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The Experimental Field for Participation and Open Science at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin

Testing new Formats of Participation in Science, Collections and Debates

The Experimental Field for Participation and Open Science at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin aims to test new ways to engage visitors, open up its research and collections and take up controversial debates that connect to research done at the museum.

Currently, the topics of research are taken up in the exhibitions of the museum, which draw on the objects of the collections for this purpose. However, the processes of research (application for funding, publication or critical discussion), of questioning and of thesis and antithesis, as well as the (ethical) debates that revolve around research, its application and its implications for society, have hardly been reflected in the exhibitions to date.

The research at the museum can benefit in many ways from the support of visitors. Not only the extended possibilities of a data collection by citizen researchers or the use of a large number of motivated visitors for documentation, but also the evaluation of data and the development of new questions can generate added value from the diverse perspectives of the visitors and the public in general. Many ethical questions cannot and should not be answered by scientists alone. It first requires a process of opinion formation and finally a broad picture of opinion in order to make political decisions. The museum can play a role here as a mediator. In the collections, the focus is on the objects, but they only become valuable through information on history and current contextualization. The broad participation of the public is also a great opportunity to expand this collection history.

Taking up different perspectives on objects and research questions and making them visible to subsequent visitors as well as incorporating them into research and collection work offers added value for the public and the museum. In the experimental field, research and the collections at the museum are to be made more visible and enriched by a variety of perspectives and opinions. Direct communication between employees and visitors is to be promoted and insights into the work of the Research Museum are granted. Social debates are taken up and opinion-forming processes are stimulated.

The contribution will share the planning process, design and conceptual thoughts behind the project as well as the very first experiences with the “Experimental Field for Participation and Open Science”. Since the museum is breaking new ground with this approach, the experimental field must be a real testing ground where new things can be tried out and the danger of failure is seen as an opportunity. Observation and evaluation are indispensable in order to make recommendations for the further development of participatory formats.