

# **BUG FEST: THE RISE OF AN INFESTIVAL**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The management at the Academy of Natural Sciences wanted to increase attendance and visibility of the museum in slow periods of the year. In April of 2008 it was decided to try to offer four themed festivals yearly. Our slowest times of the year for the Academy were identified to be late summer (particularly early August), February, late spring (mid May-early June), and early fall (end of September-early October). It was decided the first festival would be the second weekend of August and would focus on arthropods due to their marketability and our world renowned entomological collection. Bug Fest was born.

## **DEVELOPMENT AND COORDINATING**

Staff members within the Education Department were assigned to develop programming for the upcoming event. Key experiences were identified; showcase entomology department, exhibit live invertebrate displays, invite outside vendors, cockroach races, crafts, entomophagy, and specimen preservation (bug pinning). Staff also reached out for advice and information from other institutions that already had long standing “bug centered” events, including; The Natural History Museum- Los Angeles County and The North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences.

In addition to the coordinators from the Education Department, staff members from other key Academy departments including: Entomology, Visitor Services, Exhibits, Institutional Advancement and Marketing, met throughout the year to plan and prepare for the next Bug Fest. In the months leading up to the event, the Education and Exhibits Departments work closely together to develop props and other materials needed for educational activities.

At the time of Bug Fest’s conception, the live invertebrate collection was dismal. The invertebrates that were being housed for education included a medium sized Madagascar hissing cockroach colony, one rose haired tarantula, and one curly haired tarantula. The goal was set to grow the Academy’s live invertebrate collection from these three species to at least 20 more species housed year round, preferably up to 50 species showcased annually for Bug Fest.

The invertebrate collection was successfully expanded through collecting, purchases and lots of help from colleagues at other institutions. As the collection grew, training in the care and handling of invertebrates was developed for staff and interested volunteers. The core “certified” invertebrate staff would each be assigned as the ‘point person’ for various live displays and

activities with live invertebrates. A typical Bug Fest would require a minimum of 18 Education staff members and at least 25 volunteers to work at various stations throughout the museum. This staffing does not include the Visitor Service or Building Operations staff also working during the event.

## **THE FESTIVAL LAYOUT**

After the first Bug Fest, the planning committee identified visitors' favorite experiences that should be reoccurring in annual Bug Fests. The "core experiences" are the entomology displays, the live invertebrate displays, Roach Race 500, Bug Appétit, and Bug Ball. Though some other activities would be revisited for a few years, others would change yearly. In Bug Fest's eighth year, the four "core experiences" have held to popularity and have grown. In 2013, live invertebrate stage shows using HD screens and camera was added as a "core experience".

### **Entomology Displays**

One of the goals of Bug Fest was to showcase the Academy's world renowned research and collections, specifically in the Entomology Department. Each year, Academy entomologists pull collections to be displayed throughout the first floor of the museum. Additionally, they staff tables showcasing their research, hands on activities for visitors, information on various "hot topics" (i.e. invasive species, conservations, bio blitz). Also, Entomology staff remain accessible to visitors to answer questions and help with bug identification throughout the event. Alongside Academy entomologists, the department's interns and volunteers assist staffing tables, as well as members from American Entomological Society (AES).

In 2010 (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bug Fest) Entomology added "Bug Walks" during the event. Visitors could sign up at the entomology tables to participate in a "Bug Walk" with Entomologist to the park across from the academy in Logan's Circle. In the small park, the staff would identify species found in the native plantings and showcase what can be found "in your own backyard". Spots were limited to 15 participants and offered and filled quickly. There are four- five walks offered each day of event.

### **Live Invertebrate Displays**

Each year the live displays are the stars of the event. In surveys throughout the years, about half of visitors comment they like "the live bugs best". For the first three Bug Fests, live displays were concentrated in specific areas in the museum; the first floor leading into entomological displays, cockroaches were concentrated in the Roach Race 500, and more displays in our Children's area. In the more recent years as we grew our collections, live invertebrate displays are now set up throughout the museum.

Tank set ups are put together in the weeks leading into the event. However, due to museum remaining open for normal operating hours, the enclosures cannot be placed out onto the museum floor until after hours, day before event.

Education staff and volunteers that are certified invertebrate handlers staff the tables. Designated staff members are assigned to do handlings where visitors can. touch certain species. Other staff members and volunteers are available to handle some species of invertebrates, answer questions and get visitors excited about the world of bugs.

### **Bug Appétit**

In an effort to showcase entomophagy, the decision was made to hire outside colleagues to perform a cooking show and demonstration. The format of the show has changed slightly over the years. Sometimes a cook-off style show when there was availability of second chefs. We have had the opportunity to showcase local chefs incorporating insects onto their menus. Other years, the show would just star Zach Lemman. Additionally, Zack would offer tastings and cooking demonstrations after the stage show throughout the rest of the afternoon. This upcoming Bug Fest (2015) will feature David George Gordon.

