



## Air Quality and Public Health: An Opportunity for BC Museums

### Introduction:

Museums and cultural institutions everywhere are striving to become relevant by fostering the well being of their local and regional communities. A range of familiar constraints, including limited funding, collection-driven missions, funder and stakeholder expectations, and the absence of adequate impact measures, hampers many of their efforts. Between now and the end of March, museums in BC will have a chance to discuss and do something about these problems, with a focus on air quality.

Supported by funding from Environment Canada, and in partnership with the BC Museums Association, UVic's Cultural Resource Management Program and WorldViews Consulting, museum and cultural innovators in BC are being invited to work together over the next two months to create novel community engagement projects aimed at air quality and public health. Health Canada, in partnership with Environment Canada, has developed a tool, called the Air Quality Health Index (AQHI), to provide individuals and communities with feedback about threats that affect air quality (at local and regional scales). By consulting and working with the BC museum and arts communities, our aim is to foster innovative initiatives that will make a difference in how individuals cope with poor air quality. But the opportunity goes even further! Using the AQHI as a powerful tool, museum-led projects focused on air quality can help vulnerable populations reduce exposure to bad air and foster dialogue across communities about how best to address the underlying causes of related environmental problems.

This consultation follows on a national study, conducted by WorldViews Consulting in 2009, in which a wide range of cultural professionals contributed many thoughts about the AQHI and how our sector might use it. Some of the ideas included:

- incorporate local AQHI data (provided by Environment Canada on an hourly basis) into existing exhibits, with discussion about the significance for the community – this could include changing rates of hospitalization due to respiratory ailments, etc.
- develop a new exhibit concept on determinants of health, with a component focused on air quality and using the AQHI
- design an organizational policy about the use of certain equipment (eg. lawn-mowers) when air quality is poor (using AQHI) – and to turn this policy/practice into a communication tool that engages the public
- some museums already have 'ecological footprint' calculators, either in exhibits or online, and the AQHI could be incorporated into these existing initiatives
- develop an web-based institutional "dashboard" that tracks the AQHI and other environmental variables that are 'determinants of health'
- develop a program based on how people arrive at the museum – by car, by transit, by bicycle, etc. – with discounts offered according to how much or how little they may be contributing to air quality problems

- engaging community artists to develop public engagement strategies, like theatre performances, to shine a light on health/environment connections, as well as on ways to mitigate air quality problems through personal and public actions
- develop a ‘youth council’ to help create an ongoing commitment to program generation that would keep people involved
- develop a community arts approach that would use the creative spark of artists who work with community in order to generate novel ways to build social cohesion and action around air quality and environmental health issues.

### **New Ways to Measure Success:**

One exciting aspect of this initiative is the opportunity to develop new ‘measures of success’ for cultural programming. In the past it was often enough to create exhibits that addressed one topic or another, regardless of how well they might have engaged people, or whether these engagements actually led to any behavioral impacts. In this initiative, we will be measuring success by focusing on impacts experienced by individuals, as well as using indicators to gauge community-based outcomes.

### **New Partnerships:**

This project will also foster partnerships between museums and stakeholders who have not been active in the sector but have much to contribute, including public health educators, artists, and scientists.

### **Commitment:**

This project must be completed by March 31, 2010, based on the following stages:

#### **Phase I:**

1. Call for interested participants
2. Online introductory conversation to discuss the project and solicit commitment (10:00am, Thursday, February 11, 2010)

#### **Phase II:**

3. Participants build community-level links to public-health practitioners who will become partners
4. Participants begin to flesh out ideas, recording them on a website/wiki designed to foster conversation amongst all participants
5. Second online conversation to share progress and challenges (to be determined)

#### **Phase III:**

6. Meet face-to-face in Victoria (travel, accommodation and food expenses for participants subsidized by the project – number of participants to be limited)
7. Prepare project ideas for submission as fundable projects (to Environment Canada, as well as other funders).

### **For information:**

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