The Namib Desert, one of the locations featured in The Greatest Places.
At the conclusion of *The Greatest Places* LARGE FORMAT educator leadership institute, moderated by Mike Day and Lee Schmitt museum educators sat down to talk about the educational impact of large-format films.

In July, 21 museums from around North America participated in an educator institute, supported by the United States' National Science Foundation (NSF), for *The Greatest Places* film project. Each institution sent a two-person team—one museum educator paired with one schoolteacher—to a 10-day leadership institute held at the Science Museum of Minnesota in St. Paul. This was the first educator institute conducted in advance of the release of a large-format film—and the first time that educators representing multiple museums were directly involved in using their experience to develop educational enhancement materials and programs that will support a film.
The Greatest Places educator leadership institute was designed not only to establish an international cadre of educators who will serve as lead resources to increase the educational impact of the films, but also to support educators conducting teacher training sessions at their host institutions. Feedback from institute participants will be used to help develop activities for a teacher guide, museum trunk, and family activity guide, and the educators received training that will maximize the use of The Greatest Places Internet resource program.

At the conclusion of The Greatest Places institute, museum educators sat down to talk about the educational impact of large-format films. The session was moderated by Mike Day, executive producer for The Greatest Places and publisher of The Big Frame, and Lee Schmitt, a former Wisconsin state teacher of the year, current director of teacher education at the Science Museum of Minnesota, and chief coordinator of The Greatest Places institute. Excerpts of that discussion are presented here.

**What connection does the large-format theater in your museum have to the education staff?**

**Melissa Proebstle, Memphis Pink Palace Museum:** In our museum, we started with a ground rule of a direct working relationship between the theater and the education department. We are partners in the movie experience. We are partners in an obligation to enrich and supplement whatever comes into our theater. I think it's come up a couple of times that we ought to have a connection of the theater being responsible for half of my salary. That's about as direct as we can get with the theater, without me threading that projector.

**Linda Brown, Carnegie Science Center, Pittsburgh:** We generally do run programming with the theater. We'll have several family workshops, as well as children's classes, that relate to the film. So we do use the film as a springboard for education.

**Mary Korenic, Milwaukee Public Museum:** At our museum we're trying to make connections with the exhibits so that people just don't go to the theater and then go home. The theater is a way of building people's interest and curiosity, kind of attitudinal learning and excitement. We want to continue that by adding a little bit more content to the excitement they have. So the connection, I think, is to add cognitive learning to the attitudinal part that the theater provides.

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**Melissa Proebstle, Memphis Pink Palace Museum**

**What are the weaknesses in the connection between your museum and its theater?**

**Gerald Warmack, Cincinnati Museum Center:** One of the weaknesses that I see is often times the school kids will come to see the theater, but there is no reinforcement on what they're seeing.

**Eileen Pokrzywa, Louisville Science Center:** It's a relatively new medium for schools to use, and teachers are not really that familiar with how they can use it. We are all here to continue the process of teachers knowing how to use a large-format film and the overall implications of that film into their framework, whatever they need to do. A trend is happening, and teachers are starting to look more towards, "Oh gosh, I can do that as the learning tool."

**Jeanette Booth, Children's Museum of Indianapolis:** I think as museum educators, we have to assume responsibility for collecting the kind of data that really gives us some true insight into how teachers use these films—what motivates. A real weakness is that we don't collect data systematically, and we rarely share experiences. This institute offers us a great opportunity to begin to do that, so that decisions are based on what teachers do—and not what we think.

**Linda Foss, Houston Museum of Natural Science:** School group sales are a huge part of our income. But I do think most teachers just take the kids to the theater as part of their day in the museum. I don't know if they really fit it into their classrooms; but, to justify coming, the film does have to fit somehow.

**Are these large-format films good platforms for strong educational programs?**

**Melissa Proebstle:** At their best, they're a phenomenal experience.

**Colleen Blair, Fort Worth Museum of Science and History:** I do an evaluation with the teachers on why are they coming, why are they choosing this film. What we hear patterned is, "I cannot do this in my classroom. There's a lot I can do in my classroom, but you have something that I cannot come near."
Joyce Trageser, Maryland Science Center, Baltimore: I know I’ve learned a great deal here this week about how to look at a film in terms of multidisciplinary education, and I don’t think we’ve really done that in the past. We’ve looked at it for strictly the value of what that film is and haven’t dug any deeper. I think there are probably a lot of connections we can find now in other films as well.

Melissa Proebstle: If you don’t mind, I’d like to make a leap here. What it appears within the industry that we’re coming up on is a crossroads as far as how films are going to be made and what’s going to be the driving force behind them. We have this opportunity today as museum educators to add our voice to this and to tell film producers what it is that we want to see in films: whether it’s slick and thrill oriented; whether it’s educationally based, but fun; what it is that our audiences are truly responding to; and what it is as museums we’d like to have and be associated with. This is a phenomenal time right now in the large-format industry, and it’s very interesting to think about what’s going to happen from here.

What can filmmakers do to improve the educational impact of these films?

