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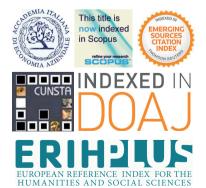
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Striving for relevance: the social value of museums

Stefania Oliva*, Martin Piber**

Abstract

Social value in various patterns is a key objective for museums. Despite the growing interest in the societal relevance of cultural organisations and museums, there is little understanding of the social value and the appropriate way to account for and communicate its key dimensions. This contribution aims to fill this gap by investigating the literature on the value generation of museums – focusing on social value. The article discusses the case study of the Natural History Museum Vienna (NHM) – featured as an institution that especially pays attention to biodiversity issues and environmental concerns. The study relies on a series of interviews with staff members, a document analysis and a participant observation from 2017 to 2023. This approach enables to map the social activities of the museum, to analyse the interactions with key stakeholders and to understand the relevant categories of social value as well as its communication and impact.

Generare valore per la società, in diverse forme, è un obiettivo cruciale per le istituzioni museali. Nonostante la letteratura di management delle organizzazioni culturali

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rilevi un crescente interesse per il tema del valore sociale, c'è ancora poca comprensione di come generare, rendicontare e comunicare le sue dimensioni. Il presente contributo si propone di indagare questo tema analizzando la letteratura sul valore dei musei, con particolare attenzione al valore sociale. L'articolo analizza il caso di studio del Museo di Storia Naturale di Vienna, un'istituzione che presta particolare attenzione ai temi dello sviluppo sostenibile, della conservazione della biodiversità e dell'ambiente. La raccolta dati ha riguardato un periodo che va dal 2017 al 2023 e si basa su una serie di interviste al personale, ai direttori dei dipartimenti e ai vertici del museo, sull'analisi dei documenti di reportistica e su un periodo di osservazione partecipata. Questo approccio metodologico ha consentito di mappare le attività sociali del museo, di analizzare le interazioni con i principali stakeholder e di comprendere le categorie rilevanti del valore sociale, nonché la relativa comunicazione e l'impatto.

1. Introduction

The societal dimension of value is widely discussed in the literature on cultural organisations¹. It represents a growing strand of literature and a cutting-edge topic of research in cultural institutions, such as museums². Contributing to societal value by enhancing collections or providing educational offers are crucial objectives for museums of a different kind³.

The literature on museums and cultural organisations has studied social value focusing on different aspects, such as the contribution of culture to societal development and well-being, social inclusion and accessibility and several forms of engagement and community participation⁴. With the increasing concerns connected to environmental issues and climate change, a special strand of literature has started to focus on museums and cultural organisations' role in achieving sustainability goals⁵.

In terms of international policies, the value of cultural heritage for society is established by the Council of Europe through the Faro Convention, enshrining the importance of cultural heritage for the quality of life of individuals and human development, democracy and social cohesion. Moreover, the United Nations emphasise the need to manage cultural heritage to promote sustainable development goals (SDGs). Recently, with the development of Culture 2030 Indicators, UNESCO measures and monitors the contribution of culture

- ¹ Matarasso 1996; Holden 2004; Throsby 2004; Scott 2006; Jenson 2010.
- ² Simon 2010; Simon 2016.
- ³ Pratesi, Vannozzi 2014.
- ⁴ Simon 2010; Morse 2019; Solima et al. 2021.
- ⁵ Oliva, Lazzeretti 2020; Cicerchia, Solima 2022.
- ⁶ Council of Europe 2005.

to the SDGs⁷. In this scenario, museums might contribute to society and sustainable development, both making their activities accessible to a wider public and actively putting the SDGs into practice through new forms of protection and enhancement of cultural and natural heritage.

Although there is a growing interest in studying the relevance of museums for society and their role in contributing to a prosperous and sustainable development of society, still poor attention has been paid to understanding the (best) practices and activities undertaken by museums to increase their social value. Moreover, financial and economic constraints impose an efficient allocation of resources – for and in museums – resulting in increased competitiveness for financial support as well as a further focus on management and marketing activities⁸. In this regard, we address the research gap, how to understand and account for social value in museums⁹.

This article aims to deeply investigate museums' role in value creation, focusing on the social dimensions of value. For this purpose, the Natural History Museum (NHM) in Vienna – featured as an institution that pays attention to biodiversity issues and environmental concerns – has been studied. The NHM is the oldest museum in Austria and its collection counts more than 300,000 items¹⁰.

The article adopts a case study approach in order to understand how the NHM defines social value and which museum activities pertain to its creation. Primarily we highlight two main research questions: (1) What is the "social value" of museums (shown by the example of NHM)?; (2) What activities contribute to it? The case of the NHM is chosen, as there is a growing need to legitimise public funding in Austrian museums – and the NHM is one of the oldest and biggest federal museums with high pressure to provide and communicate return services for substantial state subsidies. Furthermore, the focus on natural history allows us to develop environmental concerns and sustainability issues. To answer these research questions, the article maps the social activities of the museum and interactions with visitors to understand the relevant categories of social value, the stakeholders involved and how the value is communicated and evaluated.

