Field Trip 2 Reaction Paper:

National Museum of Natural History

On February 12, 2012 I travelled to the National Museum of Natural History with some of my fellow members of the Science and Global change scholars group. At least one field trip is required each semester, and this particular one stood out to me over the others. I have only visited this museum as a child, so I thought it would be interesting to go again as my years of schooling have enabled me the understand and appreciate the field of natural science more. By really reading the plaques and signs I could now relate the concepts displayed in the museum to broader topics, rather then simply browsing through the exhibits and awed by the extremely real figures.

The National Museum of Natural History displays a multitude of information relating to the natural world. Studies of human origins, dinosaurs, the ocean, and geology are all examples of what is available to explore. Information on each topic is presented through the use of realistic figurines, descriptive writings on the walls and signs, videos, and interactive features. For this assignment we examined the galleries, “Written in Bone: Forensic Files of the 17th Century Chesapeake” and “Bones.”

The first hall I visited, “Written in Bone: Forensic Files of the 17th Century Chesapeake,” presented the stories of 17th century European and African settlers of the Chesapeake Bay. The field of science this exhibit focuses on is mostly forensic and human anatomy related. As you enter the exhibit information is presented depicting the ways that scientists can “read” the skeletons they find buried under the ground. This introduction provides the concepts needed to understand how they determine such detailed histories of people from the past from something as peculiar as their remains. An example of such a concept includes the determining factors of male
and female skulls. Males have large brow ridges and rounded foreheads, while women’s brow ridges are less sloped and their foreheads more vertical. This information was conveyed through writings and photos on a large portion of wall. Different ancestries among people also provide different skull shapes, examples of which were on display in the exhibit to show these variances. With the knowledge of these distinctions, forensic anthropologists are able to tell information such as gender and ancestry of those who have died years ago.

As you progress through this exhibit the information presented applies the forensic science described before to a specific case, the 17th century Chesapeake. Multiple studies focusing on different individuals are presented on the walls, with their bones on display underneath their descriptions. Also described are the differences in bone structures relating to social class. Servants and slaves would have denser bones than the landowners due to labor and rigorous use of their bodies. This hall tells you the stories of these early settlers of the United States, each of which shows how science can be used to discover what led to their eventual end.

The hall, “Written in Bone: Forensic Files of the 17th Century Chesapeake,” was aimed more at the high school level and above. While younger visitors could still enjoy the life-like sculptures and the hands-on forensic anthropology lab at the end, in which they got to handle the bones on display, the majority of the hall was readings that would most likely not hold their attentions. Despite this education gap, the interactive lab was effective in conveying the information presented throughout the readings. There were many children exploring the area when I entered, so it seemed to be keeping them interested and involved in the material. The goal of the area was to use the measurements and further information about the bones on display to figure out whom they once belonged to. I found this a very appropriate exercise seeing that this is the type of science that was described throughout the rest of the hall.
The second hall I visited while at the National Museum of Natural History was the larger gallery, “Bones.” This exhibit focuses on the paleontology of a variety of animals, and displays a large number of complete skeletons. Much of the information focuses on how bone structures determine the classifications of different organisms, which is conveyed once again through writings on the walls behind the skeletons they are referring to. One display featured different examples of bird palates; the parts of which were color coded to give an easier understanding of how related parts varied in differing orders of birds. The evolutions of different skeletal features such as the jaw, as well as human/ape similarities were also on display.

This hall was aimed at a much simpler education level, for there was little to read to take in the full effect of what was on display. Although the writing supplemented what you were looking at, any age could appreciate the interesting skeletons of familiar animals such as turtles, giraffes, and even an enormous gray whale. Although this exhibit did not include any interactive features, it was still effective in conveying the information by presenting a wide variety of animal skeletons.

The National Museum of Natural History does an excellent job at presenting such a diversity of information relating to the natural world. From such realistic recreations of dinosaurs to such wondrous jewels as the Hope Diamond, it is an intellectual and entertaining place that most anyone can enjoy. Aside from displaying simply the information relevant to its related field (anthropology, paleontology), this museum takes it a step beyond to convey even larger-scale phenomena. The first hall I visited, “Written in Bone…” used the information presented relating to different bone structures to describe how this knowledge is being used in reference to our own century, not just ones that have passed. It specifically described how our changing diets have led to denser bone structure necessary to support more weight. This leads to the idea of technological
advancements in this field of skeletal systems. With knowledge similar to that used to determine the history of the early Chesapeake settlers, scientists are becoming able to create synthetic bones and similar structures that will lengthen ours and future lives; so we will not as easily succumb to the fate that our ancestors did.