

MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH NATURE

PROGRAMMING FOR A LARGER COMMUNITY



Picture a moment when you were lucky enough to witness the magic of discovery - eyes widen, a smile grows, maybe a hand reaches out to touch some wonderful thing crafted by nature. Emotions flicker, a mind opens, a memory is made. As observers we smile too, charmed by the moment. Now, here is the big question: Did you picture a child? I bet most of you did.



By Mollie O'Neil

I have been lucky enough to see these reactions on the beautifully lined faces of those at the other end of life's journey. They are as delightful and, perhaps, more importantly as meaningful. Educators tend to focus on the young: creating experiences for the inexperienced, introducing the natural world to its more recent arrivals. It is vital that the generations to come are knowledgeable about nature and inspired to conserve wildlife and wild places. Nonetheless, embracing a much older generation can have immense benefits. Children are not the only ones enchanted by nature; however, they are often the main focus of program designers.

It has been almost thirty years since Edward O. Wilson published the groundbreaking book *Biophilia* in which he describes the innate human desire to be close to other living organisms. Since its publication, a large body of research supports the theory that interacting with nature has a significant positive impact on general health and well-being. Time and time again, studies have shown that connecting with nature reduces stress and anxiety, promotes feelings of peace and tranquility and enhances self-esteem. We also know that these reactions are not age-specific: people both young and old benefit from nearby nature. As facilitators in nature-focused institutions, we should encourage these connections from a holistic perspective. Societies, like ecosystems, require each part to be healthy for the whole to thrive. We will all benefit from including the older adults of our communities in nature-related programs and activities, particularly because senior citizens are a large and growing part of our society.

The U.S. has 80 million Baby Boomers, the first of whom turned 65 in 2011. By 2030, senior citizens will represent nearly 20 percent of the U.S. population. In some ways, this is great news. Many people over 65 are retired, which means there is a substantial and increasing number of older adults in this country who may have time to attend nature-focused programs, either on-site or through outreach. I began developing pilot programs for this age group two years ago, and it has been easy to fill classes. Senior citizens are as interested and enthusiastic about the experience as children – sometimes more. They also ask insightful, astute questions and relate wonderful personal stories. Participants may even be inspired to become volunteers, or could be recruited as educational staff. We should utilize one of our most valuable resources, the older members of our community who have vast experience and wisdom to share.

One way of helping our senior citizens share their knowledge is to develop grandparent/grandchild programs that engage both generations in nature and create positive memories. Recent research shows grandparent-provided childcare has increased since the recession of 2007. In a 2010 study conducted by the Pew Research Center, 51 percent of grandparents in their 60s and 70s reported caring for their grandchildren in the last year. Consider offering a “storytime” series with animals from your interpretive collections, plant tree or vegetable seeds together and talk about the benefits of gardening, make art with things found in nature like twigs and leaves. These distinctive moments build shared experiences that can be recounted later. Reminiscing is an important social behavior that can help bond family members, open doors to new friendships, and create lasting, emotional connections to special places.

Alas, despite these benefits, a large population of older citizens also brings challenges. It will have a major impact on the economic and emotional health of our society. Common diseases associated

with aging include Alzheimer's and dementia, depression, heart disease, arthritis, cancer, and diabetes. All of these conditions will become more prevalent as the proportion of our population reaches its 60s, 70s and beyond. Fortunately, connecting with nature can ease some of the symptoms of these difficult diseases. Multiple studies have shown that interacting with plants and animals decreases blood pressure, the stress hormone cortisol, and post-surgical recovery time, and increases production of endorphins, oxytocin and dopamine. Simply put, being around plants and animals is good for our bodies and minds. If adults entering their “golden years” are invited and encouraged to participate in nature-focused activities, then, perhaps, some of these conditions can be delayed or avoided. Zoos and aquariums are already destinations for fun and learning so open your doors a bit wider to include people from all age brackets. We will all benefit from a happier, healthier populace.

Certainly, many zoos and aquariums, due to logistical and topographical constraints, have challenges developing extensive on-site programs for participants with physical or intellectual limitations. In these cases, offer tailored outreach programs for people living in primary care facilities so that you are still able to reach as wide an audience as possible. When it is not feasible to bring animals, show beautiful pictures of animals. Bring plants or natural objects they can touch and smell, play the sounds of local songbirds. Engage as many senses as possible so that those who cannot see, hear, smell or touch will still cherish the experience.

If you decide to explore senior programming options, here are some tips:

- When developing programs for older adults, remember that “65+” and “senior citizen” are vague terms. We would not create a single program for K-12 students because a kindergartener and a high school senior are very different. Similarly, there are 85 year olds who are physically and mentally fit, and 72 year olds who will struggle to keep up and stay engaged. Create and market programs based on interest and function level, not age.
- When working with a retirement home, assisted living community or community senior center, speak with the activities coordinator and have a clear understanding of your audience. This will ensure the experience is positive, not frustrating.
- Explore grants that may be available for local senior programs as there are likely many options, but remember seniors are often willing and able to pay reasonable program fees.

Undoubtedly, zoos and aquariums should continue to engage the next generation of learners, leaders, advocates and activists, but they should consider embracing older adults as well. Organize a Senior Programming Task Force and investigate what is possible for your institution and share your successes and failures with other Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) educators. As with children, you never know how an experience with nature will impact someone's life. What do you have to lose? What might our larger community have to gain?

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