



We Are Water MN

Visitor Experience Evaluation

2016-17 Final Report

Prepared by
The Improve Group

Project overview

We Are Water MN is an exhibition and a collaboration between the Minnesota Humanities Center, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, Minnesota Historical Society, Minnesota Department of Health, Minnesota section of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, and six greater Minnesota communities. In 2015-2017, the collaborative hosted *Water/Ways*, a traveling exhibition and community engagement initiative of the Smithsonian Institution's Museum on Main Street program.

The 2015-2017 project brought together six host site communities and together we engaged in a year-long exploration of water and the host sites' identity, history, and culture. Host sites created local companion exhibitions, community events, and educational programming with a goal of telling their unique water stories and engaging thousands of Minnesotans from across the state. The exhibit visited each community for six weeks each.

We Are Water MN exhibition goals

The Minnesota Humanities Center and its partners hope to accomplish four goals through the *We Are Water MN* exhibition:

- Share national, state, and local histories and narratives about water.
- Reinforce Minnesotans' individual relationships with water.
- Reinforce Minnesotans' individual responsibility for water.
- Build relationships between Minnesotans through community engagement events and activities preceding, during, and after the exhibit.

Exhibit components

The *We Are Water MN* traveling exhibition is composed of three components: the *Water/Ways* exhibit created by the Smithsonian, the state exhibit developed by the *We are Water MN* partnership, and local exhibits created by each host site.

Smithsonian exhibit: *Water/Ways*

According to the exhibit materials, The Smithsonian's *Water/Ways* exhibit "dives into water--an essential component of life on our planet, environmentally, culturally, and historically." The exhibit includes information on the practical and spiritual role of water worldwide and in American society.

State exhibit: *We Are Water*

The *We Are Water* exhibit features three key messages about Minnesota's water: the current state of pollution/pristineness of Minnesota's many water bodies; local stories and issues; and the ways in which Minnesotans have affected water for the good and the bad.

Local exhibits

Each host site developed their own exhibit to tell local stories about water. These exhibits included community members' stories about water, current and historic photographs, and local artifacts.

Evaluation overview

Evaluation goals

The visitor experience evaluation was designed around the following goals:

- Demonstrate how the program/exhibit impacts participants' relationship with water as indicated by their:
 - Knowledge about water issues;
 - Attitudes about local water resources;
 - Motivation to take action;
 - Participation in stewardship activities; and
 - Relationships with community members.
- Identify how unique components, factors, and/or elements impact the participant experience.

Evaluation questions

The visitor experience evaluation was designed to answer four primary evaluation questions:

1. How does the community's/participant's relationship to water change after visiting the exhibit?
2. What is the participant experience with the *We Are Water MN* exhibit and programming?
3. How does the *We Are Water MN* exhibit and related programming practice the Minnesota Humanities Center core values?
4. What aspects of the partnership between the Smithsonian, the Minnesota Humanities Center, state sponsors, and host sites contribute to the success of the project?

Methodology

The data for this evaluation was collected through interviews with host site representatives, visitor and event surveys, visitor observations, and program data. Three interactive components – water stories, water drops, and a push button survey – were also used to evaluate the visitor experiences. The Improve Group and We Are Water MN partners analyzed the qualitative data for themes to uncover findings. Survey responses were used to support these themes.

Visitor Exhibit Findings Overview

The *We Are Water MN* exhibition attracted:

7,468
visitors

1,600+ event
participants

398 opening
ceremonies attendees

We Are Water MN visitors shared:

901 water
drops

718 water
stories

750 water
protection pledges

Exhibit outcomes:



Nearly 750 visitors committed to take responsibility for protecting and conserving water after attending the exhibit.



Over 200 people took immediate action by participating in conservation and protection activities.



4 out of 5 visitors reported they were more knowledgeable about water issues after attending the exhibit (83%).



Survey respondents cited the importance of water protection and water conservation as the most important lessons of exhibit.



Local exhibits included rich content about the host site communities, residents, and perspectives.



Visitors learned about others' relationships to water by listening to interviewer-collected water stories and exploring visitor stories on the water story map.



Host sites said the collaborative approach of the project and focus on relationship-building helped to create high quality and engaging exhibits and events.

What will **you** do to protect your community's water?

