It’s Hard to Compete with a 25-year-old Porcupine
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When we were asked to stage a mushroom exhibit at the Sacramento Discovery Museum, we didn't know our audience in advance so we prepared a range of activities. It turned out that visitors were parents with young children of primary and preschool ages. The Discovery Museum has a hands-on policy aimed at getting kids engaged and active rather than viewing displays, no matter how realistic, as passive spectators. This was not the typical adulatory Fungus Fair audience of adults content to view and admire mushrooms displayed on tables. Here we found considerable apprehension and wrinkled noses.

For young children, activities with a strong sensory and motor component work best. The folios of water color paintings of mushrooms went unopened. The same was true of colorful mushroom stamps from around the world, a deck of mushroom playing cards, and a collection of spore prints. We managed to interest adults but not children in yarn colored by mushroom dyes. One of our most popular kids’ activities was making finger prints from deliquescing Inky Caps. We kept a box of tissues handy to wipe fingers afterward. In retrospect, it would have been nice to follow this with drawing or writing using mushroom ink and a quill pen made from the fallen feather of a local bird.

The second most popular activity was sniffing some (definitely not all) aromatic mushrooms. The dried Candy Caps were the odds-on favorite for young visitors. They could recognize the maple syrup odor immediately upon entering the room. In a few cases this proved sufficient to overcome an initial mycophobia. These were little kids who, perhaps as a result of parental admonitions, were reluctant to associate themselves in any way with wild mushrooms. The pleasant fragrance of Candy Caps provided the needed push for a hesitant child to enter the room and approach the display table. We encouraged parents to sniff first, so that they could reassure the child that this was a safe and fun interesting activity.

Following the positive experience with the Candy Caps, we introduced the parents next to the smoky fragrance of dried morels. Parental interest was increased when we pointed out that this was an expensive fungus featured on the menus of fancy San Francisco restaurants. Kids acknowledged the smoky aroma but without any surprise or emotional response. It was like “No big deal; the mushroom smells smoky.” Perhaps it had previously been on a grill.

Next we tried the dried Shrimp Russula (R. xerampelina), cautioning them that the mushroom smelled like dried fish. Responses varied from acknowledgment that the dried mushroom indeed smelled fishy to outright disgust. The latter was the most frequent response of the children, “ugh” rather than “awesome.” While sweetness seems a basic and positive olfactory quality, a fishy odor seems to require maturation for appreciation. We didn’t find any kids who enjoyed sniffing the Shrimp Russula. At the end of the session, we reconstituted dried Garlic Mushrooms (Marasmius copelandi) in water. The tiny fruitbodies looked unimpressive, but when we held them under a visitor’s nose, there was immediate recognition. Unfortunately, similar to the dried fish experience, garlic is not a pleasant fragrance for young kids; again an “Ugh” response.

As docents at Fungus Fair display tables, we have asked visitors to sniff the underside of local Matsutake (Armillaria ponderosa) with mixed results. Some people immediately acknowledged the spicy cinnamon fragrance. Others interpreted the aroma differently, naming spices or products we had not considered. There were also people who could not detect an odor, despite repeated urging and hints on our part. Response to many odors seems both extremely variable and transient as habituation to odor sets in quickly. Exploring this variability would make a neat science project for a high school mycophile.

A third popular children’s activity was coloring outline drawings of mushrooms with crayons. We considered this to be at cross purposes from our goals as it removed kids from the sensory experience of observing and interacting with real fungi, but young children familiar with coloring books enjoyed it. We would have preferred kids sketching real mushrooms, but the colored outlines and crayons had been prepared by museum staff before we arrived and the activity supervised by a museum volunteer.

Halfway through our session, the audience drifted away, leaving us standing in an empty room. When we investigated the reasons for the exodus, we found everyone next door at a live animal exhibit. There was an extremely large rabbit, three times normal bunny size, and at the front of the room and outside his cage was JR, a 25-year-old porcupine munching an ear of Sloughhouse corn, a delicacy in the Sacramento area. A few folks visited our mushroom exhibit afterward, but it was clear that biologist E. O. Wilson’s concept of Biophilia (people's attraction to living things) was valid. At least for children, mushroom fingerprints, coloring books, and even garlic odors could not compete with an oversize rabbit and a 25-year-old porcupine.