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City museums still draw crowds

By: [Monée Fields-White](#) Jan. 27, 2009

(Crain's) — Many of Chicago's major cultural attractions drew a large number of visitors last year even as the economic slowdown led many consumers to pare discretionary spending.

Higher attendance at eight of the city's museums helped offset a 15% drop at the [Museum of Science and Industry](#) and a 7% decline at the [John G. Shedd Aquarium](#), according to figures released Tuesday by the organization Museums in the Park.

The total number of visitors to all 10 major cultural attractions was nearly 7.7 million last year — a 1% decline from the previous year.

"When you look at what people are facing in a difficult economy, it's a relief to see that support for Chicago's museums still remain strong," said Gary T. Johnson, Chicago History Museum president and head of the museum organization.

Despite their declines, both the [Museum of Science and Industry](#) and the Shedd Aquarium still topped the list of Chicago's cultural attractions in terms of total number of visits. The Shedd Aquarium, which closed its Oceanarium in September for renovations, had 1.9 million visitors. The [Museum of Science and Industry](#) had 1.4 million visitors in 2008. The [Art Institute of Chicago](#) came in third, with just under 1.4 million visitors.

According to the Shedd Aquarium, it has held the top spot in Chicago 12 out of 17 years since 1991 and four out of the last five since opening its Wild Reef section in 2003. The Oceanarium is slated to reopen in June.

"This past year provided some unique opportunities and real challenges for Shedd," said Ted A. Beattie, the aquarium's president and CEO. "However, even with the Oceanarium temporarily under renovation and the nation's economic concerns, 2008 was another amazing year for the aquarium."

The Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum posted the biggest jump in attendance — up 46% to just over 300,000. That was followed by a 32% jump at the Chicago History Museum to about 266,000.

"We are encouraged by the fact that the city of Chicago can celebrate that, even during this challenging period, overall attendance is really down very minimally," said Donna Gustaffson, the nature museum's interim president and CEO.

The Museums in the Park report also showed a steep increase in the number of people coming to the museums for free days. That was up 15% to just over 1 million last year. Attendance by school groups rose 2% to almost 1.2 million.

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