
Text

Water: A Cross-Disciplinary Exhibit Exploring the
Significance, Power & Play of Life's Critical
Resource

2018

A Look at a WATER Exhibit in Appalachia

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artsandclimate

8-11 minutes

Climate change is an oft-controversial challenge – even uttering that term can cause discomfort, especially in the heavily rural areas where land is central to living, such as Appalachia. Visual art exhibitions and creatively designed educational information have the potential to open minds and transform perspectives. We explored this idea through a recent collaborative, interdisciplinary project between the West Virginia Water Research Institute and the West Virginia University Libraries, two organizations that don't read as necessarily creative in the hills of Appalachia.

Appalachians and Climate Change

Climate change is a serious global threat, and there is scientific consensus that [humans are a contributing factor](#). Yet, some environmental educators face skepticism when trying to explain climate change, especially in Appalachia. In West Virginia, [40% of adults do not believe global warming is happening](#). This is higher than the national average by 11%. Many indicators can be used to predict climate change attitudes, such as values, political affiliation, and knowledge. Moreover, improved climate education

can reverse negative views about climate change in youth. Climate change education can further be improved by creating a space for conversation. As explained on the [Yale Program on Climate Change Communication](#) website: “Individuals, communities, and societies come to understand, care, and act on climate change through their communication with other people.”

Old habits die very, very hard, as the news reminds us every day, but change begins with illumination – attention, pointing, identifying and generally shining lights in dark places. News organizations play a role in this. So, increasingly, do crowds of people with cellphones and laptops. And so do certain kinds of art.

— [Roberta Smith, New York Times, 2011](#)



Exhibitions' Ability to Open Minds

As co-chief art critic for the *New York Times*, Roberta Smith recognizes the significance of exhibitions and their potential for impact. Art exhibitions and creatively designed visual and

interactive exhibitions on other topics, do not necessarily tell people what to do or think, but engagement with them can [connect people to their senses, body and mind](#). Exhibitions can help viewers identify with others and expand their notion of identity – locally and globally. Thus they are incredible strategies for reaching people.

Visiting exhibitions in institutions such as museums, archives and libraries is culturally understood as seeking knowledge. Given these institutions' unique position in our culture and society, exhibitions developed and displayed by them automatically provide a privileged perspective, one that can and should be utilized but also recognized so as not to unintentionally exclude or mislead anyone.



In addition to the traditional, well-known cultural institutions that most often attract tourists, there are other spaces where people come to satisfy their curiosity or to look for everyday information: the libraries. As library content becomes increasingly digital and learning more social, exhibitions can provide new ways of engaging users' intellect and creativity, providing visual

representations of topics that encourage focus, contemplation, and reflection. As libraries evolve into a new sort of space – still used for research, learning, and study, but also for community engagement and collaboration – they present a unique opportunity to engage both collaborating exhibitors and guests. In this neutral space replete with resources, ideas are protected and encouraged and may reach people who wouldn't normally seek this kind of experience.



Collaborative Creations

With this in mind, collaborating with the [West Virginia Water Research Institute](#) to curate an exhibition around water to display at the [West Virginia University main Downtown Campus Library](#) was an idea to both model interdisciplinary work as well as give greater exposure to the work of scholars, artists, and practitioners already working on these topics. This concept is a new one for the libraries, whose [Art in the Libraries](#) program was originally started to cover blank wall space. And although the West Virginia Water Research Institute develops educational and outreach programs, curating an exhibition was a new venture.

Gathering content from diverse fields that look at the same topic – water – in different ways, and creating a flowing, visually interesting, narrative for both academic and lay audiences, is also an innovative concept.

The process was both basic and complex: we put out a call for content, developed by the Art in the Libraries committee (comprised of art and library faculty) and by us invited specific individuals, and also encouraged outside contributors. Everything was accepted – from one sentence to 20-page articles, and from paintings, to poetry excerpts, to landscape designs, to drainage system maps. We gathered over 30 contributors from campus (students and faculty) and from the community (organizations and artists).



The complexity began here: we had to organize this vastly different content into themes and an order that would make sense and provoke intrigue. We used interpretive curatorial thinking, which aims to [make topics “come to life” and relate to visitors](#), rather than informative thinking, which aims to simply provide gleaned information. Keeping our audience – mainly Appalachians – in mind, we designed a flow for the exhibit and settled on three main themes with a number of sub-themes:

1. Educational – What is water to Appalachia?

- a. West Virginia Water Ecosystems Provide Habitat and Biodiversity (Rivers)
 - b. Wetlands & Appalachian Species
 - c. Water Cycle
2. Creativity & Action
 - a. Art in Motion (Poetry & Art)
 - b. Adventure West Virginia (Recreation)
 - c. Landscape Design
 - d. World Wide Issues & Impact (Climate Change Internationally)
3. Regional Issues & Impact
 - a. Flooding
 - b. Pollution
 - c. Acid Mine Drainage
4. Solutions

Featured 5 local organizations working to make change in West Virginia's water and climate situation.

5. Beauty & Plastics

Two installations featured beautiful water views of West Virginia, and opposing, an installation of plastics over an image of water, discussing this issue in depth.

Once we had this plan laid out, we worked together with the designers to come up with creative integrated visual concepts, and curated the contributors' content down to fit the exhibition designs. This process was a lot more complex than what is described here! We also developed complementary programming and other, smaller, exhibitions on more pointed topics, such as gender and water.

Hope for the Future

We hope that such an inviting and accessible display of significant and timely information leads to changing perspectives around the issues explored in the exhibition, including local climate change. Such models of collaborative, interpretive and interdisciplinary exhibition developments are exciting, and may just be what is needed to make real change as we move towards an uncertain future.

Over **250 species** have been ingested or become tangled in plastic.

Learn more at WVU Libraries' WATER exhibit.

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(All photos courtesy of WVU Libraries.)

[Megan Kruger](#) is the Environmental Education and Outreach Coordinator for the West Virginia Water Research Institute where she works to develop and implement curriculum for WVWRI

outreach and educational programs. Megan attended West Virginia University where she earned her B.S. in Wildlife and Fisheries Resource Management. During her time at WVU, she focused on environmental education, conservation, and wildlife biology. She is currently finishing her Master's degree in Environmental Education. Megan is a West Virginia native and is passionate about promoting environmental conservation, ecological understanding and a respect for nature and science, especially to the younger generations. She likes to spend time with her family, take the dog for walks, explore the lake on her kayak, and birdwatch.

[Sally Deskins](#) is an artist, curator, and writer focusing on women in the arts, and feminist and curatorial issues. She currently serves as Exhibits & Programs Coordinator for West Virginia University Libraries. She holds a Master's in Art History from WVU, and a Master's in Public Administration from University of Nebraska. She has published articles with Hyperallergic, Artslant, Bitch Magazine, among others. Her art is exhibited nationally, examining the relationship between motherhood, womanhood, and the body. She has won two Nebraska Book Awards for her illustration of books. She edits the blog [Les Femmes Folles](#). Sally is a Nebraska native. Her passion is inspiring and impacting broad audiences through nontraditional, interactive exhibitions. In her spare time she spends time with her family, travels, listens to music, creates art, and watches Netflix.