The results underline that the museum's main activities connected to social value involve generating and disseminating knowledge within the scientific community and communicating scientific findings to the wider public. In this respect, the article contributes to improve the evaluation of the societal relevance of museums.

The article is structured as follows. Section 2 discusses the theoretical

⁷ UNESCO 2019.

⁸ Camarero, Garrido 2008.

⁹ Sibilio 2014; Sibilio Parri, Manetti 2014.

¹⁰ Jovanovic-Kruspel 2017.

background of "social museums" discussing literature on the social relevance of cultural organisations and museums. Section 3 explains the methodology adopted to develop and analyse the case study. In Section 4, the analysis of the case is debated explaining the main features of the organisation and discussing its activities. Section 5 focuses on the results of the study and, finally, section 6 develops conclusions highlighting the theoretical contribution of the article and implications for policies of cultural organisations.

2. Theoretical framework: the relevance of museums for society

Starting from the 80s, a new paradigm emerged for the governance of the public sector, oriented to results, resource efficiency and economy¹¹. The New Public Management approach (NPM)¹² is used to implement management and management control practices in public administrations – also with the support of performance measurement approaches and result-driven instruments. Managerial strategies try to foster the public sector to implement a vision and more citizen (consumer)-oriented processes. The resulting aims are frequently expressed in terms of efficiency costs or other performance metrics¹³.

According to this approach, the cultural sector faces the challenge of justifying the use of public resources, not only through a description of the activities carried out but demonstrating that all processes contribute to broader political programs such as social inclusion, economic regeneration or educational activities¹⁴. To receive public funds, cultural organisations have started to assess their economic contribution producing more or less accurate reports for measuring impacts in terms of employment, tourists' presence or organisational performance¹⁵. Furthermore, cultural organisations try to be relevant for wider and broader audiences. With efforts for purposeful audience development, museums and other cultural institutions try to find new audiences which have not been targeted before. The idea is to get additional legitimation via the new audiences¹⁶.

Although being aware of this ongoing "managerialisation and performatisation" of the cultural sector and the rise of the social aspects of cultural institutions, scholars underline the need for a closer investigation of these issues. Knell and Taylor call for "reinventing instrumentalism" to face the evidence

¹¹ Belfiore 2004.

¹² Hood 1991; Schedler, Proeller 2000.

¹³ Gstraunthaler, Piber 2007.

¹⁴ Holden 2004.

¹⁵ Crossick, Kaszynska 2014.

¹⁶ Cuenca-Amigo, Cuenca 2020.

that social priorities have had few impacts on the financing decisions of the cultural sector¹⁷. As Belfiore and Bennet emphasise:

unless we see economic function as the primary purpose of the arts, then economics can have little to tell us about their intrinsic value. Similarly, economics can show that the arts may have "positive externalities" and that, if they do, this can be a justification of public subsidy. But what economics cannot do is tell us how the externalities attached to the arts actually do enrich individuals and societies¹⁸.

In a similar vein, Holden (2004) clearly distinguishes the intrinsic and the instrumental value of art.

This focus on the management of economic resources has particularly interested museums that, in the European tradition, are generally publicly funded. However, the logic of cost-efficiency, while necessary to ensure the economic sustainability of institutions, says little about the value generated for society. Museums are fundamental institutions for society because they represent educational and research spaces and contribute to knowledge storage, transfer and production¹⁹. Their role is crucial for the conservation of history and the generation and dissemination of knowledge²⁰ as well as the preservation of significant artefacts and fundamental practices for future generations. They are informal educational settings that encourage visitors to explore not only historical artefacts and scientific phenomena but also contemporary social issues²¹. Their role can be crucial for young visitors in order to increase their self-confidence and skills through continuous cultural participation²². Finally, for the nature of their non-profit mission, they involve several volunteers who enhance cultural, historical and natural heritage. This voluntary action produces a value for the organisation and the wider society that is often far from being considered in official (financial) accounts²³.

There are some humble approaches to categorising and assessing social value – but the field is still underdeveloped and disputed²⁴. Often the social function is associated with participation in the cultural or museum context. Social value through participation is expressed in the increased connection and involvement of visitors in contributing to the institution, the creation of community relations and the educational value of experiences²⁵. However, re-

¹⁷ Knell, Taylor 2011.

¹⁸ Belfiore, Bennet 2007, p. 137.

¹⁹ Lazzeretti, Capone 2015.

²⁰ Oliva, Lazzeretti 2020.

²¹ Packer, Ballantyne 2005.

²² Domšić 2021.

²³ Mook et al. 2007.

²⁴ Newman 2013.

²⁵ Simon 2010.

cent literature on the topic of participation highlights the importance of rethinking the meaning of the term, emphasising the role of culture in the civic involvement of individuals in building a collective civic consciousness²⁶.

