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### Shifting Baselines; Teaching People about their own Ignorance

In June 2007, the first iPhone was released. It was the first of its kind and boasted a 3.5-inch 320x480 pixel screen, unheard of at the time. Over the past 9 years, smartphones have become a staple of living in the first world. Along with that comes certain expectations and standards including that of screen size and quality, that are constantly changing. The very recent iPhone 7 has a huge 5.5 inch screen, and a 1920x1080 pixel resolution. The replaceability of smartphones due to cloud storage technology, and the brevity of time between releases of new phones usually with an upgrade in specs allow us to quickly update our standard for what an average phone is. The iPhone 4 was released in only 2011, but has a 3.5 inch screen; two inches smaller than the iPhone 7. However, people who have used smartphones since the release of the 1st iPhone seem to forget this size difference. Showing an iPhone 7 user an iPhone 4 would likely elicit a reaction of surprise or even disgust. All of this ties into the idea of shifting baselines, a concept used in the field of conservation. Much like the forgetfulness that people have over shifting standards in phone screen sizes, over generations people tend to not realize the changes in their environment, and to accept that their current state has always been what is normal. For those concerned about keeping our environment healthy, shifting baselines is a real obstacle in convincing the average citizen to do their part. Various endeavours have been undertaken to negate the effects of this social amnesia such as large-scale exhibits like Ocean Hall in the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History. The museum tries to null the effects of shifting baselines not by directly explaining to

them their own ignorance, but mostly by showing them data over long periods of time. This is the only way to really let it sink in for people that things used to be quite different, and this has significant impact on their world today. The museum is the inevitable end of the process that conservationists and other academics have to send their ideas into the world through popular education.

Most movements to educate begin with some sort of research or empirical evidence that there is something to be taught. In the case of shifting baselines, one of the larger pieces of evidence put forth was an essay entitled, "Evidence for Shifting baseline syndrome in conservation" by Papworth et. al. It takes three case studies of communities, and measures what individuals in those communities memories were of their environment in prior years as relative to now. All three cases showed evidence of two types of amnesia that were hypothesized in the paper. The first was personal amnesia, individuals forgetting past situations, and the second was generational amnesia, younger generations not hearing from their elders what the former conditions may have been like. This paper provided evidence for a previously dubious issue, and this kind of empirical evidence is necessary to encourage others in the same field to attempt to do anything to solve the issue.

After formal evidence is shown, people are encouraged to spread this evidence especially when the problem itself like shifting baselines is one of ignorance. Jon Mooallem's book, *Wild Ones* is the next step. The book presents the concept through 3 sections each focusing on a separate case. The book is not intended to be in itself evidence of shifting baselines like the paper, nor is it supposed to be the source from which the public is to learn of this problem. Books are a good middle ground between the academic and the general publics. Individuals from various fields now have a way to access this information for themselves. With a diverse set of intellectual viewpoints on this issue it is finally in a position from the public eye that it can be incorporated into a form for mass consumption such as the museum.

The purpose for any museum is to put information into a quickly consumable form for anyone. A museum is a perfect solution for the very problem that shifting baselines posits. The flow of information from the book to the museum is different than from the paper to the book. It does not translate into another iteration explaining what shifting baselines are, it instead tries to be the solution itself to the problem. This is the real result of moving information around is people taking action based on their knowledge. The museum overcame shifting baselines by not just stating present facts, but in every instance showing as much data from as wide a range of time as possible. Arctic average summer temperature was shown over a range of 800 years. Otherwise, generational and personal amnesia would be very difficult to overcome in order to convey the final message to the museum-goer.

To conclude, the museum is the result of many factors. One being the goal of conservation in general, and the other being a testing ground for breaking shifting baselines, and get people to see the big picture of the environment. However, like any project, the project of the museum relies on initial evidence like the Papworth paper, and other methods of dispersing and diversifying information such as the Mooallem book. It is unclear whether the museum will be successful at mitigating the negative outcomes of shifting baselines, but what we can tell from it now is that it is obviously a result of the overall conservationist community, and the flow of information within it.

## Bibliography

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