

Cultivating a Cultural Community with Argus

ARGUS. Success Story

THE EXPLORATION PLACE CHALLENGES

- Single venue with multiple portals for 8 partner organizations
- Mobile access
- SaaS (Canada-based)
- Security and permissions management
- Future-proof technology
- Predictable cost

“With Argus, we can showcase the professionalism of the member organizations in the northern part of the Province. Argus is contemporary and easy to use, and allows us to publicly express our commitment to cultural heritage and care of the collections, which brings peace of mind to donors and funders, establishes credibility, and makes us relatable and even more fundable.”

Tracy Calogheros

CEO

The Exploration Place Museum + Science Centre

The Exploration Place Museum + Science Centre (EP) is owned and operated by the Fraser-Fort George Museum Society. It is both a museum and a science center, with a wide variety of collections and materials, including archives, oral histories, digital materials, artefacts, and paleontology, and archaeology collections. In 2006, The Regional District of Fraser-Fort George brought a number of cultural institutions together—including The Exploration Place—for planning, support, and programming.

With Argus, The Exploration Place Museum and Science Centre has implemented a collections management system flexible enough to address its own needs and requirements, as well as the varying requirements of seven cultural partners: The Central BC Railway and Forestry Museum, Huble Homestead, Mackenzie Museum, Valley Museum and Archives, Valemount Museum, Lheidli T'enneh First Nation, and Two Rivers Gallery. These partner organizations have the benefit that their cultural collections are safely stored and properly managed, by EP's subject matter experts. Argus makes it easier to transfer and track materials between organizations, and because their collections show results in seamless searches, the CMS provides an increase in visibility for smaller, seasonal operations—those who perhaps lack internet access and would otherwise be

unable to Web-mount their collections. Per Ms. Calogheros, Chief Executive Officer of the Exploration Place, “Ease of access, expanded visibility, and proper care and management of our cultural heritage is better for users, residents, and collections. There is no downside to Argus.”



EARLY ADOPTERS

As an early adopter of the internet, via a proprietary database, EP became the first organization in the District with a Web-based, publicly searchable, multi-membership, plain language lexicon collections database. Over time, the technology became less and less stable, and vendor support dwindled. Ms. Calogheros and Alyssa Leier, Curator for The Exploration Place, knew that in order to manage collections beginning with over 1 million items in their archives alone, plus 10,000 objects, and a growing number of living collections, they needed to future-proof with a built for purpose CMS that didn't sit on aging technology, depend on internal IT support, or require large funds for periodic upgrades. With Lucidea's SaaS (software-as-a-service) solution, Argus met these requirements, and more.

It was always a goal to enable virtual visitors to share images from the collections through social media, with links that jumped users to the EP site. The intention was to capture commentary, enhancing curation with the “wisdom of the community.” With the social features in Argus, this cultural community building is in full swing. Ms. Leier mentioned their “Throwback Thursday” program of social media posts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter: they reference items or images and directly link to them in the Argus database, capture visitor comments, and add them to the collection. This has led to increased public information queries, and requests for reuse permission or purchases of high-resolution photos—having a beneficial impact on EP's financials.

“BUDGETABLE”, PREDICTABLE

Per Ms. Calogheros, it's enormously helpful that Argus is “budgetable”. She knows exactly what their CMS expenses will be, and unlike with Open Source or proprietary software that needs continual adaptation, there are no hidden costs. Ms. Leier comments that Argus' efficient workflow saves money because staff spend less time on reporting, training, and data entry. This efficiency is a major reason for adding their living collection to the Argus database; “Taking better care of the records around the living collections, including the Paleontology Hall installation, our future small zoo, and materials on botany through climate change will save money, while replacing paper records, and integrating them into the curatorial department and collections— thereby increasing access.”

Per Ms. Calogheros, “Argus is truly the public facing piece of what we do. So little of a museum's collection is on exhibit at any time, and in Prince George, even weather can be a barrier to in-person visits. Public use of our museum is a strategic goal, and Argus is essentially a vaccination against funding cuts. When we have huge swathes of people using our online portals and services, we have a built-in audience”.

