

Agronomic Science Foundation

Spreading the Message of Soil across the Country

Most people probably think they know everything they need to know about soil. While it is useful for their garden, most still probably think of it as “dirt”—something they wash off their hands, cars, floors, and windows and sweep off their sidewalks. The fact that soil is actually what helps to sustain virtually every form of life on earth is still largely unknown to many.

Dig It! The Secrets of Soil is a traveling soils exhibit that is working to change this. It started out as an exhibit at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), attracting millions of visitors during its 18-month run. Developed through a collaboration of NMNH, SSSA, and the Agronomic Science Foundation with support from government agencies such as the USDA, *Dig It!* has now visited four different museums around the United States.

In fact, the project now has a life of its own. In addition to the 5,000 ft² physical display, SSSA’s K-12 Committee has developed a publication called *Soil! Get the Inside Scoop*, which is already in its second printing. NMNH has also developed an educational website at www.si.edu, which provides educational content and curriculum for K-12 teachers as well as the media.

For those of you who haven’t visited this exhibit, it is currently on display at the Bell Museum in Minneapolis, MN until 28 July 2013. I hope you will visit in person, but in the meantime, I thought you might enjoy a short description.

What’s at the Exhibit?

There is one gallery called “The Big Picture,” which gives a global view of a world map with computer interac-



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tive stations highlighting the surprising global connections to soils. A “Get Soil Savvy!” display uses dramatic images to explore the importance of soils in land management and conservation. In the “At Home in the World of Soils” gallery, visitors can explore the connections between soil and culture. While people walk on soils every day, they rarely think about how soils affect their daily lives. This gallery helps them discover those connections with a scale model of a typical suburban house that highlights soils in and around a typical home. A video features soils as the “secret ingredients” in thousands of everyday items including medicine, food, fiber, paint, cosmetics, and pottery.

The “Underneath it All” gallery explores soils in a broader perspective. A large topographic model illustrates the role of soils in residential, urban, and agricultural areas. Touchable soil samples provide close-up looks of two very different urban soils. There are exhibit panels that examine how soil management can help meet modern day demands for food production, infrastructure construction, and environmental protection.

If you have an edgier bent, you can dig into life, death, and decay in the “Matters of Life and Death Theater,” where a 10-minute video follows a detective story about the micro- and macroscopic soil food web. Infrared gas analyzers help visitors learn more about how microorganisms in soil impact our planet by detecting the amount of carbon dioxide they produce in two very different environments.



In an exhibit called “Chef’s Challenge,” two “soil chefs” create two very different soils from the same ingredients. In this gallery, visitors can also find their “home earth” in a display of 54 soil samples, or “monoliths,” representing each state in the nation, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. Visitors can even become soil detectives and use clues to deduce what landscapes three mystery soils support.

Increasing public awareness of the importance of soil is tenuous, and our food supply depends on this mission. There is such a fragile relationship among flourishing agricultural practices, soil management, and the survival of civilization itself that it cannot be ignored. *Dig It! The Secrets of Soil* is helping to spread this message, and we need your help to keep it alive.

Do you know of a location that would welcome this interactive exhibit as we persevere in our mission to educate the upcoming generation about the importance of soil science? If so, please contact me at abarton@sciencesocieties.org or 608-273-8095.

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