A survey of eight Spanish museums reveals that the value generated by museums goes beyond ticket revenues and visitor numbers and is in line with the SDGs. In particular, the most relevant aspects that emerged emphasise the role of museums in preserving heritage and memory, generating knowledge, disseminating culture and attracting (international) audiences²⁷. Studying the relationship between culture, economy and society, Lazzeretti identifies three main trajectories of the societal function of cultural heritage: culture as a safeguard of identity and authenticity, culture for social cohesion and integration, and culture for democracy and well-being²⁸. Some scholars and policymakers highlight the role of museums in cultural and public life in terms of place-making, community building²⁹ and contributing to general individuals' well-being³⁰. In this context, a crucial topic related to the social value generated by museums is that of accessibility. Analysing the case of the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (MANN), Solima et al. point out the importance of links with local communities and actors to develop a project for the accessibility of people with cognitive and behavioural disabilities³¹. Furthermore, the research underlines that, in its attempt to increase its social dimension, the museum can be the driving force for social innovation.

Recently, with the occurrence of climate change, literature has focused on sustainability and sustainable practices in museums³². In this respect, they may increase awareness of visitors in science and environmental issues through their educative function³³. Furthermore, they represent long-term and comprehensive archives of humankind so that they can promote a message based on sustainability and an intergenerational vision³⁴. A recent survey of Italian museum audiences underlines that sustainability is increasingly a strategic dimension for museums. The study shows that visitors confirm the awareness of museums towards sustainable practices, especially in waste management and sustainable procurement, while the cultural offer is still far from focusing on sustainability issues³⁵. Finally, the discussion of the social value of cultural heritage is also gaining attention concerning the sustainability of tourism. Lit-

- ²⁶ Cimoli 2020.
- ²⁷ San-Jose et al. 2022.
- ²⁸ Lazzeretti 2012.
- ²⁹ Repetto Málaga, Brown 2019; Biondi et al. 2020.
- ³⁰ Newman 2013: Morse 2019.
- 31 Solima et al. 2021.
- ³² Pencarelli et al. 2016.
- ³³ Oliva, Lazzeretti 2020.
- ³⁴ Garthe 2022.
- 35 Cicerchia, Solima 2022.

erature in the field sheds light on different attributes of social value related to the existence, aesthetic, economic and legacy value of cultural resources in the context of sustainable tourism practices³⁶.

Another relevant topic is the participation of visitors in museum activities, actively engaging the public in learning and entertaining³⁷. Scholars suggest that citizen participation in museums and their outreach activities may increase community well-being in terms of social cohesion and social capital³⁸. One of the activities recently studied for fostering participation in museums is citizen science, where volunteers or non-professional scientists dedicate themselves to scientific research in different fields and through a multi-scale approach to responding to real-world problems³⁹. In recent decades, the phenomenon has increased due to the wide diffusion of new technologies allowing the dissemination of information on citizen science projects and enabling an easy collection of data. Citizens are increasingly involved in museums' knowledge creation and sharing processes, while science needs to be accessible and exploitable also by non-specialists. Furthermore, in a society with a higher level of educated people, individuals represent an important source of free workforce, skills and local knowledge for science⁴⁰.

In addition, the intensified use of digital technologies has increased the possibilities for visitors to participate in museum activities and (co-)produce sustainable experiences. A recent survey of Italian museums shows that the application of new technologies mostly depends on the typology of museums and concerns primarily the communication with visitors and the digitalisation of distribution channels⁴¹. However, the digital revolution is transforming the role and functions of museums in the new Infosphere, where participation, value co-creation and audience engagement are moving at the core of the museums' service design⁴². On the one hand, they can be an adequate anchor for an increased sense of belonging. Moreover, the application of technologies may enlarge the pool of new visitors, especially among the youngest audience⁴³. On the other hand, they can generate new shared identities, which represent a further step in the direction of a differentiated social value of museums⁴⁴. Digital platforms represent an emblematic example of tools that may increase visitors' interaction and engagement and foster knowledge dissemination through dem-

³⁶ Parga-Dans, González 2019; Parga-Dans et al. 2020.

³⁷ Simon 2010.

³⁸ Galeotti 2016.

³⁹ Cohn 2008.

⁴⁰ Schäfer, Kieslinger 2016; Wildschut 2017.

⁴¹ Leoni, Cristofaro 2021.

⁴² Simone et al. 2021.

⁴³ Izzo et al. 2023.

⁴⁴ Bonacini 2012.

ocratic and participatory governance and enhancement⁴⁵. However, the dark side of digital transition may hinder social value produced in terms of users' alienation, loss of memory or digital and social-economic inequalities⁴⁶.

Although a large part of the literature recognises the museums' relevance for society, some scholars are critical about the positive social impact and value generated by their activities. This literature suggests that museums drive the message of the society where they operate, possibly reflecting its specific vision, sometimes excluding less represented societal categories, with a consequence of increasing inequalities. In some cases, they have a legacy of racism, classism and sexism that should be overcome with new and more inclusive practices⁴⁷.