Tell us

Tell how you would:

- Learn more
- Talk with neighbors
- Join a group
- Make changes at home
- Volunteer

Listen to someone with different...

83% of visitors said they learned about water issues by attending the exhibit

Visitors said they were more knowledgeable about water issues and were more likely to take action after attending the exhibit.

After attending the exhibit, visitors reported increased knowledge about local, state, and national water issues and motivation to participate in water conservation activities. Participants also reported having a better understanding of the variety of perspectives about water in host site communities after hearing other people's stories and attending community events.

Visitors expressed increased awareness of personal responsibility for protecting and conserving water on exhibit "water drops" and during conversations with host sites.

Visitors committed to nearly 750 actions to conserve and protect water by filling out a water drop for the "Tell us" action panel. These actions were sorted by the amount of effort they will take to implement and the level of impact. The goal of the project was to inspire challenging personal and community-level actions.

Exhibit visitors committed to:

551 simple personal actions

152 challenging personal actions

43 community level actions

Over 200 people participated in conservation and protection events

- **Simple personal actions** are individual level changes that do not take a significant investment of time or money to make.
- **Challenging personal actions** include changes that take a significant investment of time or money to make.
- **Community-level actions** include actions that take significant effort and involve working with others in the community.

Actions ranged from small personal actions, such as recycling and taking shorter showers, to community level actions, including joining water protection groups and influencing local policy. One in five people listed challenging personal actions, such as planting rain gardens, updating plumbing, and reducing chemical use.

In addition to pledging to take action to protect and conserve water, over 200 community members participated in protection and conservation activities before, during, and after the 6-week exhibition. Each host site held at least one conservation and

protection activity as a part of the project. Activities included a community clean-up day, Adopt-A-Drain sign up events, and joining watershed clean-up activities.

Local exhibits raised awareness of local water issues and deepened visitors' understanding of local history as it relates to water.

Each host site developed a local exhibit that included information about local watersheds, the history of local water bodies, and stories from community members about their relationships with water. Many visitors said the local exhibits and events, which included historic pictures, artifacts, and local narratives, were the parts of the exhibit they liked best.

Each local exhibit focused on the unique geography and history of water in the host community. The local exhibit components ranged from historical pictures and maps to permanent exhibits that covered generations of water history. Many visitors said the local components helped them relate to the exhibit messages of protection and conservation by applying the message to local water issues. For example, the local exhibit at Becker County Historical Society on the history of commercial ice and bottled water production made visitors think about how dramatically local water quality has changed over the past century.

Local water stories were a way for visitors to share their own personal experiences while learning about other community members' relationships with water.

Over 700 water stories were collected during the *We Are Water MN* project including 108 interviewer-collected stories that were gathered before the exhibition period. These stories captured a wide range of experience with water – from water as a daily part of visitors' lives to deeply personal stories of love and loss. In addition to sharing their stories, visitors also marked the place the story took place on the water story map in the exhibit. At the end of the exhibition period, the water stories were preserved in online Story Maps so people can continue to explore the stories.

Over half of the visitor stories (319) were about using water for recreation – including swimming, fishing, camping, and canoeing or kayaking. Many of the recreation stories also included themes of relationships with family, friends, or community members. Other visitor stories made the connection to the exhibit's themes of water protection and conservation by sharing personal stories about their own water protection activities (52), how water quality has affected their families (28) and how the ways we have changed or reengineered bodies of water have led to personal tragedies (26).



Visitors said the exhibit was educational, visually attractive, and relevant to the host site community.

Overall, the *We Are Water MN* exhibit was well received with the majority of visitors reporting the exhibit was educational, well designed, and satisfying. Visitors also said they liked the variety of elements, including the high-quality photographs, messages, and family-friendly interactive exhibit components. Survey respondents said the informational content and local exhibit components were the parts of the exhibit they liked best. Visitors' favorite parts of the exhibit were:

- The informational content (31%)
- The local exhibits and events (22%)
- The quality of the exhibits (17%)
- The interactive components (15%)
- The water stories and story map (10%)

Host sites said they received positive feedback from visitors about the amount of information and non-judgmental messages in the exhibit. They added that many visitors commented on the amount of water required to make everyday items such as clothes and food. During formal and informal observations, host sites noticed that the interactive exhibit components, water stories, and video kiosks were the most popular parts of the exhibit.

