



Museum of
**Natural
History**
University of Oxford

FAIR WATER?



THE INEQUALITY BELOW THE SURFACE



REACH

Improving water
security for the poor



Our Water World

Just Water?



REACH

Improving water security for the poor



21 November 2023 – 1 September 2024

An exhibition travelling from water source to mouth,
revealing the inequality below the surface.

In partnership with the REACH global research programme



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



**UK International
Development**
Partnership | Progress | Prosperity



Smith School
of Enterprise and
the Environment

**Reuben
College**
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD



FAIR WATER?

IN NUMBERS...

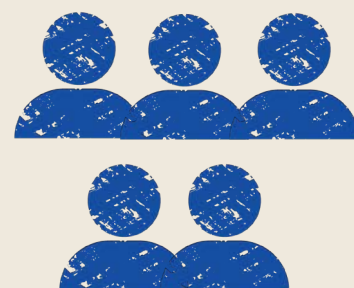


76%
of visitors
were likely to
recommend the
exhibition



273,370
visitors
to the
exhibition

Over **100** local A-Level
and GCSE geography
students engaged
with a *Fair Water*
study day along with
4 secondary schools in
Cameroon via a weblink



4,134
attended
the *Fair
Water*
events
programme



Over **25**
researchers
collaborated with
the exhibition
or took part in
events

Toured to **2**
Museums
National
Museum of
Dhaka and the
Ayala Museum,
Manilla



78%
rated the
exhibition as
very good/
good

Worked with **11** local
freshwater conservation
projects, trusts, and
groups in the exhibition
and programme



23
public
events



FAIR WATER?



The inequality below the surface

21 November 2023 – 1 September 2024

The exhibition tells the story of the complex journey taken by our water, from river source to mouth, rainfall to drinking glass – a process easily taken for granted in the UK. Through the lens of communities in Kenya, Ethiopia and Bangladesh, the exhibition examined current approaches to water management and how communities, engineers, and researchers are working to provide better access to drinking water and protection against hazards like floods and droughts.

Fair Water was a joint collaboration with the global research programme, REACH, based in the University of Oxford's School of Geography and the Environment. The Museum developed the exhibition with over 10 REACH researchers from institutions around the world in order to ground it in current research.

Ethiopian artist, Aida Muluneh's striking photographic series was displayed in the exhibition. Commissioned by Water Aid, the series focused on the undeniable impact of living without access to clean water has on women's lives and futures.

An accompanying programme of events enabled the Museum to explore more deeply particular themes in the exhibition and welcomed speakers from institutions in Kenya, South Africa, Bangladesh and Ethiopia to talk about their work.

Fair Water attracted over **273,370** visitors and its accompanying public programme of events reached over **4000** people. The exhibition's online version remains a digital legacy of the project to this day.

THE POP-UP



Fair water premiered as a pop-up exhibition in the Main Court of the Museum to coincide with the global Water Security and Poverty conference at the University of Oxford on 20-22 September 2023.

The pop-up introduced water security research undertaken by REACH in Kenya, Ethiopia and Bangladesh. A specially commissioned animation by Scriberia was included which communicated research on understanding and predicting extreme climate variability to ensure water security for communities in Kenya.

Ten striking artworks from a collection entitled *Water Life*, 2018, by award-winning Ethiopian photographer Aida Muluneh aimed to address the plight of water access and its impact not only on a society but also on women in rural regions through the collection.

This taster exhibition gathered thoughts and comments by museum visitors and delegates of the REACH conference on water security. This was done through recorded interviews and digital engagement stations. This information was then used to inform the content of *Fair water*.



Pop up exhibition and artwork by Aida Muluneh



WORKING WITH RESEARCHERS

Fair Water aimed to provide a constructive and inspiring approach to how we can maintain and improve our water security. It was designed to highlight the value and influence of government-funded research leaving people feeling hopeful about the role of research and collaborations to bring about change.

