

Global ambitions: Science Museum's new leader aims to blend tech, creativity

Science Museum's New Leader aims to blend technology, creativity

Jonathan Foley

By Chris Rauber

Title/organization: Executive Director, California Academy of Sciences

HQ: San Francisco

First job: A summer job in high school, collecting water samples across state of Maine in a canoe, measuring phosphorus that ran off from farms into the state's waterways.

Education: B.S. and Ph.D from University of Wisconsin, both in atmospheric sciences.

Residence: San Francisco

Jonathan Foley was a professor and academic expert on the global environment and sustainability issues for more than two decades before becoming executive director at the California Academy of Sciences in mid-August. The California Academy is the Bay Area's 2nd-largest museum, based on fiscal 2013 revenue, with \$75.7 million, trailing the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which had \$243 million in revenue that year. Before coming to the California Academy, he published highly-cited scientific articles in Science, Nature and the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, according to his biography, along with essays, op-eds and other articles in the [New York Times](#), Scientific American, National Geographic, and The Guardian. Most recently, he directed the Institute on the Environment at the University of Minnesota, where he was also a professor of global environment and sustainability.



BUSINESS STRATEGY

How's business? We're doing extremely well, having been in the new building for about six years. It's one of the most-visited museums in the country.

Biggest challenge for your organization? To transform it into a global institution. Museums are usually pretty local. Getting online, getting onto the web, gaining global scale.

What's going to change at your organization in the next year? We're working internally to identify the next three to five big ideas for the Cal Academy over the next decade. We're looking to focus more on a few big things. We have among the best coral reef exhibits and rainforest and planetarium exhibits in the world, for example.

Organizational goal yet to be achieved? Two long-term goals we're working toward: To see that every American is science literate, and to save the environment for the next generation.

MANAGEMENT PHILOSOPHY

Guiding principles for good management? Focus on the one most important goal — everything else is secondary.

Best way to keep competitive edge? Focus on creativity and collaboration. That's really crucial for us.

Why people like working for you? We're pushing the envelope in what academic institutions can do.

Why people don't like working for you? Same answer. Some people love that, some people don't.

Most inspiring entrepreneur? Elon Musk. He's revolutionizing three different industries at the same time. It's extraordinary.

JUDGEMENT CALLS

Best business decision? Moving to the California Academy.

Hardest lesson learned and how you learned it? Learning that emotional intelligence and the "soft skills" are just as important as the hard skills.

TRUE CONFESSIONS

Like best about job? The people that work here are amazing. The blend of scientists, artists, entrepreneurs and operational people who can dream and execute in ways I've never seen.

Like least about job? Waking up at 3:30 in the morning on the sixth day on the job to the Napa Earthquake, and realizing I'm the CEO of a building made entirely of glass and water.

Pet peeve? When people say, 'We've always done it that way.'

Most respected competitor? The Exploratorium. They're really a partner, and they're best in the business at what they do.

First choice for a new career? Astronaut.

PREDILECTIONS

Most influential book? "The Limits to Growth," with [Donella Meadows](#) as the principal author. It came out in the 1970s, and said the planet has limits to it. Even on a global scale, we have to live within some limits.

Favorite cause? Having science become more a part of decision-making in our daily lives, more a part of our political, social and business decision-making.

Favorite restaurant? I don't have one yet. I just got here.

Favorite way to spend free time? Exploring the outdoors, kayaking, hiking, exploring tide pools, that sort of thing.

Favorite music? Alternative rock.

Automobile? I own a gray 2014 Prius, but I'm looking to get an all-electric car next.