

NEW VISITOR STUDIES GROUP IN THE UK

by Anne Pennington

A new group has been set up to meet the growing demand for networking and support in the visitor studies field in the UK.

It is almost ten years since I began doing visitor studies at National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside and at that time there were only a handful of people working in this area in the UK. If we had problems or queries we could pick up the phone and call one another. Many of us joined the VSA and gained support and networking opportunities from our colleagues across the pond.

By July 1998, the numbers of people in the UK wanting help and information about visitor studies was large enough to warrant an exploratory meeting at NMGM's Conservation Centre. Out of 60 invitations 32 people turned up, many having traveled long distances—clear indication of a desire for action. After agreeing that the formation of a group in its own right was the way to go, a steering

committee was elected and charged with reporting back before the end of the year. I was elected chair.

The next few months saw lots of hard work by the steering committee in preparation for the inaugural meeting which was held at the Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery in November 1998. After a welcome by the director we heard about, and discussed, three evaluation projects carried out at the museum and gallery. The business of formally setting up

• Our aim is to exchange information and support one another as we continue to build a body of knowledge and good practice. Our aspiration is to advance the evolution of visitor studies. We work with each other generously, thriving on low waffle and lively debate.

• We put members of our network in touch with one another.

• We publish studies, hold training sessions and debate key issues.

What's in it for the members?

We held our first event entitled Broadening Access: The Challenge Ahead at the Science Museum in London last March. Access has become the issue of the late 90's for natural and cultural heritage attractions in the UK. It no longer simply means making doors wide enough for wheelchairs or preparing labels in Braille. It also includes intellectual, financial, emotional and cultural access as well as an opportunity to participate in decision-making. As funding increasingly depends on the provision of evidence of broadened access, many of us are busy trying to assess baselines so that we can measure improvements. With the help of three speakers, we looked at the implications of broadening access to museums and galleries and how people are tackling it.

To facilitate debate amongst members, we departed from the standard presentation and question and answer session. Each 20-minute presentation was followed by five minutes of questions to clarify any points before we broke up into smaller groups, led by facilitators, to consider the content of the presentation in more depth. The aim was to give participants the opportunity to

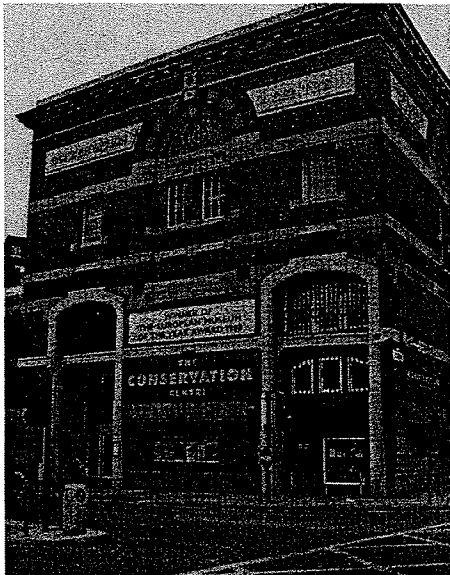
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the Visitor Studies Group was conducted and (for my sins!) I was elected chair of a committee of eight. Currently, the membership is 48.

From the constitution, our mission is clear: to share, develop and promote understanding of the visitor experience in natural and cultural heritage settings. While we work to a long list of purposes set down in legal jargon in the constitution, the committee is preparing a more user-friendly introductory statement about the Visitor Studies Group. It is still being worked on but currently is as follows:

• The Visitor Studies Group is a learning community open to all those who are concerned with the visitors' experience in natural and cultural heritage settings.



The Conservation Centre, Liverpool UK, venue for initial planning meeting of the Visitor Studies Group

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portunity to chew over what they had heard and decide what they could do back at work. Participants felt that this was a useful approach and asked us to repeat it. For the Visitor Studies Group it was a perfect opportunity to facilitate networking.

The next event will be the Visitor Studies Group Summer School in which we will offer two days training to give people new to visitor studies the confidence to have a go at evaluation themselves or to commission an agency. This is in response to increasing demand by grant agencies for objective evidence of the success of the projects they have supported. One agency, in particular, is finding that its grantees are very unfamiliar with visitor studies and so the Visitor Studies Group and this agency are working together to address the problem.

Further down the line, we are planning our first AGM in November at which we hope to have a variety of speakers to give us different perspectives on the work we do. Having spoken to researchers in other fields such as the probation service, the insurance sector and the computer games market, I have found that while the subject matter is very different from ours many of the issues are the same. One example is a concern of many VSA and Visitor Studies Group members—conflict with exhibition designers and curators who can be precious about their subject and lack visitor focus. Surprise, surprise, technical people in the insurance world don't see the need to simplify communications with their customers and probation officers don't see the need to ask offenders' opinions of their corrective programmes. There is much we can learn from discussing other researchers' ways of doing things.

The Visitor Studies Association and the Visitor Studies Group

I would like to reassure VSA members that the Visitor Studies Group was not set up to poach potential VSA members. Many Visitor Studies Group members cannot afford membership of an overseas organisation, much less the cost of flights and conference fees. Existing VSA members are likely to remain so because we have made many friends through the VSA and find the conferences useful—even if we cannot get to every one!

The Visitor Studies Group places high priority on links with other groups for mutual benefit and we hope for especially strong ties with the VSA and the Evaluation and Visitor Research Special Interest Group of Museums Australia. There are a number of ways we propose to form links including occasional publication of

an academic book that would take research papers from all over the world.

Unfortunately, I cannot make this year's VSA conference in Chicago so I cannot meet you to discuss our activities in the UK. However, I would welcome comments from VSA members and we can always find space in the newsletters for articles!

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MEMBERS APPROVE BYLAWS CHANGES

Last fall a ballot was sent to all current VSA members asking them to vote on seven "Motions for Change" to the Bylaws. These changes were mostly designed to bring the Bylaws into compliance with the way in which the election of Executive Officers and Board members are conducted, their terms of office, as well as eliminating certain details that were thought to be too restrictive and better left to the "real time" decision-making powers of the Executive Officers and Board members.

I am happy to report that these changes were approved by the overwhelming majority of those who returned a valid ballot (96%), thus well exceeding the two-thirds majority required for adoptions of Bylaws amendments.

An updated version of the Bylaws incorporating these modifications is being prepared and will be available to anyone who requests a copy.

The Bylaws committee thanks those VSA members who took the time to complete and return a rather lengthy and complex ballot.

Harris Shettel

Bylaws Committee Chair

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VSA 1999 CONFERENCE:
<http://museum.msu.edu/vsa>