Colleen Blair: I would like to encourage the industry to kind of follow Minnesota’s lead and open the conversation. I don’t get The Big Frame, but I spent some time looking at it last night, and the wonderful thing is that it was very empowering for me to think about the business issues. I would encourage them to bring us in and educate us about these issues. Plus, do some cross-pollination between people thinking about survival and education—and just open up the conversation. I think we all have lots to learn.

What can producers and distributors of the films do to enhance the educational materials?

Aly Evans, R.H. Fleet Space Theater and Science Center, San Diego: Give us everything. We want the kits. We want the guides. We want the family guides. We want it all.

Bert Henderson, Museum of Science and Industry, Tampa: I have to second that—she took the words right out of my mouth. Not only the kits and guides and materials, but quality kits and quality guides and quality materials. I mean, really top-quality stuff, where we can turn around and either pay to use it in our own programs or allow the teachers in our areas—the schools in our areas—to use these materials.

Eileen Pokrzywa: I agree with that. And, the museum trunk full of artifacts and activities, is going to be very valuable to our science center, especially The Greatest Places trunk, because right now we don’t have a lot of connection with what’s in our science center to the film. So I’m going to create a room around this (trunk) to give people additional educational experiences in our museum related to The Greatest Places. When I talked with our education staff before coming here, they said great things about the Tropical Rainforest trunk and how we utilized it. I think that will be really valuable to our center—the trunk and objects and items that won’t be readily available to us without that support.

Colleen Blair: A couple of specific things that come to mind are: With each film perhaps there could be a classroom poster, because that takes the learning and puts it back in the school. I think film distributors need to provide two sets of marketing materials, because a lot of times the marketing stuff stays with the marketing people. Let’s give the educators the same materials so they can get busy. I think The Big Frame needs to put articles in about learning—experiential learning—and invite people who are thinking about that to publish. You’re going to get stakeholders if you start empowering and opening up the conversation. And send The Big Frame to the directors of the education and interpretation divisions.

Melissa Proebstle: As far as what film distributors can provide, I think they have to assume that we don’t have anything.

Jennifer Ernisse, McWane Center, Birmingham: The more expansive the set of tools that we’re given, the more people we can reach.

Mary Korenic: I’d like distributors and producers to think about the large-format film industry, to collaborate with evaluators and visitor studies personnel to evaluate these adjunct materials. How effective are the trunks? How effective are the teacher guides and the family guides? Have the industry sponsor some of these evaluations.

Kathy Ketterer, St. Louis Science Center: I would like to know if you could put a beacon or something on top of the artifact and activity
trunk when it is shipped. Because we had the films, *Tropical Rainforest* and *Search for the Great Sharks*, and I had no idea that there was a trunk in our museum. No idea. It was shipped to our theater department or reserve services, which is completely separate from listener programs, which is where I work. So, I guess they get it, they don’t know what to do with it, they’re not going to use it, so it stays I-don’t-know-where. Maybe add a sign or something, so we hear it, we see it, we know it’s arrived at our museum.

**Melissa Proebstle:** We’re asking to be included in this, but we also have to reach out. You know we all have theater departments. If you as a museum educator are not that close with the theater department, that’s faulty on both sides. We have the opportunity to go back and truly connect with that department and to possibly change things within the museum, which then possibly changes the way things are done within the industry.

**Garth Wiens, Science World British Columbia, Vancouver:** I would say a definite yes to that. What the institute has allowed me, personally, is to get to know people from all over North America and glean ideas relating not only to this new film that’s going to be available, but also how to work with other things in general inside museums.

**Mike Levad, Bishop Museum, Honolulu:** I think what this institute has done is really professionalized the area of museum education—big business does this all the time. I think this really allowed us to make lots of contacts within our industry and has moved the professionalism of museum education forward in leaps and bounds.

**Mary Korenic:** There are two advantages I would like to mention about why the institute was positive for me. One is the mix of people. There are museum educators here who have been involved in the industry for less than a year, and some museum educators have been involved for 10 or more years. And I think having this mix of the veterans with the novices really helped ideas cook. We learned what the successful programs are that we can repeat, and also this is an opportunity for the greenhorns to add some new ideas and discuss the pros and cons. The second advantage is that participation in an institute of this length and intensity helped me look at large-format film programming in a new way.

**Martha Sanchez Bedolla, Papalote Museo del Niño, Mexico City:** Now I know how to give these ideas to teachers and invite teachers to the museum to get involved with a new kind of learning.

**Diana Yoder, Orlando Science Center:** When I looked over the agenda, one of the reasons I really wanted to come is, as a former teacher, I’d been a geography alliance trainer in Florida, and a lot of the things that appealed to me there appealed to me on this agenda. I thought, “Well, I wonder what they’re going to do with it.” And, there was always a new twist, something maybe I had done, and I thought, “Oh yeah, that’s great.” And so it opened my eyes. Plus, coming as a museum educator this time—you don’t believe—there are many parallels between the teaching world and the museum educator world. I hear all you saying that you feel so isolated, and that’s just like teaching. You feel isolated, and this is the best connection. The one-on-one, you know people, you know teachers, you know museum educators, and so that bridge has certainly been made, and that’s the best thing about this type of an institute.

For a copy of the complete transcript of the museum educators’ discussion, please contact Debra Adams at The Big Frame office in St. Paul, fax (612) 221-0493, or e-mail bigframe@sci.museum.