immersive visitor experience.

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Almost a year after its opening, *ANIMALIA* has shown many signs of success. The show has seen almost six thousand visitors, putting it on track to surpass attendance levels of previous exhibits at the Archives. Many visitors have left positive comments in the exhibit's guestbook by noting what they learned and why animals are important to them. Hundreds of elementary and secondary school students have explored the exhibit as part of a full-day field trip to our facility, in which they learn about archival records and Ontario's past. Educational programming at the Archives links to the exhibit's key themes, and students enjoy completing a "scavenger hunt" activity designed to teach them how to draw observational insights from the records, the accompanying interpretive text, and citations. An online version of the exhibit on the Archives of Ontario website, along with "micro-exhibit" content posted on our Twitter and Facebook channels, have also furthered the reach of *ANIMALIA* to thousands more people. As expected, our social media posts have promoted the exhibit to wider audiences, in part thanks to the many different animal-related days of significance (with accompanying hashtags) across Canada and the globe.

Admittedly, a small number of visitors have shared criticisms: in particular, the choice of dogs as an exhibit focus over cats (some in jest and others in seriousness), and the little space the exhibit gives to the role of livestock, animal processing, and related aspects in the province's history. Whereas some may see these silences as missed opportunities, they remind me of the choices curators must make when creating an exhibit within an institutional setting for diverse public audiences. Like any form of public history or cultural production, an exhibit cannot cover all aspects of a topic, especially one as wide as animal history. An exhibit about the documentary heritage of Ontario's slaughterhouses might have its time and place, but the exhibit team at the Archives of Ontario felt there were other topics that aligned better with our institutional context and promised greater appeal to our audiences.

The Archives exhibit team had to consider a multitude of factors related to audience expectation and engagement in the creation of *ANIMALIA*. The physical realities of the exhibit space, along with the Archives' brand and position as a government institution, also influenced key decisions about narrative, tone, and style. The exhibit has shown that the relationships between humans and other animals of the past is fertile terrain for public history projects. It has also demonstrated how exhibits and other forms of public history can take inspiration from emerging fields of academic study and translate research trends into products for popular audiences. In an era when some pundits have questioned new fields of research in the humanities, *ANIMALIA*'s greatest contribution within the academic realm might be how it shows such pursuits to be as enduring and relevant as ever.