

Wild Ways of Learning: Zoo Education in New South Wales

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Zoos are sensory places – children and adults can see, smell, hear and touch wildlife!

Zoos educate people across the whole of society, from all socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. They all do it in their own way even though there are some common themes.

For many people their connection with the environment happens in a zoo – especially in urban communities where experiences with nature are few and far between.



A group of primary school children interact with an Australian marsupial - the quokka.

Zoos are dynamic places – they have changed and are changing. Animal collections have been in existence since early times. However modern zoos are very different from their earlier counterparts. They are evolving into multi-purpose conservation centres.

Zoos are seen more and more as educational organisations – striving to get the message across about all this important work and to ultimately link people with nature and ignite the spark towards environmental literacy.

“Zoo Education has almost become an independent discipline. The use of a wide variety of educational techniques, facilities, and considerations, together with knowledge, creativity, and inventiveness can make zoos highly interesting, attractive, and effective places for environmental, conservation, and holistic life system education.” (World Zoo Conservation Strategy, 1993)

Zoos worldwide are visited annually by over 600 million people which is more than 10% of the world’s population (World Zoo Conservation Strategy, 1993) – visitation unequalled by any other group of public, conservation-oriented institutions. This is not a bad effort considering we do not have a

Tomorrowland, Frontierland, Adventureland or Fantasyland in sight! Zoos are ideally suited to deliver worthwhile education programmes because of such high visitation and interest from the community.

Educationally proactive organisations can influence public attitudes and highlight environmental issues in a variety of ways. The zoo community must help to reverse environmental trends through targeted education – organisations such as the International Zoo Educators Association, recognise the need for well placed education programmes, international co-operation and uniform messages about the unique role of our institutions.

Zoos exhibit living animals, which makes them different from museums and other cultural institutions – animals give zoos an edge. Zoos are in the perfect position to promote environmental education and through this to shape public opinion about conservation.

If we take Taronga and Western Plains as typical zoos we can examine the options available for educational experiences. Over one million people visit the two zoos of NSW each year. We aim to provide varying levels of educational experiences for our diverse range of visitors.

Informal Education – education not directly linked to the curricula of formal educational institutions

Public programmes and informal learning situations are important as contact points for the vast majority of zoo visitors. Informal education takes place through information labels, interpretives, brochures, media coverage, keeper presentations, school holiday programmes, playspaces, animal contact opportunities, touch tables, tours, special events, the animal themselves and environmental practices within the zoo.

Each of these informal situations must have the target audience clearly defined and messages made simple (even if the concept is complex) and easily understood. It is the role of educators and interpreters to make these informal experiences memorable – they may be the first key to increasing understanding and changing attitudes in our visitors.

Formal Education – more directly linked to curricula frameworks

Formal education takes place through publications, specialist lectures, adult education courses, the TAFE Zookeeping Course, other special interest group meetings (like the Veterinary Association) and the Australian Conservation Training Institute (for overseas conservation organisations) and school education.

These formal situations are targeted at specific audiences and deliver more complicated messages about the work of zoos. To give you an example: Over 120,000 school students were involved in some way with Taronga and Western Plains Zoos last year – that is 10% of total visitation to the zoo. Of the 3,068 Schools in NSW in 1997, approximately 1,300 visited Taronga. Clearly a zoo visit is an integral part of the school curriculum. Environmental education is mandatory in NSW schools.

The draft 1999 NSW Department of Education Environmental Education document states that “environmental education is a lifelong process of learning that helps people to understand and appreciate the environment and their inter-connectedness with and responsibility for it.” Zoos are critical to environmental education – “effective environmental education provides diverse learning experiences in and beyond the classroom”.

Some of these experiences at Taronga Zoo are:

- ◆ Classrooms with live animals and interesting biofacts. Kids can touch, see, smell, hear and get close to animals. This goes a long way to breaking down fears and barriers towards animals.

The lessons address the curriculum and are designed to complement the teacher's classroom programme.

- ◆ Special programmes which link the zoo to curriculum areas. The Writing Competition and Banner Competition require students to research an animal theme and develop a curriculum-based, zoo-linked outcome.

- ◆ The Zoomobile, our outreach programme (with our cool and ‘out there’ educator!), visits schools unable to visit the zoo (approximately 10,000 students each year). These include hospital

schools, remand centres and isolated schools. Country trips to isolated schools cause a great stir as the animals check into the local motel!

- ◆ Animals of the Dreaming (another outreach option) combines interesting aspects of Australia, native animals and Dreaming stories which relate to a number of curriculum areas.



A close encounter with a live snake.

- ◆ Work experience programmes give students a taste of being a keeper and meet vocational education requirements for schools.



Searching for tadpoles in a creek.

- ◆ Zoo Adventures, our holiday programme, provides educationally based programmes with behind the scenes opportunities.
- ◆ ZoosnooZ – sleep at the zoo. What a wonderful way to get connected! Imagine getting close to Kotik, our 225 kg sealion, or feeding a giraffe! The teachers don't mind it either. It is a once in a lifetime experience.
- ◆ Research Week, where students research an area of the zoo, work with zoo staff and use the zoo's specialist library.
- ◆ Internet programs like Murder Under the Microscope, the zoo's website chat room.

- ◆ Wild Homes is a design and technology programme where Year 11 students design zoo exhibits with the assistance of the zoo's Exhibit Planning Officer and architects.
- ◆ Teacher inservice programmes to give teachers a better understanding of educational opportunities available at the zoo.
- ◆ Joint programmes with other environmental agencies like Streamwatch and State Forests.

But the real challenge for zoo educators has been and will be to take our expertise outside the zoo boundaries. As zoos develop more *in situ* conservation programmes it is imperative that community education programmes support this work.

The Taronga Zoo Education and Herpetofauna staff have developed a community based programme to reintroduce Green and Golden Bell Frogs to Sir Joseph Banks Reserve at Botany. We work with the local schools, council and community group to look after the site and collect scientific data about the tadpoles and frogs.

This programme has now been the catalyst to develop a national education

programme for frogs (ASX Frog Focus) through the zoo education network – an Australian first. This educational interactive CD-ROM will give teachers and students across Australia information and activities which will help them help frogs!

Programmes like Frog Focus, which combines conservation and education, are at the cutting edge of future zoo education – local ownership of conservation is the most meaningful. Local communities are uncertain of where to begin even if they are motivated – it is here that zoo experts can help. By combining the talents of educators and life sciences staff, worthwhile conservation education programmes can develop.

This programme is zoo education at its best; after all, education is about opening doors to new experiences, new ways of thinking and new ways of behaving. What more is there to say except:

“In the end we will conserve only what we love, we will love only what we understand, we will understand only what we are taught”. Baba Dioum

References

NSW Department of Education and Training (1999), Draft Environmental Education Policy.

World Zoo Conservation Strategy (1993) Chicago Zoological Society, Brookfield Illinois. IUDZB/CBSG.

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