

Welcoming address

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Naturalis, the National Museum of Natural History, is very proud of hosting this important symposium. The organizers made a right choice by selecting our museum for this expert meeting because our geological collections are famous.

The collections (zoological, palaeontological and geological) are stored in the tower of the museum 20 floors high. In all more than 11,000,000 items. The geological collections have a wide scope thanks to, for instance:

- The former mining industry in The Netherlands up to 1970.
- Our former colonies, in particular the East-Indies, nowadays Indonesia.
- Geological explorations all over the world by our scientists.
- The transfer of geological collections by universities and the Dutch Geological Survey (NITG/TNO).

Some of the collections are world famous, such as the Staring Collection. Dr W.C.H. Staring (1808-1877) was the secretary of the Commission for the geological map of The Netherlands. One of the best palaeobotanical collections worldwide has been assembled by Professor Wilhelmus Jongmans (1878-1957); recently this collection has been transferred to Naturalis.

A small collection of as such unattractive minerals and fossils is of special interest, because it is the first of its kind from Japan. Philip Von Siebold acquired them during his stay on the artificial island of Deshima during the first half of the 19th century.

But how do we use the collection? The Museum's mission statement is as follows: –

‘We want to use our unique natural history collections to advance the knowledge of, and appreciation for Nature, aimed at the largest possible spectrum of Dutch society.

Therefore, we want to be THE natural history museum of the nation, operating in an international network of similar organizations.

We do this:

- by curating the largest central archive of natural history in the Netherlands;
- by assembling knowledge on the diversity of Nature, now and in the past;
- by making this knowledge accessible in a differentiated manner to reach a broad spectrum of the public.’

Since the foundation of the museum in 1820 by King William I, scientific research has been prominent, though the geological museum had until 1991 its own exhibitions (The Natural History Museum and the Geological Museum have merged in 1984). Justifiably, Naturalis can be called a knowledge centre of biodiversity.

But how do we transfer knowledge? By publication series like *Scripta Geologica*, by information services and educational programmes, and, of course, by our semi-

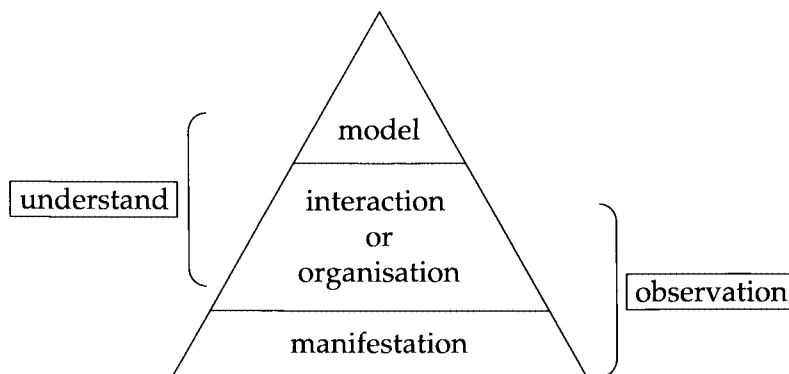


Fig. 1. Educational model.

permanent and temporary exhibitions. For all exhibitions we use the same educational model and modularity (see Fig. 1). The visitor grasps the subject from concrete (manifestation) to abstract (model). So, we try to provide a general history of the Earth as being a large, dynamic system, that is, system Earth explained.

Two huge exhibitions of 1000 m² each, "Primeval Parade" and "Natural History Theatre", show the diversity of the natural world of yesterday and today. The adjacent exhibits "Earth" and "Life" explain the processes that have led to this enormous diversity.

How we - mankind - view nature is very much determined by our culture. That is why I - being a historian originally - like the exhibition "Visions of Nature" so much. The Egypt of the Pharaohs, Taoism, Islam and the Enlightenment are used as examples to give an idea how these four different cultures saw and approached nature. All these cultures struggled with the same kind of questions many of us today are still pondering. Questions like "what are the origins of our natural world" and "what is our place in it?" I can recommend this exhibition to you very warmly, because it makes clear that natural diversity has led and leads to diversity of opinions and thoughts about nature.

Finally, I wish you all a very fruitful symposium and I hope sincerely you will enjoy your stay in Naturalis.