When asked what they liked least about the exhibit, most survey respondents said "nothing." However, some visitors thought there was too much content to digest during their visit, especially in the Smithsonian exhibit. Other visitors felt like the exhibit did not have enough family-friendly content. Some visitors had minor complaints about technical or design details, and a few said their experience was impacted by accessibility issues or factors outside of the host site's control.

"Number one thing was the flip book that indicated how many gallons of water it takes to make every day items... (students) would quiz each other about it."

– Host site representative

Visitors learned about industrial water use, the threats to water, the importance of protecting water, and how water issues impact Minnesotans.

In conversations with host sites, visitors said they learned a lot from the exhibit, especially about how fragile and vulnerable water is. Most survey respondents said they were more knowledgeable about water issues after attending the exhibit (83%) and over half of the visitors who used the exhibit interactive survey said they were more knowledgeable about the condition of water in Minnesota (53%). When asked what they wanted other people to know about the exhibit, most survey respondents wanted to share one of the primary messages of the exhibit. A third of visitors said they wanted others to know about the overall quality of the exhibit (38%).

Many visitors said they wanted to share this information with others, and some visitors encouraged their friends and family to attend the exhibit. For the Becker County Historical Society, this desire led to an increase in family memberships when students who came to the exhibit on field trips asked their parents to go back to see the exhibit again. Some of those families ended up joining the Historical Society.

The *We Are Water MN* exhibition attracted many first-time visitors to host sites, including visitors from all over the state.

The exhibit attracted new visitors to the host sites. More than half of the survey respondents were first-time visitors to the host site. Many of those visitors traveled significant distances to attend the exhibit. While a third of visitors said they traveled less than 10 miles to the host site, nearly as many traveled 50 or more miles.

Three in five people were first time visitors



- This was my first time
- 2-3 times
- 4 or more times

One in four visitors travelled over 50 miles to the exhibit



- Less than 10
- 10-24
- 25-49
- 50-100
- Over 100

New and returning visitors were often impressed by the quality of the host sites' other exhibits and offerings. Several host sites shared that hosting the exhibit raised the profile of their organization in the community. In some cases, the raised profile has led to an increase in the number of visitors, memberships, and donations. One host site representative said that the exhibit also led to a significant increase in the number of active volunteers they have. Another said many visitors remarked about what an incredible institution and museum their site is, not just because of *We Are Water MN*. Based on feedback on the companion exhibit, several host sites plan to display the local exhibit and related components on a long-term basis.



Community engagement events during the planning phase led to an increased sense of local ownership by engaging community members and local organizations in planning and executing the *We Are Water MN* exhibition.

While preparing to host the exhibit, host sites planned events and community meetings to foster a sense of community ownership of the project, to come to a shared understanding of water resources, and to increase participation in water protection activities. Community engagement events and activities were designed to expand the *We Are Water MN* exhibition beyond a one-time visit to a community-wide event.

Host sites held community meetings to get input on exhibit content and community events. These events and other outreach activities were useful in recruiting volunteers and project partners. For some host sites, community engagement efforts led to partnerships with local businesses, nonprofit organizations, and community members that turned the *We Are Water MN* exhibition into a city-wide celebration. Other host sites said engagement efforts allowed them to tap into local expertise that led to stronger exhibit content. While some host sites felt they could have been more successful at getting community input during these events, they all felt that engagement activities led to a stronger final product.

Outreach events and relationships with partner organizations helped to raise awareness and increase the number of visitors to the exhibit. Host sites said partner events like concerts, trivia nights, and complementary exhibits helped to drive traffic to the exhibit because the partner events were another way to get the word out about the exhibit.

Community engagement events and activities helped build awareness of local conservation, restoration, and protection efforts.

In all, host sites held over 60 events before, during, and after the 6-week exhibition. Events ranged from film screenings, arts exhibits, river walks, and musical performances, to water protection and conservation activities. These events were intended to bring the messages of the exhibit to community members who may or may not have attended the exhibit. Over 1600 people attended host community events before or during the exhibition period.

