



Informing the public on nuclear power and waste

If advances in science and technology are to meet with approval, and support from citizens, it is a requisite that they be provided with quality information. Visiatome, at Marcoule, stands as a decisive initiative, aiming to inform the public objectively on the issue of energy, and the future fate of nuclear waste.



C. Dupont/CEA

Visiatome, at Marcoule, open 7 days a week, saw some 10,000 visitors during its first six months' operation, in 2005.

In a knowledge-based society, democratic governance must ensure citizens are provided with the means to take part, in fully informed fashion, in making choices, from the options brought by responsibly conducted scientific and technological advances.

Seeing, understanding, discovering...

It is this concern Visiatome, at Marcoule (Gard département, Southern France), seeks to meet, with an interactive exhibition center to enable "seeing, understanding, and discovering." Conceived by CEA, its purpose – in a context where the future of nuclear power, and particularly of the waste it generates, has been the subject, in France, of a national debate, up to the beginning of 2006, and where prospects are becoming clearer, as regards the decommissioning of older power plants – is to inform the public, objectively, on the issue of energy, and the future fate of radioactive waste. Communicating, on nuclear power and radioactivity,



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2nd-year highschool students at Visiatome. Before going through the exhibition proper, highschoolers are presented with a variety of entertaining experiments.

is an arduous exercise, both conceptually and politically. Visiatome's designers have sought to articulate, and structure, the messages delivered, in this space dedicated to information, in such a way as to answer the public's legitimate queries, by facilitating the approach to, and understanding of, the issues covered, while respecting the visitors' freedom of opinion.

Visitors to Visiatome correspond to three types. Individual visitors, first, representatives of a public from the local area, or holidaying nearby, as a rule coming as a family. Groups of adults, second, made up, in the majority, of professionally active persons, but also including pensioners, and members of local associations. Students, finally: from primary school to high school, students come with their teachers, and take part in the learning activities on offer.

For each public, these activities have the common feature that they provide a human mediator. It is indeed of particular importance, on such a sensitive topic as that of radioactive waste, that the visitor may experience interchange with the Visiatome staff, ask his or her questions, and, if such be the case, voice his or her fears. Thus, group visits (whether of adults or students) are systematically accompanied. To interact with visitors arriving individually, other means had to be found. Short educational animations, directly available in the exhibition area, or films shown in the auditorium, allowing a dialog to be set up, can meet this purpose. The aim of the designers? That every visitor goes through a unique personal experience, and may leave with the thought: "Radioactive waste, now I know what that looks like, and what happens to it."

To sum up, the purpose is not to convince the public, or to make visitors take up this or that point of view, rather it is to inform the public in objective fashion, by showing both the benefits and the drawbacks of the solutions being contemplated. The aim, in brief, is never to disconnect the scientific and technical issues from the social and human consequences, and to conceal neither the potential hazards from, nor the medium- or long-term effects of, the management solutions being considered.

It is such objectivity, and frank, straightforward presentation which, undoubtedly, ensure Visiatome makes a decisive contribution to the discussion, and ultimate relevance, of the choices that are to be made, in France, as at the European level.

> Jean-Pierre Moncouyoux

Director, Radioactive Materials Conditioning and Storage Expertise Center
CEA Valrhô-Marcoule Center