3. Methodology and context of the analysis

3.1. Methodology and data collection

The article discusses the case of the NHM, Austria, based on a qualitative analysis following a case study approach⁴⁸. The choice of the empirical setting is grounded on the funding situation of museums in Austria and on the special efforts and the commitment of the museum to social value. Scientific museums have been the unit of analysis of several studies devoted to investigating specific aspects of their social dimension, such as the educational function⁴⁹ or the contribution to sustainability issues⁵⁰. Due to the typology of its collection, NHM spent much effort on conserving biodiversity and enhancing natural heritage through studying, researching and disseminating knowledge on nature and the environment. In addition, the museum management has committed to contributing the global sustainability by making the museum carbon-neutral by 2030⁵¹. Secondly, according to the 2021 annual report, the museum's public counts a large share of young visitors. The share of visitors under 19 rose from 56% to 70% from 2019 to 2021. Finally, the museum adopted a specific strategy to manage community participation and social engagement through the "Citizen Science" project to contribute to an open, collaborative, global, creative, and accessible way of doing science⁵².

- 45 Santagati 2019.
- 46 Lazzeretti 2020.
- 47 Dibley 2005; Sendell 2007.
- 48 Eisenhardt 1989; Voss et al. 2002.
- ⁴⁹ Oliva, Lazzeretti 2020.
- ⁵⁰ Magliacani, Sorrentino 2021.
- ⁵¹ Natural History Museum Vienna 2021.
- 52 Natural History Museum Vienna 2017.

The analysis aims to analyse how the NHM understands the social value and which museum activities contribute to its creation. We want to address two main research questions: (1) What is the "social value" of museums (shown by the example of NHM)? and (2) What activities contribute to it?

The research questions and the fragmented research field require the broad lens of a case study approach⁵³. In order to comprehensively understand the phenomenon under analysis and to allow data triangulation, we used several complementary data sources⁵⁴. Moreover, two research rounds were conducted to develop a longitudinal case study and explore long-term impacts. First, three months – from November 2017 to January 2018 – have been spent within the institution – allowing a continuous participant observation. During this period, researchers could participate in several museum activities, particularly staff meetings, conferences and exhibitions. Participant observation is particularly useful for obtaining deeper information and knowledge than outside data collection, especially if public information is unavailable⁵⁵. In our study, this data collection technique has been useful to identify how the institution's agents act to achieve their social purposes.

Second, 21 semi-structured interviews were collected with the institution's staff. The first round of interviews took place from November 2017 to January 2018, while the second was conducted from November 2022 to January 2023. The interviews were conducted in person, lasted between 30 and 120 minutes and concerned the following points: information on the work activities of the interviewee; definition of social value; stakeholders to whom the museum is responsible; which activities of the museum generate social value; how social value is communicated. The interviewees were chosen based on the position they held. In particular, interviews were conducted with individuals in senior positions to gain insight into the institution's management and with individuals directly involved in activities that have an impact on the community based on the literature.

Third, in November 2018, a focus group with fifteen museum employees was set up. Nine of them have already been interviewed before. During the focus group, the first result from the interviews were discussed. Following the interaction between the museum's staff, opinions concerning its social dimension have been collected. Additionally, we discussed possible future activities concerning the social value and we addressed communication practices and future strategies. Finally, data from secondary sources were collected, particularly annual reports (from 2015 to 2021), information material, website and social media and press releases. Table 1 summarises the collection techniques and the data sources for the case study construction.

⁵³ Yin 2009.

⁵⁴ Stake 2013.

⁵⁵ Vinten 1994.

Facebook

Prim	ary Sources	
Parti	icipant Observation	
	ferences bitions' Openings	
	day Reunions of the Department	
	views	
N	Department	Position
1	Administration	Director
2	Administration	Former Director (2010-2020)
3	Administration	Vice Director & CFO
4	Administration	Former Director (1994-2009, currently volunteer at the museum)
5	Archive	Head of the department
6	Botany – Publications	Head of the department; head of collections of phanerogams; head of the NHM Vienna publishing house
7	Central Research Laboratories	Head of the department
8	Ecology and Environmental Education	Head of the department
9	Exhibition & Education	Head of the department
10	Exhibition & Education	Staff
11	Exhibition & Education	Science editor & international cooperation
12	Exhibition & Education	Administrative assistant
13	Geology	Head of the department
14	Geology	Staff scientist and Curator of Vertebrate Palaeontology
15	Geology – Speleology	Staff scientist
16	Mineralogy	Head of the mineral collection
17	Prehistoric	Staff scientist
18	Zoology I – Archaeological Zoological	Scientific employee
19	Zoology I – Invertebrates	Head of the department
20	Zoology I – Herpetology	Staff scientist and Curator
21	Zoology III – Vertebrate	Head of the department
Госи	es Group	
Fifte	en participants from museum staff (nine o	of them have already been interviewed before)
Seco	ndary Sources	
The Rese Gene	eum catalogue annual reports from 2015 to 2021 arch publications eral publications (books and magazines) en Science Strategy	

Tab. 1. Summary of data sources and data collection techniques (Source: Authors' elaboration)

The data from interviews and the focus group were recorded and transcribed by the researchers and validated by the museum staff. Firstly, the different dimensions and aspects that emerged during the interviews and the focus group concerning the social value generated were categorised. Secondly, the different categories of stakeholders the museum addresses regarding social value were identified. Finally, the activities carried out to generate social value and the communication channels were mapped. Information from primary sources was finally triangulated with documents from secondary sources in order to verify the accuracy and limit confirmation bias⁵⁶. The data collected enable a mapping of the museum activities and show the interaction with visitors in order to understand the crucial categories of social value, the most involved stakeholders and how different categories of value are communicated and evaluated.

