



SANTA CRUZ MUSEUM

of natural history

MUSEUM FACTS

Establishment

In 1904, local lighthouse keeper Laura Hecox deeded her collection of shells and other curios to the City of Santa Cruz for the establishment of its first public museum. On August 21, 1905, the Hecox Museum opened in the basement of the new downtown library. The Museum has since made its home in various locations throughout Santa Cruz, finally coming to its current location in the Seabright Neighborhood in 1954.

Physical Space

The Museum is located in a historic Carnegie library built in 1915 by Watsonville architect W.H. Weeks. In the 1960s, additions were made to the building to accommodate new exhibits and growing collections. The Museum building is owned by the City of Santa Cruz, and is located within Tyrrell Park. The Museum also manages the surrounding Garden Learning Center and nearby Pilkington Creek as part of the City's "Adopt-a-Park" program. The iconic grey whale statue in front of the Museum was installed in 1982, with significant renovations in spring of 2025. To this day, many locals refer to the Museum as "The Whale Museum", although the whale is owned and cared for by the City.

Collections

The preservation of biological, ethnographic, and historic objects allows for the creation of our educational and informative exhibits and contributes to scientific research. These collections are preserved for study and display for generations to come. Only a small percentage of our collections are on exhibit. Our collection currently contains over 16,000 items, some of which are stored offsite.

Exhibits

Museum exhibits highlight the region's diverse plant, animal, and human communities from the shoreline of Monterey Bay to the summit of the Santa Cruz Mountains. Live animals and hands-on components invite children and adults alike to discover their curiosity and connect with the natural world. The Museum also hosts rotating temporary exhibits, including an annual scientific illustration exhibit. Many of the Museum's exhibits can be enjoyed virtually, including a guide to our Garden Learning Center.

Attendance and Reach

On average, the Museum welcomes over 15,000 visitors for general admission annually. About 55% of our visitors come from Santa Cruz County, with the majority of the remainder visiting us from within the state of California. In total, through Museum exhibits, programs, and events we reach over 30,000 people every year.

Operations

In 1978 the Santa Cruz Museum Association formed as the non-profit arm of the then Santa Cruz City Museum to support education and membership. In 2009 the City of Santa Cruz turned over operation of the Museum to its long-time non-profit partner, the Santa Cruz Museum

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Association (officially renamed as the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History in 2013). As an independent, non-profit organization, the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History now depends upon our local community and other generous donors to keep our natural history legacy thriving.

Board and Staff

The Museum is governed by a volunteer Board of Directors. The Board guides our Executive Director in fulfilling our mission to connect people with science and nature to inspire stewardship. The Museum employs full and part time staff to support the achievement of our Mission, in areas such as visitor services, education, collections, operations, and garden care.

Education

Since 1980, the Museum has been a local leader in education, bringing engaging programs to school children throughout the region. The Museum offers an array of field trips, both at the Museum and in local open spaces, reaching over 7,000 students and their families each year. The Museum also provides classroom presentations, educational kits, and virtual resources. Museum educators work closely with local teachers to ensure programming is aligned with standards and meeting the best practices for environmental education.

Public Programs

Public Programs at the Museum offer dynamic and inclusive places for learning, dialogue, study, and exploration. Through community outreach, virtual presentations, small-group gatherings in nature, large community events, and stewardship and volunteer opportunities, the Museum builds community around a shared curiosity for and appreciation of the natural environment. Programs help communicate how science impacts our daily lives by connecting local experts with community members, including researchers at UC Santa Cruz, science illustrators, tribal members, and other non-profit organizations.

Membership

The Museum has over 800 members, ranging from individual seniors to families. Our affordable memberships start at just \$20 per year and all members receive free admission, discounts in the Museum Store, and access to exclusive programming and events. Membership dues support the preservation of our collections, exciting new exhibits, and education programs and resources that are crucial to our local community.

Financial

In fiscal year 2024, the Museum operated with a budget of slightly more than \$1 million. About 50% of expenses were applied towards education, programming, and exhibits. Over 56% of revenue came from individuals and sponsors, with 24% coming from earned income. In the winter of 2025, the Museum launched the quiet phase of its Bright Future capital campaign to support building improvements.