

Conservation Education: Engaging with visitors inside and out

Kelly Maxwell
Miami University Project Dragonfly AIP Graduate Student
Jacksonville Beach, Florida



Figure 1. Carson Springs Wildlife Conservation Foundation presentation at Holy Spirit Catholic

CONSERVATION EDUCATION

Conservation education is a resource that organizations and outreach programs use to share knowledge of the environment and ecosystems with the public. It aims to provide opportunities for people to engage with nature and foster connections that inspire them to change their behavior to protect nature for future generations.

These education programs explain “bite-size” changes that people can engage and connect with without feeling intimidated, whether they are visiting an organization or interacting with outreach opportunities. These “bite-sized” changes could be buying sustainably sourced products, recycling, reducing plastic waste, donating to conservation organizations, and sharing their new conservation knowledge. Conservation education transforms these concepts into engaging activities that emphasize the importance of small-change conservation.

Conservation education maximizes impact through targeting people's cognition, emotions, values, and behaviors. Knowledge empowers guests to understand human impact and make small changes in their lives. Emotions can determine what type of action one may take. Joy from knowing that their recycling makes a difference may encourage someone to continue with bigger steps. Empathy for orangutans and their habitat's destruction from palm oil farming may cause someone to choose products that lack palm oil or are ethically-sourced.

At first glance, one may think conservation education is just signage and interpretation. Though these are useful tools, when looking at the heart of these programs, it becomes apparent how much more is done in conservation education. Zoological organizations engage guests through different techniques including teacher resources, zoo classrooms, zoo camps, and volunteer/internship opportunities. Educational lessons and resources for various grade levels that are aligned with the Next Generation Science Standards are accessible across the United States for free or low cost, enticing educators to utilize the zoo as a learning platform. Zoo educators, keepers, and other staff frequently engage with guests, sharing stories that create emotional connections for the guests while spreading conservation messages.

Across the world, organizations are developing new and enticing ways to engage with guests. However, it has come to light that those who are entering the gates represent only a small portion of the community. There is a large population of people who may not have access to zoos that may need these programs and exposure to nature and conservation the most. Building outreach conservation education programs has become an

increased focus for care facilities to engage with these populations and encourage both adults and children to become conservationists regardless of their backgrounds through "bite-sized," manageable changes.

If provided access to educational sources, audiences who experience barriers such as funds, accessibility, care, or connectivity, could have the most significant impact on conservation. No single answer will solve these issues for all zoos, but it can start with individual actions that can instigate community and ecological change.

ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS

Do your zoo educators visit different locations such as schools, senior centers, community gardens, and neighborhood parks? Meeting these audiences and building rapport within their community is one of the next approaches to interacting with them. If a community garden or neighborhood park is available, nature walks or outdoor seminars focusing on local species could be scheduled at various times of the day and seasons. Sharing the importance of protecting these species, the environment, and how it can impact peoples' lifestyles if

something upsets the balance (overuse of fertilizers, pesticides, removal of flowers, etc.) can elicit change. What if zoos could reach out to the public, encourage linkage between the public and their surroundings, and then connect that to conservation messaging?

As important as it is to engage with guests who visit zoos and engage with conservation messaging, they are only a small portion of the population. To spread conservation awareness and educational opportunities, facilities need to engage with those who do not regularly visit in ways that will be meaningful to them. Conservation education strategies are intended to build connections between people and places, whether those places are right outside their front doors or in other countries. Fostering these connections allows people to be more educated about what is happening to the environment around them, and through emotions, it leads to changes in behavior. Meet your audience where they are to provide them with background information, connect them with reasons to care, and show them ways to engage in minor changes; this is how you build a community of conservationists. 🦁



Figure 2. Catty Shack Ranch Wildlife Sanctuary at Anchor Academy Elementary School for science night. Photo courtesy of Anchor Academy Elementary.

The Journal of the American Association of Zoo Keepers, Inc.

Animal Keepers' Forum