3.2. Context of the research: collection, visitors and museum's organisation

The NHM is the oldest museum in Austria. Its collection dates to the 18th century when Emperor Franz Stephan bought the natural collection of the Florentine scholar Johann Ritter von Baillou. At that time, the collection counted about 30,000 items between stones, corals, shells, fossils and bones. When the Emperor died, his wife Maria Theresia donated the collection to the state. Thereafter, it was opened to the public twice a week⁵⁷.

The principal site of the museum is at Maria-Theresien-Platz. The museum also counts the Pathological-Anatomical Collection at the "Narrenturm", a historical tower of 1784 used as a sanatorium and it has offices at the National Park Institute Donauauen in Petronell and the Historic Salt Mine "Alte Schmiede" in Hallstatt.

According to the museum's annual reports, the visitors' number increased from 2015 to 2019, from 652,177 to 804,620 (+23%). A decrease occurred in 2020 and 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed on national and international tourism. However, the museum maintained its popularity among visitors of the city. It was the second most visited museum in 2020, according to data from Statistics Austria.

In terms of the audience, the NHM may be considered a highly international cultural institution due to the presence of a wide international public. According to the 2020 Annual Report, before the pandemic in 2019, almost 46.9% of visitors came from Austria, while 45.7% came from other European

⁵⁶ Yin 2009.

⁵⁷ Jovanovic-Kruspel 2017.

countries. The share of visitors from the US was 3%, while Asian visitors were 4%, confirming a positive increase (+1.49 from the US and +0.77 from Asia compared to 2018).

The museum is organised in management, scientific and support departments. Management departments comprehend direction and administration offices; scientific departments are divided into several sections: anthropology, botany, geology and palaeontology, mineralogy and petrography, prehistory, zoology and scientific laboratories; finally, support departments are ecology and environmental education, communication and media, exhibitions and didactics, event management and tourism, libraries, publications and the museum shop⁵⁸.

Concerning management, the NHM has a dual governance, consisting of a General Director and a Vice Director. The direction also has a support area dedicated to research coordination, fundraising and sponsoring activities. The administration department comprises the organisational units dedicated to ICT, finance, facility management, superintendence and security services, human resources management and purchase and procurement.

The scientific departments deal with the conservation and enhancement of the collection. The scientific staff does research at the state-of-the-art level and also contributes to the daily activities of the museum. For example, the scientists offer special guided tours for the visitors. The scientific departments collaborate with the support departments concerning activities related to organising events and exhibitions.

Concerning the support departments, the exhibition and education department includes exhibition management, science editorship, museum education, graphics and exhibition and media technology. The event management and tourism department is in charge of, among other tasks, representing the NHM at numerous national and international fairs and organising and supporting the museum's events.

4. The case of the NHM Vienna

4.1. Defining social value and societal responsibility in the NHM

During the interviews, the staff of the NHM identified several categories that pertain to social aspects and functions related to the activities of the museum. The bandwidth of the categories shows the multiplicity of social value generation in museums.

⁵⁸ The museum's departments have been recently reorganised and some have been renamed.

In describing the museum's social value, several responses were influenced by the typology of the collection preserved by the museum. Being a scientific museum, many interviewees stressed the dimensions of scientific research and conservation of nature as one of the most relevant implications that museum activities can have on society. Among the most cited objectives of the museums in terms of social value, several interviewees recalled the museum's efforts in «creating knowledge in science» or «developing interest in science». On these, one of the curators of the Paleontology department affirms that: «I think the museum has the aim of transmitting knowledge to a broad public. [...] Our responsibility is to interest people in special topics because [they] often do not know about some topics and the museum is the ideal surrounding to transmit knowledge to a broad public. (Interview n. 14).

Part of the responses were connected to the preservation activities that positively affect society when the museum can «communicate what we learn from the past» or can be considered a «repository for sociological, historical and scientific knowledge». As stated by the head of the department of Archive and History of Science: «the museum is of a high educational, historical and scientific value. Its value lies in its position as a repository for sociological, historical and scientific knowledge» (Interview n. 5).

Moreover, a few interviewees underlined the museum's role in cultural conservation, «the museum preserves cultural identity», and social cohesion, «museum as a platform for connecting different societies».

In identifying the stakeholders towards whom the museum can have a substantial effect in terms of social value and responsibility, the museum's vision appears clear, reflecting the specific characteristics of its collection. The general public represents the main stakeholder as explicated by the head of the Mineral Collection: «the public pays us and we have to give to the public something back. To give them our knowledge, to show them what we have» (Interview n. 16).

A strong characterisation of the museum's educational role emerges from the interviews, starting with some specific groups of audiences on which attention is focused – such as the young public. «Our main visitors are school classes, groups, families, even kindergartens since few years old» (Interview n. 11). The younger participants in the museum's activities are encouraged by several specific projects and free admission for children and teenagers under 19 years. Cultural policies on a national level also address the focus on the youngest audience: «the ministry decided all people aged up to 19 come in for free. For example, we have no choice in this» (Interview n. 11).