As the first Contemporary Science and Society exhibition at the museum to emerge from the Social Sciences Division, this exhibit stemmed out of **nine years of research** published in over **100 academic papers**.



Part of the intention behind the exhibition was to create a platform to showcase and support the work of REACH's Early Career Researchers. In the exhibition, video screens feature **Dr Sonia Hoque**, **Dr Ellen Dyer** and **Dr Behailu Birhanu** speaking about areas of their research.

Researchers were directly involved in the development of bespoke digital interactives to ensure the content was correct and current.

LEGACY

The partnership with the REACH research programme continued after the exhibition closed at the Museum.

REACH and the Museum collaborated with the Asian Development Bank to bring the *Fair Water* exhibition to the **Ayala Museum in Manila**, Philippines, in May- August 2025. *Fair Water* also toured to the **National Museum in Bangladesh** in May 2025.



(TL) Dr Behailu Birhanu 'Ask a researcher' interactive in gallery, (BL) *Fair Water* at the National Museum Bangladesh (BR) *Fair Water* at the Ayala Museum in Manila

THE INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE



The exhibition's engaging design and focus on hands-on experience invited visitors to relate to the experiences of those who face water insecurity.

Following the course of a river, visitors were guided through a broad range of topics from geology to weather prediction and governance. Tools like jerry cans and hand pumps controlled a display that introduced concepts and statistics around water access. By turning a water wheel, visitors were able to match water pollutants and their sources to the impact.

Visitors could place themselves into the position of a dam manager via a projection onto a valley in Ethiopia by seeing how heavy rainfall sets into motion a string of decisions that keep populations and agricultural land safe from devastating floods.

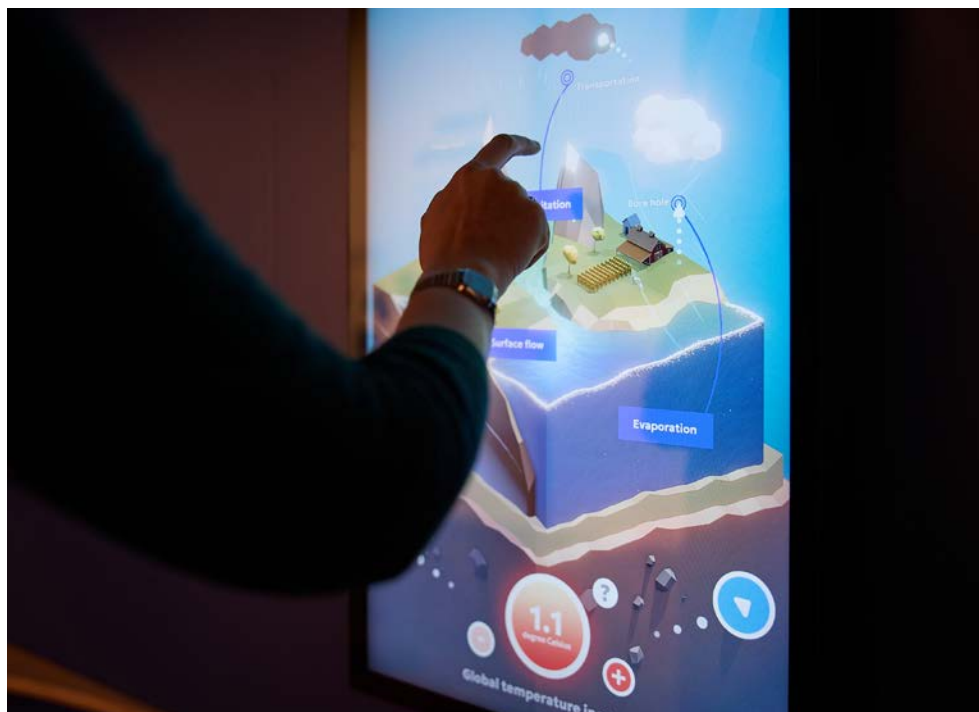
"All the resources we could touch and watch or use were really entertaining and helping me to understand the facilities that certain people don't have."

