

## 9 - Environmental, Health and Outdoor Science Education | Empirical

### SP - (16633) - DIGITAL PRESENCE OF INSTITUTIONS OF INFORMAL SCIENCE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS

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#### Short Abstract

*Institutions of informal science education (ISE) such as museums, zoos, botanic gardens, science centres and aquaria can help their audiences learn about science and make sense of their world around them. The importance of these skills is highlighted by the plethora of information and misinformation circulated in the current pandemic. But ISE institutions are traditionally physical spaces that rely on their collections and educational programs to be experienced, enjoyed and studied by visitors on site. In the first months of 2020, many of us woke up to a reality of strict lockdown meaning these institutions were stripped of their physical presence overnight with digital channels as the only means to sustain continuous communication with their audiences. The aim of this research was to characterise the digital presence of ISE institutions during the COVID-19 crisis. This research was conducted by a network of researchers and practitioners from six countries and states. A coding scheme was developed to characterise the general and COVID-19 related content of websites of ISE institutions. A sample of 233 key ISE institutions was coded according to institution type. Findings show that only a minority of websites had content mediated the science of COVID-19. Most websites had content targeted at general audience and only a minority of websites had content relating to the formal curriculum or home-schooling. The institutions that were most prominent in exhibiting their collections (and thus creating a link between the physical and digital worlds) were zoos, museums of natural history and botanic gardens. The significance of the research spreads beyond the COVID-19 pandemic and is part of a wider discussion as institutions seek ways to employ digital tools to engage their audiences.*