Another positive impact is the scientific research on the collection. Research activity allows the museum to disseminate its results both to the scientific community and the general public through different typologies of publication. According to the annual report, in 2021, the NHM staff published 479 monographs, book chapters, peer-reviewed articles and other publications. One hun-

dred seventy-six of these were published in international journals with a considerable impact factor and 198 as open access publications. In addition, thanks to its internal publisher, the museum publishes books on its own. Research activity is considered a priority of the museum in terms of impact. That means that the NHM is also one of Austria's main scientific research centres. «One, on the one hand, we have visitors that come, watch and learn. Then we have research. We have to try to have a direct and indirect impact» (Interview n. 20). In this regard, a large part of the staff recognised the collection as one of the main subjects to be responsible for. The head of the Mineralogy department underlines: «a museum holds a collection, so we are first responsible for the collection» (Interview n. 16).

The curators also highlight the importance of the collection for the main activities of the museum: «the reason we are alive is the collection, different from other institutions, such as the University» (Interview n. 20).

Instead, others underlined the responsibility towards the scientific community: «the museum has a responsibility in front of its clients, the people who visit it. It also has a responsibility in front of the scientific community, it produces new knowledge, but this knowledge is not useful or understandable by all the society» (Interview n. 13).

Finally, the museum has always been interested in environmental issues, raising the visitors' awareness of ecological problems, and holding responsibility and positive effects on the community in taking action on the major environmental challenges. A specific department is dedicated to Ecology and Environmental Education, established more than 20 years ago. It is also in charge of organising guided tours outside the museum: «our department has outdoor activities for young visitors in nature. [...] Generally, they live away from nature. Today they have their iPhones and iPads, so they have no chance to stay in nature» (Interviews n. 4 and 8).

Recently, in line with the literature on the role of museums in the climate change emergency⁵⁹, the attention to environmental issues has increased. In particular, the new management board has introduced and pursues the clear vision to become a carbon-neutral museum until 2030. Summarising these flashlights, the main emerging dimensions of social value in the NHM deal with its educational function for visitors, protecting the collection and producing and disseminating knowledge via research. This is also highlighted by the head of the department of Archive and History of Science: «the museum has a responsibility in terms of education and preservation as well as scientific integrity» (Interview n. 5).

From the interviews, the relevance of the museum for society emerges from its scientific and historical importance for both: visitors and the scientific community. The vision of the head of the Exhibition & Education department per-

⁵⁹ Oliva, Lazzeretti 2020; Garthe 2022.

fectly synthesises the crucial points: «social value? It is a scientific museum and it is a museum for the public. There is a social value for science because we are like a library for nature [...]. This is a big value for the scientific community, for science. This is one. But there is also a social value for the public. This is also a historical museum. We cannot change a lot. This gives you a historical impression, the feeling of entrance in another world, [...], this atmosphere, this wonderworld, it is our strength» (Interview n. 9).

4.2. Mapping activities of social value creation

Based on the interviews, it has been possible to map the activities and projects that, according to the interviewees, have the most significant impact in terms of creating social value for the museum. To the question "what are the museum's activities that can create social value?", the following activities were most frequently referred to: guided tours, publications and Citizen Science.

In terms of guided tours, the museum organises guided tours and workshops for all ages with personalised educational programs based on the participants' age group and previous knowledge. The tours are carried out by specially trained external guides and internal scientists who are part of the museum staff and directly involved in the collection's care and management. In organising the guided tours, the museum pays particular attention to the youngest audience representing one of the main targets. According to the Annual Report 2021, visitors under 19 years of age accounted for 70% of the total visitors, compared to 56% in 2019. Thus, the special guided tours for younger audiences involve preschool children guided tours where kids can touch artefacts to get a special flavour for science, tours for school children differentiated by age, treasure hunts and special events for children and families (for example, camping with dinosaurs in the museum).

According to the museum's staff, guided tours represent one of the main activities that generate social value. As observed by the head of the department of Archive and History of Science: «the staff directly and indirectly communicates the museum's social value and relevance during tours, lectures and in publications» (Interview n. 5).

According to the interviews, the museum's cultural offer, differentiated based on visitors' age and interests, is highly appreciated by the visitors as well as less traditional and more playful forms of education. As claimed by the science editor: «children's birthdays or night touring in the museum, I would say they are very popular. You have to pay in addition to the normal entrance fee and they are not cheap, but they are very well liked and mostly fully booked» (Interview n. 11).

In this context, the head of the Exhibition & Education department emphasised the leisurely and entertaining objective that the museum should have

for children and families during guided tours, in addition to the educational one: «I think the museum is not only education. Museum is also relaxing. [...] We attract the public, we educate it, but it is a different type of education from that of schools» (Interview n. 9).

Concerning learning through entertainment, a recent initiative is the creation of Deck 50, a space where visitors can playfully explore connections between research and contemporary issues in society and where the museum's staff organises science shows for the audience.