REPORTING

With Argus reporting, they can easily quantify that audience, too. Remarks Ms. Leier, “With easily customizable reporting, we can export exactly and only the information we need, at any time.” The Exploration Place is funded in part by the Regional District, and is required to submit reports bi-annually. With Argus, EP staff can create customized reports which can then be pulled by Regional District staff whenever they want. This is an advantage to the entire Region because all organizational reports can be accessed through a single venue instead of District staff having to reach out to each one.

Ms. Leier asserts that “Argus has solidified partnerships between organizations, and even within EP it makes sharing between departments so much easier. The efficient workflow within the curatorial department makes it much easier to handle public information queries, even with the increase in research request volume that results from our virtual and online exhibits. Argus provides a truly intuitive way to showcase our collections for the public.”



LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

The Location features of Argus allow curatorial staff to easily enter and track locations of objects on loan, being used in exhibits, and “within the vault”, as well as on display within the galleries. Of particular importance during COVID, they use Argus to locate objects that have been quarantined. Historically, EP staff have always quarantined new objects in case of issues related to pest management. As a result of the pandemic, they must now quarantine objects when they have been handled. EP's offsite storage has further complicated location tracking, but Argus solves any issues, particularly since it's tablet and mobile-friendly.



Photo: The Exploration Place Museum + Science Centre

Cultural Heritage Partnerships

Working with First Nations, The Exploration Place has digitized over 1,000 oral histories, which are discoverable via a First Nations portal within Argus. Records for these unique and important recordings can be put into the database for easy access. Prior to this project, Lheidli T'enneh oral histories were on audio cassettes and degrading over time, so digitization is exciting and future-proofs those precious memories. The Exploration Place team anticipates further leveraging Argus to increase partnerships with their local First Nations friends as well as other indigenous Nations in Northern BC. Per Ms. Leier, the security of Lheidli T'enneh culturally sensitive materials is critical, and with the permissions management capabilities built into Argus, access can be restricted, even while the content is available remotely. "These types of materials don't belong to The Exploration Place; we are entrusted with their care and we work with our partner organizations and First Nations to ensure their security."

SHARED COMMITMENT

Both Ms. Calogheros and Ms. Leier both stress that Lucidea's Sales and Client Services team members have been unfailingly collaborative and reliable, as well as committed. For example, when it became clear that there was no export capability built in to their proprietary software, per Ms. Leier, "Client Services worked to assist us in getting the data, finding options and solutions, and offering guidance to make the best choices and decisions for the organization – even before we were a paying client".

Ms. Leier tells us that she and her colleagues have had really positive feedback on Argus from staff, who praise the system for its simplicity and ease of use. "If you have staff texting the CEO at 10 o'clock at night when they've discovered a new Argus function, you know they love it!" The reaction from public users has been great as well, including from Lheidli T'enneh researchers seeking images related to traditional First Nations food harvesting for a special project. Using Argus' request management option it was quick and intuitive to send a complete list of photos via the "submit" button and request high resolution images—reducing work that would have taken several days in the past to just an hour.



In closing, Alyssa Leier remarked, "If people are thinking about getting a new CMS and feel they're in an impossible situation, or that it's too big of a job, they should contact Argus/Lucidea. It will be a really positive experience. We got everything out of it that we were hoping for, and more. At Exploration Place, we're in this for the long haul. When you're entrusted with the maintenance of a collection in perpetuity, you need a partner that is right in there with you."

ABOUT LUCIDEA

Lucidea provides unrivaled museum collections management software, with innovative tools based on observing museums of all sizes for 25 years. Lucidea's powerful web-based CMS, Argus, is purpose-built, enabling museums large, small, or middling to describe and provide access to historical materials, save time and resources.

To learn more about Argus and how it can help solve your museum collections management challenges, visit lucidea.com/argus

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