To assist the chefs, three staff/volunteer members are assigned to the chefs. The appointed staff members help with gathering ingredients, utensils, and crowd control. Due to allergy concerns, signs are posted to advise about possibly food allergies, and staff also help address concerns with visitors.

### **Roach Race 500**

In Roach Race 500, visitors get to cheer on their favorite cockroach and learn about one of insects' most misunderstood members. The races start every half hour, about 3-5 races each time. When visitors arrive to the "racing room" they can choose a paddle to route for their favorite cockroach. They also get an up close look at the Academy's various cockroach colonies. It is a very energetic and fun atmosphere. Staff encourage visitors to cheer loudly to help the "racers". After each race, a trophy is awarded to the winner on our score board. To make each race different and unique, "mystery" cockroaches are added, awards for best grooming and running laps are also awarded. To allow multiple viewing, a camera was set up to show the races on a nearby screen.

In 2012 two tracks were added to keep the races fun and unique. In addition to the standard track, an "all terrain" and straight track were added. To ensure the safety of the cockroaches, two to three certified invertebrate staff members run the races. Additionally, two more staff or volunteers are assigned to the area to help with crowd control, review of rules, and to act as "cheerleaders".

## **Bug Ball**

The “Bug Ball” is a place, our “Commons” area, designated primarily for families to have seating for eating. This large area is where we offer free tattoos, face painting, and a variety of buggy themed crafts. The “Bug Ball” is also where the “Bug Appétit cooking demonstrations and tastings.

## **Live Invertebrate Stage Show**

In an effort to increase the presence of the live invertebrates, a show was added to the lineup in the auditorium. The show would highlight popular, alluring species that enhanced designated theme of Bug Fest. Examples of typical species that would be showcased include tarantulas, large phasmids, cockroaches and more. The show would utilize the Academy’s HD equipment housed in the auditorium. On the stage, a camera is set above a cart, which projects the live invert being handled under the camera onto a large HD television screen (also on stage) and large projection screen behind presenter.

This up close and unique view of the live specimens is a crowd favorite. It also allows presenters to highlight invertebrates’ adaptations and features in a unique way.

## **Supporting Activities and Themes**

In addition to the above “core activities” there are other educational experiences that have been offered. One experience that had been considered a “core experience for six years was “Got Bugs”; a hands on activity that allowed visitors to pin their own prepared beetle to take home. Staff and volunteers would assist the visitor and teach them about proper pinning techniques and preserved collections. However, due to expense of the beetles and supplies, it was replaced with “Bug Picasso” in 2014.

“Bug Picasso” started in 2014 to enhance the “Infesting Culture” theme. Maggots and Madagascar hissing cockroaches were used to create works of art with non toxic tempera paint. Staff would handle all the live specimens to do the painting while the visitors would watch. Art work was collected and given out to visitors who participated in surveys. Due to the popularity and low costs, it was decided to revisit this experience again for 2015.

Over the years, Bug Fest has offered at least three new educational experiences. In 2010, Bug Fest adopted themes in an attempt to aid marketing the event. These additional activities would enhance the various themes included Pollinators (2010), Beetles (2011), Butterflies (2012), “Masters of Disguise” (2013), and “Insefting Culture” (2014). Since the themes were not giving the desired marketing push, Bug Fest is not assigned a theme this year. However, to aide in the development of cohesive activities, education has chosen an underlying theme for the activities.

By eliminating the overall marketing theme, it has put the focus back onto the live invertebrates, which is one of the biggest draws for visitors.

Activities and experiences over the years have included bed bug sniffing dog demonstration, bee beard demonstration, lectures, educational games highlighting anatomy, pollination, and more. Earlier Bug Fests have included vendors selling insect related merchandise. However, this was not very popular with our audience. More recent years we have focused more on “community partners” which would staff educational tables showcasing their work. Community partners would include various local universities entomology departments, arboretums, local bee keepers, etc.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Bug Fest remains one of the Academy’s most popular events, especially among the members. Before the first Bug Fest, the average attendance for the second weekend of August was 952 visitors. Most of the late summer is very slow for the museum. The average attendance for the second weekend in August with Bug Fest is 2,694, making it one of our busiest weekends of the year. Since the start of Bug Fest and other festivals, we have seen a rise in our memberships.

An annual event like Bug Fest allows the Academy more marketing opportunities including some coverage in papers, TV and Radio. However, marketing to general admission visitors remains to be a challenge. Most of the attendees are already members, which receive mailers about upcoming events. Generally there are a few TV spots leading up to event and some advertisements in local news papers.

Other challenges include holding space and staff care. About half of the live invertebrate collections on display for Bug Fest are permanent year round. With growing the collection, designated space is limited. Over the years, minor renovations have been made to exhibit and house most of the invertebrates. However, when it doubles for Bug Fest, temporary areas are set up for the other invertebrate. The staff does continue to work these invertebrates for displays and education programming.