According to the interviews, the second category of activities that mostly pertain to social value was that the museum has its own publishing house that publishes scientific and popular works. The most important publication is the Annals of the Natural History Museum (in German: *Annalen des Naturhistorischen Museums in Wien*). Published for the first time in 1836, it is among the oldest periodicals published in Europe. They contain contributions concerning the totality of the natural scientific disciplines hosted in the museum. Other scientific publications are monographs and scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals. Moreover, scientists of the museum are involved in several general publications, such as science books for the general public and articles in Austrian science magazines.

During the interviews, especially the relevance of books for the general public has been highlighted: «we do sometimes also books. These books are sometimes very popular books. [...] For example, we try to do these books for researchers, for students, for volunteers but also for people who simply visit the museum. [...] We try to do books for all people» (Interview n. 20).

The head of the Central Research Laboratories even underlines this concept: «communicating the science sounds important, what science is, the principle of science. Evidence-based science is very important to be communicated. [...] But also contribute to the museum's journals and to the newspapers» (Interview n. 7).

The third category of activities that was highlighted as relevant in terms of social value was the voluntary project developed under the umbrella of "Citizen Science". Citizen Science is an approach that promotes public participation in the scientific activities of museum institutions and scientific research. The NHM, in particular, has always been one of Austria's leading institutions to promote the community's active participation in the museum's life. As stated by the science editor, the museum has a long tradition of citizen participation: «it is a very urgent modern topic for museums, but in the NHM, we have done this since the 18th century practically. [...] The Duke of Lorraine was kind of citizen scientist» (Interview n. 11).

This long tradition of the museum has been recently revised, as underlined by the head of the Botany department: «we always had volunteer scientists. [...] We change this approach to have people who want to work, not only scientists but simply people who want to work» (Interview n. 6).

Recently, the museum has published a document to formalise the activities carried out under the Citizen Science projects. As stated in the 2017 NHM Citizen Science Strategy documents, these projects aim to strengthen and professionalise the interaction between science and society but also to make this interaction visible and transparent so that it can be seen, recognised and supported by the general public, by politics and, ultimately, by funding bodies. Following this strategy, Citizen Science at NHM follows five pillars based on the adaptivity to new knowledge and needs, the anticipation of society's needs, the openness and the inclusion of the scientific process.

According to the interviewees, the Citizen Science projects embody broad opportunities to increase the social value generated by the museum: «citizen science is a way for me to reach people and to show them our work, how important it is» (Interview n. 20).

According to the head of the Zoology I department: «for me, Citizen Science projects have a social value because the people who do that get a wellness of the diversity of nature, they get interested from this and so it is a sort of value for the community» (Interview n. 19).

The positive impact generated by the Citizen Science project is twofold. On the one hand, volunteers participating in the museum activity have benefits in terms of experience in science and active participation in the cultural organisation. «Our programme on the volunteers is a good example, [...] these people gain something for themselves, they confirm they are still important, useful for something» (Interview n. 6).

On the other hand, by involving citizens in its activities, the museum can establish a long-term relationship with the local community that, possibly, will support the museum in the future. Concerning this aspect, one of the scientists of the museum underlined: «citizen science is very important because the support of the people is fundamental for the museum» (Interview n. 18).

The activities under the umbrella of Citizen Science range from mere data collection to complex research projects. There are currently more than 30 activities at the NHM in which citizens are involved. The project involves 60 professional researchers and about 300 citizens. Four groups of projects can be distinguished: (1) participation in projects and scientific research, (2) collaboration in departments to work on the museum collections, (3) work experience days for schoolchildren and (4) research projects that involve researchers, education institutions and civil society.

These are wide-ranging scientific projects, which may include a short data collection period or intense, long-term participation. The requirements for participation vary depending on the type of project. Academic training is not a requirement, but knowing and respecting scientific standards is important. Collaboration can involve activities directly at the museum or via online and digital platforms. Examples are projects related to amphibian and reptile observation in Austria, documentation of the Karst Caves, and the world register

of marine species. Another type of activity mainly involves the classification of the collection. These activities are carried out mainly within the museum and are organised directly by the various research departments. Examples are the ceramic restoration at the archeologic department or the virtual Herbarium developed by the botanic department.

The results related to the definition of social value and the corresponding activities were further discussed in a focus group to highlight the museum's future vision. Some aspects were considered crucial in increasing the social function of the museum in the future. One example is new technologies to communicate the activities and the research of the museum to a wider public. Also, the museum's importance for society was emphasised in terms of community building, going into the community and developing activities outside the museum's physical boundaries and making the museum an easily accessible space. This also demonstrates that the museum belongs to everybody.

5. Discussion and conclusions

5.1. The understanding of social value: highlighting citizen science and the collection

The article aims to enlarge the debate on the value of museums, focusing in particular on social value. We analyse the case of the NHM to investigate how museums understand the social value (research question 1) and which activities pertain to its creation (research question 2). The case of the NHM shows a broad bandwidth of answers. Concerning the definition of social value for museums, the case reveals a focus on specific aspects, especially the educational function, the conservation of the collection and socially relevant research activities.