- Visitor

The hands-on experience of the exhibition continued with touchable aquifer rocks from the Museum's collections to explore how water is stored underground.

A specially developed digital interactive took visitors through the water cycle and the affect of rising temperatures caused by the climate crisis.

Visitors could hear about the latest research from members of the REACH project through 'Ask a Researcher' interactives.



AÏDA MULUNEH

Art continues to be an integral part of the Museum's Contemporary Science and Society series to allow visitors to engage with complex themes of an exhibition. *Fair Water* included a striking photographic series by renowned Ethiopian photographer and contemporary artist, Aïda Muluneh. Muluneh's series, commissioned by WaterAid, addresses the huge impact of living without access to clean water on women's and girls' lives and futures.

© Burden of the Day by Aïda Muluneh, Water Life series 2018. Commissioned by WaterAid and supported by the H&M Foundation.

"The addition of art was a nice touch and adding a personal note from the artist was very smart." - Visitor



EVENTS PROGRAMME

Programming in the Contemporary Science and Society series allows the museum to explore aspects of the exhibition in more detail, continue engagement with researchers and reach a large range of audiences in multiple ways.

FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS

The Museum partnered with the Oxford Botanic Garden to host an outdoor family friendly Water and Wildlife Discovery day. This event worked with local conservation groups to bring a lively and engaging programme that included bug and bird spotting walks, crafts and looking at specimens. This large scale event encouraged people to connect with nature and to consider freshwater biodiversity.

Families were also able to engage with the themes of the exhibition through sessions during school half term; and Saturday object handling sessions. These family events engaged 2528 people over the year.

The museum also ran a Schools Day in February with over 100 A-Level and GCSE geography students from Oxfordshire and surrounding counties joining in person and online. The event was also webcast to four secondary schools in Cameroon through the Water Learning Partnership project which was started by REACH researchers.



EVENT PROGRAMME

The programme included a number of panel events with researchers, artists and campaigners, that focused on inspiring positive action and exploring how climate information can be used in water management.

Evening talks by researchers spanned a wide range of topics covered by *Fair Water*. The talks looked at how the major players in global trade interact with the water environment and local suppliers, as well as climate change resilience and the benefits of groundwater for productive and consumptive use across Africa.

Additional novel events included a community choir event where several of Oxford's community choirs came together to sing about water in the main court of the Museum. A natural dye workshop with specialist Kate Turnbull guided attendees through the natural dying process and looked at the harmful impact of synthetic fabric dyeing on freshwater habitats.



The Museum opened its doors to over a 1000 people to take part in fun water themed engagement activities run by researchers, volunteers, and local environmental organisations.

Multiple tours of the exhibition were run including a touch tour for blind and partially sighted visitors. Another highlight was a water-themed stroll around Oxford's water ways with Dr Kevin Grecksch to explore global and local water-related challenges.



This page: evening talk with Dr Ellen Dyer and Professor Wilfried Pokamm, and visitors at the Water Worlds Late Night event. Opposite page: Water and Wildlife community event at the Botanic Gardens, Ian Wallman.

EVALUATION

In-gallery observations and visitor surveys provided a wealth of evaluative data about *Fair water*, assessing the engagement with overall content and individual displays.

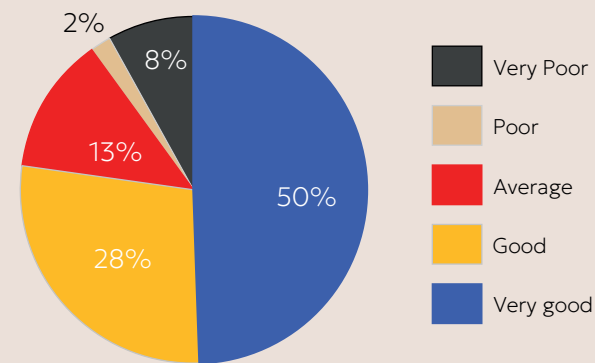
Summative surveys captured visitor experience and perceptions around water security. In total, 2,577 visitors across in-person and kiosk surveys as well as 100 visitor observations were evaluated.