Many of the events helped to strengthen community members' relationships with water. In Lanesboro, a water blessing held at the Historic Stone Arch Gravity Dam attracted 80 visitors, including a well-known local writer. The dam is at risk of collapsing, and the city has failed to get it on a bonding bill for the past 5 years. Following the water blessing, the writer wrote an editorial article reflecting on his relationship with water and his experience at the event. That article has stimulated dialogue and discussion about local water issues.

"We had water blessing at the dam on opening day, had 80 people which blew our expectations. I was continually surprised. It's hard to overstate the value of having this in winter in a seasonal town."

Some of the events had immediate impact on conservation and protection efforts. Each host site received a

- Host site representative

conservation activity grant to fund local conservation and protection events, such as community clean-up days and Adopt-a-Drain efforts. More than 100 volunteers and five partner organizations took part in these efforts. In Red Wing, 85 volunteers and local partners contributed to the 5,100 pounds of trash collected during a Cannon River Watershed cleanup event. This was the first time there was a Red Wing cleanup site for this event. In Spicer-New London, 20 people signed up to care for drains to protect the Middle Fork Watershed. In Lanesboro, five nonprofits collaborated with Lanesboro Arts to plan a community cleanup day as a part of the *We Are Water MN* project.

Participants learned about local water systems, landmarks, and the way water has shaped host site communities during local events and activities.

Every host site held at least one off-site event, including field trips to water treatment plants, fish hatcheries, and a local wildlife refuge. These events and field trips strengthened the connection between the exhibition's messages about water protection and conservation and the need to take care of local water systems. Activities did not have to be organized or planned by the host site in order to be successful. For example, a bus tour about water in Kandiyohi County brought a number of visitors who were interested in learning more about local water systems.

Attendance and participation varied with some host sites reporting many successful events and others noting they were disappointed by some events. In general, events for the whole family, events with strong community ties, and unique events had the highest attendance. By far the most popular event was the Okee Dokee Brothers concert, which brought over 800 visitors to Prairie Woods Environmental Center.

“The music and the message of the (Okee Dokee Brothers) performance definitely complimented the entire Smithsonian Project and attracted hundreds of people to the exhibit,”

– Host site representative

Some host sites felt location was a factor in making a strong connection between community engagement components and the exhibit. For example, in Lanesboro, many downtown organizations and businesses were involved in the project, which turned the exhibit into a community-wide event, giving restaurants and local business a reason to open during the off-season. Other host sites had events and related exhibits throughout the community, such as an interpretive river walk in Red Wing and field trips to local landmarks in Detroit Lakes. In contrast, Nicollet County Historical Society and Prairie Woods Environmental Learning Center did not feel as successful with their events, in part because they did not feel like they were able to create a strong connection between the community and the exhibit. Those host sites said their locations were a barrier to making the connection.

The Smithsonian name attracted host sites and visitors to the exhibit, but the state and local components kept them engaged.

All the host sites said that the Smithsonian name was one of the reasons they chose to be a part of the project. They all felt that having the Smithsonian name on the exhibit would increase the number of visitors and make it easier to find the resources they needed for developing the exhibits and events. This was supported by the survey results, in which a majority of the visitors said they knew the Smithsonian was involved in the *We Are Water MN* exhibition (75%) and the Smithsonian name was a factor in attending the exhibit.

“The real hook is the Smithsonian name, but that creates a Trojan horse”

– Host site representative

Survey respondents said the parts of the exhibit they liked best were the local pictures, water stories, and the interactive components of the state exhibit. Host sites felt that the exhibits featuring a local or regional focus had a greater impact on visitors, especially in drawing personal connections to watersheds and stewardship. Some visitors said the state exhibit had more substance in it than the Smithsonian exhibit. Other visitors felt the Smithsonian exhibit had an overwhelming amount of information and was less interesting than the state and local exhibits. Visitor observations and informal host site observations support the survey findings. Host site representatives

said visitors spent the most time at state and local exhibit components such as the water stories, photos and artifacts, and the state exhibit’s interactive components.

The focus on the power of narrative encouraged host sites to seek out new partnerships and relationships that reflect their community.

All of the host sites said the project’s focus on incorporating absent or missing narratives encouraged them to seek out new partnerships that reflect the diversity of their communities. Host sites partnered with schools, recruited speakers from native communities, and tried to build relationships with recent immigrant groups. A few host sites said they were disappointed that they were unable to make some connections during this project, but they plan to continue to seek those relationships out. Examples of missing relationships include connections with native communities and recent immigrants.