The collection of the museum seems to be at the centre of knowledge diffusion and creation processes. Knowledge diffusion aims to reach stakeholders in different social contexts, overarching specialists, such as scientific community members and scientists, visitors and citizens. According to these findings, natural history museums can be understood as knowledge repositories and knowledge disseminators for society. Their knowledge ecosystem may be an element to better understand the long-term changes in nature and society. This latter aspect has become particularly relevant for the new management board, which is strongly committed to ecologically sustainable practices. This evidence suggests the importance of museum governance in driving organisations toward more conscious societal paths⁶⁰.

⁶⁰ Oliva, Lazzeretti 2020.

Concerning the second research question on the museum's activities that contribute to social value, the results underline three main activities in relation to social aspects. The NHM positively impacts society with guided tours and initiatives for children, which appear as the main interlocutor of the museum in civil society. Publications reflect the double interest in communicating with specialists and general audiences. Third, the broad bandwidth of initiatives like "Citizen Science" projects is particularly relevant concerning social value. Figure 1 summarises the results of the analysis.

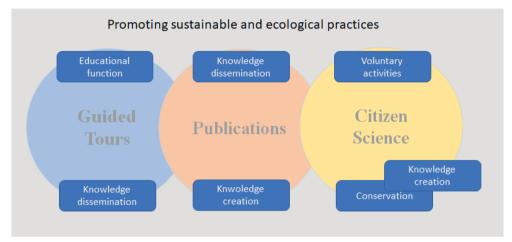


Fig. 1. NHM activities that generate social value and their function (Source: Authors' elaboration)

5.2. Managerial implications

In terms of management implications, the NHM shows its relevance through outreach activities for a broad range of target groups and stakeholders, especially for the public and the scientific community. This aspect is in line with the changing roles of museums in society⁶¹ and underlines the need for museums to maintain scientific integrity. From a citizen-science perspective, we can conclude that the generated social value impacts society in two layers. On the one hand, museums can offer opportunities for participation and motivate citizens to share their experiences. This also impacts the research results and contributes to the scientific aim of doing research with the collections. On the other hand, the citizen science projects also back the overall relevance of the museum in general and anchor the museum in civil society. Furthermore, we see it is not enough for museums to generate social value in all its dimensions. It is also necessary to

⁶¹ Simon 2010.

communicate the corresponding activities in special reports as a complement to the financial results. Here we see a shift from an intensive financial assessment of cultural organisations towards a more content-based and socially oriented assessment. At the moment, this communication towards key stakeholders is not mandatory, but the first steps in this direction can already be observed. Finally, the case of the NHM demonstrates how the setting of a clear-cut ecological aim (to become a fully carbon-neutral museum) can become a crucial issue in stakeholder communication – also in order to display the relevance of the museum as a role-model for society. However, this latter consideration mitigates the risk of spectacularisation and trivialisation of the content transmitted⁶².

5.3. Theoretical contribution and further research

In line with Lazzeretti, the case study shows the potential for heritage organisations to combine the past with the future⁶³. In the case of the NHM, the collection creates an identity which provides a space to invite audiences to participate and generate social value. Galeotti underlines that the participation of citizens increases social cohesion and the overall social capital⁶⁴. A couple of interviewees emphasised the museum's role in developing initiatives that support social inclusion and cohesion. However, promoting social cohesion through cultural heritage is one of the objectives of international policies in cultural heritage management, as well as involving heritage communities in conservation and enhancement⁶⁵. In addition, the case of the NHM gives evidence that participation - especially through the citizen science projects - also increases public visibility and shows the impact of the collection and the whole institution for scientific purposes. However, the topic of sustainability pervades all covered activities of the museum. It represents a further starting point for a general rethinking of aims, targets and impact, as stated in the vision statement of the museum, where it declares the will to contribute to the sustainable development of the planet. With the declared aim of becoming a fully carbon-neutral museum by 2030, the NHM firmly highlighted its role in taking action on future environmental challenges (see as well the vision statement of the museum⁶⁶). Although the empirical data reveal these aspects, the results of the analysis suggest that there is further room for theoretical considerations in terms of governance, policymaking and the dynamics of social value generated by museums. In addition, the conclusions

⁶² Simone et al. 2021.

⁶³ Lazzeretti 2012.

⁶⁴ Galeotti 2016.

⁶⁵ Council of Europe 2005; Cerquetti, Romagnoli 2022.

⁶⁶ The mission and vision statements are available on the museum website (https://www.nhm-wien.ac.at/en/mission_statement, 27.07.2023).

are limited, as the empirical data have been generated in a single case study. As a next step, it would be promising to extend the scope of the research to other types of museums. Future research might also address a further formalisation of the societal and sustainability impact of museums and other cultural organisations. Ad hoc reports can show detailed possibilities and obstacles for the creation of social value. However, the terms and conditions of social reports will be addressed by further research and practice. For now, a strong commitment to a sustainable future strengthens the historical value of museums for future generations and directly contributes to our immediate and long-term living conditions.

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