VISITOR ENJOYMENT

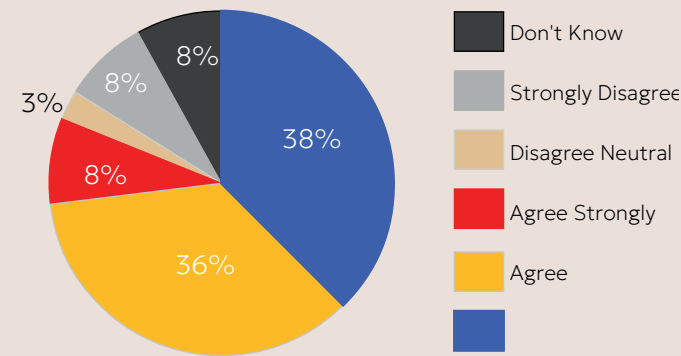
78%

Rated the exhibition as Very good/ Good



74%

Felt the combination of photography and science increased their enjoyment.



VISITOR UNDERSTANDING

77%

of respondents agreed that the combination of hands-on & digital activities added to their understanding of the Exhibition.

A fifth of respondents stated that they were most interested in how **water is managed** and a nearly equal proportion of respondents were also interested in **water quality** issues and the relationship between **gender inequality & water access**.

“The number of people who don't have access to clean water. I knew it was unfortunately quite a lot, but the reality is heart-breaking.” - Visitor

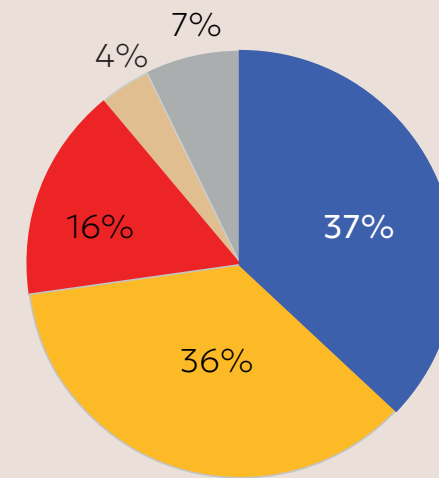
70%

Agreed that the Exhibition gave them a better understanding of global water related issues

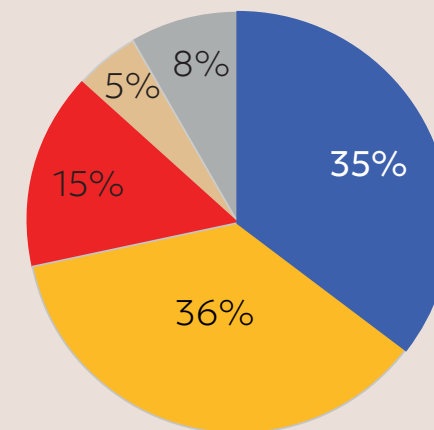
PERCEPTION OF RESEARCH

Up to 73% of respondents to the exhibition survey believe in the power and influence of research for stimulating changes.

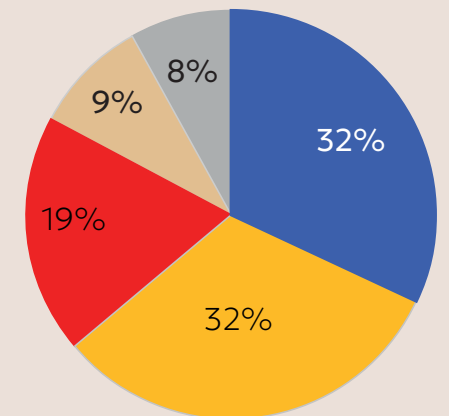
Respondents had the most confidence in the power of research on individual actions.