Presenting the exhibit materials using a variety of mediums made the exhibit accessible to people of all ages.

Host sites used art, music, and narrative approaches to engage visitors and event participants. These different approaches made the project relevant to a wide variety of audiences, from school-age children to elder communities. Student art events engaged school-age children in thinking about local water systems and created a direct connection to groups that are often missing in conversations about water issues. The narrative approaches used in the video and audio stories helped inspire people to think about their own water stories and share them on the water story wall. The interactive exhibit components engaged children and families in water protection and conservation activities.

Collaboration with local partners increased the quality of exhibit components and content.

All the host sites stressed the role collaboration and relationship building played in making the exhibition successful. They explained that collaborations with local partners helped to create exhibit content and programming that supported a plurality of narratives. In particular, collaborative efforts between host sites and schools allowed sites to incorporate student narratives. Host sites said collaborative approaches reinforced individual relationships with water and responsibility for water through art, music, history and environmental science. They added that participants found the events welcoming and inspiring.

In addition, host sites appreciated the opportunities to learn from each other during the host site retreat and host site webinars. Each host site brought their own area of expertise to the project, including experience in developing exhibits, conservation and protection, and event planning. These gatherings

were a way to share that expertise. All of the host site representatives expressed an interest in continuing to collaborate with each other on future projects if there is an opportunity. Two host sites, Goodhue County Historical Society and Nicollet County Historical Society, are actively looking for such opportunities.

The support, expertise, and technical assistance offered by the state sponsors and the Minnesota Humanities Center were key to each host site's success.

The We Are Water MN partnership works with host communities and organizations that are ready to engage in important and difficult questions around water, have the capacity to host a travelling exhibit, are interested in working collaboratively with state and local partners, and will practice the Minnesota Humanities Center's Absent Narratives approach. The state partners support community engagement in host communities through trainings and expertise, resources, and contacts.

Each of the partner organizations contributed to the project by sharing their areas of expertise, knowledge, and statewide networks. The partners also helped host sites build relationships with local organizations, find technical and financial resources, and plan exhibit and event logistics. One host site said the best thing that came out of hosting the exhibit was the new partnerships, including those with the local Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) offices.

Host sites leveraged the relationships with local DNR and MPCA offices when developing the more scientific elements of the exhibit and events. This was particularly valuable for historical society staff who feel strong in history but are less confident in the scientific realm. The Minnesota Historical Society's support was helpful for all the host sites, but particularly for the host sites that lacked experience in exhibit development. Several host sites said the MPCA, the DNR and Minnesota Department of Health were valuable resources for making sure the local exhibits were scientifically and technically accurate.



Every host site said the support and encouragement they received from the Minnesota Humanities Center and the MPCA made it possible for them to develop local exhibits and plan events with limited staff and time. In addition, local MPCA and DNR offices were a valuable source for volunteers who helped with setting up the exhibit and serving as docents.

The state sponsors also participated in opening events by having high-level representatives give remarks at opening ceremonies. The state sponsors' participation in opening events raised the profile of the exhibition at both the local and state level. Almost 400 people attended opening events, which exceeded all of the host sites' expectations.

Conclusion

Overall, visitors to the *We Are Water MN* exhibit said they were impressed by the quality and content of the exhibit. Visitors said they were more knowledgeable about water issues after attending the exhibit, and many of them pledged to take some level of action to protect and conserve water. Community engagement events, activities, and the Smithsonian name all helped to attract visitors to the exhibit, but most people said the state and local components were the most compelling elements. The project greatly benefited from applying the Minnesota Humanities Center's values around the power of narrative, collaboration, and relationship building. All of the host sites said the relationships they built through collaborations with community members, local organizations, and We Are Water MN partners were incredibly valuable in developing a successful project. Ultimately, all of the host sites felt that being a part of the project attracted new visitors, led to new relationships, and raised the profile of their organization. Every one of them stressed that this project was one they would do again, and they encouraged other communities to be a part of future exhibitions.

[The partners were] stellar, accommodating, enthusiastic. They got back to us in a really timely manner, and we were never left hanging with questions.

- Host site representative