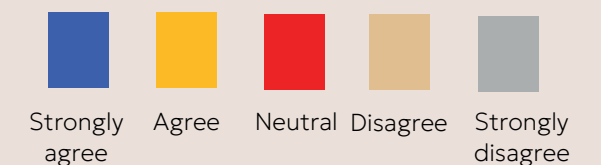
Research has the power to change individual decisions



Research has the power to inform government decisions

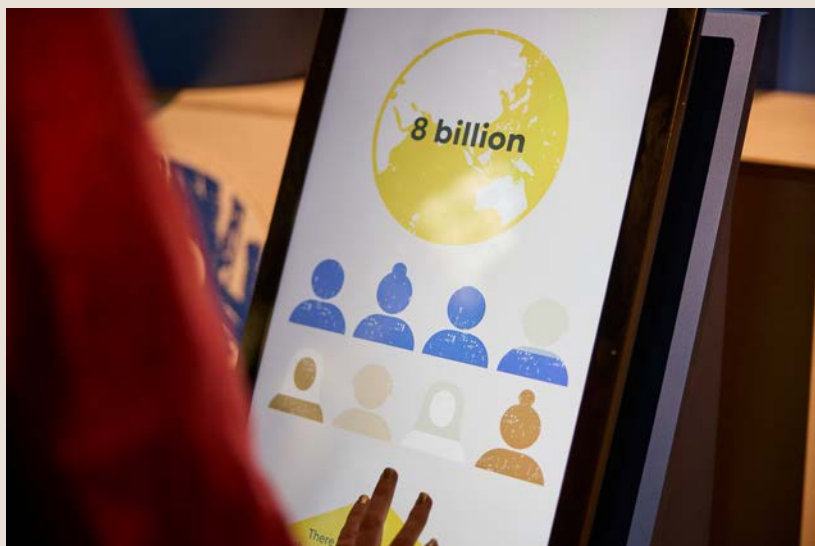
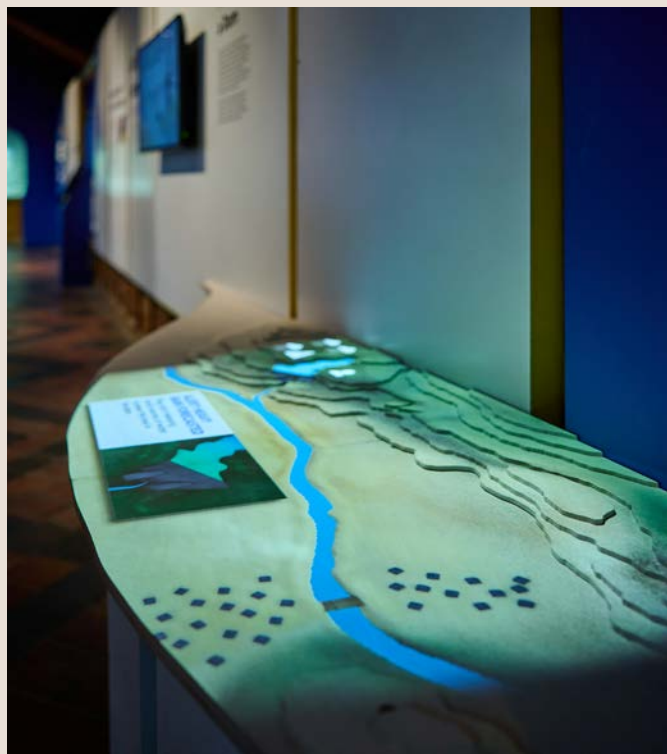


Research has the power to change how industry operates



“I was looking to learn about the environmental impacts and how projections could help us to make changes for the future, but in the end I was most interested in the human side - very interesting to learn about the responsibilities placed on women in some countries” - Visitor





With special thanks to researchers and staff from the REACH research programme at the University of Oxford.

For more information visit: www.oum.ox.ac.uk/fairwater

REACH

Improving water security for the poor



Museum of
Natural
History
University of Oxford