

USING THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS TO IMPROVE PUBLIC EDUCATION ABOUT LOCAL WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

Imagine walking through a zoo or museum and coming across a realistically styled puppet of a raccoon showcasing the dexterity of its front paws by opening a trash can lid. As you watch and listen to the puppeteer, you find yourself giggling at the antics of Danny the Dexterous Raccoon as you learn about ways that you can co-exist with raccoons in your neighborhood. You are even invited to come touch the raccoon puppet, which features real raccoon fur, so you get a tactile connection to the 'animal.' You continue on and encounter another puppet, this time of a striped skunk. You watch how Tammy the Tail-raising Skunk stomps and raises her tail in warning when she feels threatened. Through entertaining theatrical performances like these, you find yourself learning more and more about the local wildlife in your own backyard. This is the vision that the Discovery Zoo at the Boonshoft Museum of Discovery has for its future guest experiences.



By Melissa Proffitt

As the human population continues to grow and habitat continues to shrink, wildlife is often forced into closer and closer proximity to humans, increasing chances for human-wildlife conflict. Educational outreach programs have been shown to be a successful method for encouraging local residents to make ecologically responsible decisions in regard to mitigating wildlife conflicts. Education and knowledge can be powerful tools at dispelling misconceptions and generating support for conservation policies. Community engagement is an important component of native wildlife conservation. One way zoos work toward conservation is by inspiring and educating their visitors (Ballantyne, Packer, Hughes, & Dierking, 2007). As Ballantyne et al (2007) points out, research suggests that entertaining and/or interactive experiences enhance people's learning. People remember what entertains them, and this retention can be the spark that causes the person to remember to take that small conservation step at home. Many wildlife shows at zoos employ entertainment tactics with the aim to educate visitors and encourage them to reconsider their role in environmental problems and conservation action, and to see themselves as part of the solution (Falk et al., 2007). From Sharon Matola at the Belize Zoo to the Kohl's Wild Theatre in Milwaukee to Wildlife Theatre at the Central Park Zoo, and the Blakely's Barnyard Bonanza at Cincinnati Zoo, the use of puppets, masks, and other performance art techniques are growing in popularity and effectiveness.

Incorporation of the natural environment into a performance creates a scenario where nature becomes the main attraction. In wilderness theatre, natural environments acquire elevated status in the imagination of the public (Wiley, 2002). This elevated status provides an emotional context that connects people more deeply to the issues being presented. These devices need to be utilized more by conservation educators. A powerful way to enhance public entertainment and education is through the use of various theatrical conventions like incorporating elements of puppetry, masks, costumes, and scripts. These theatrical means can be melded together to form a process that can address the more complex themes found in conservation.

The Discovery Zoo is housed in the Boonshoft Museum of Discovery, and educational outreach is a key component to daily operations. Currently there is no theatrical programming geared at educating the public and other educators in the Dayton area about the local wildlife around them and how they can better co-exist with this wildlife and help with conservation. From species perhaps considered "pests" like Canada geese, to animals that may have pejorative images connected to them like big brown bats, to potential predators like bobcats, often better education and tips on how to reduce conflicts with these animals can foster better relationships between people and the wildlife. But how this information is conveyed is equally as important. Many modern zoos use animal shows to teach visitors about particular animals and encourage training animals to display natural behaviors. These behaviors when observed by visitors can increase visitors' understanding of the animal and foster positive attitudes towards conservation of the species (Ballantyne et al., 2007). The Discovery Zoo hopes to follow in these footsteps and go beyond by pulling in various aspects of performance art to complement a newly planned Wildlife Discoveries show scheduled to open in the summer of 2014.

The content of the show will be shaped on the results of evaluation of current knowledge patrons have about wildlife around them, as well as identifying common misconceptions about native wildlife. Methodology will be developed for educators to use puppets, masks, and costumes along with live animal encounters to teach visitors about their local wildlife and how to co-exist with that wildlife. Wildlife show entertainment helps to drive the overall goal of conservation not merely by educating the public, but also by helping the audience retain that information (Whitworth, 2012). A storyboard and lessons will be developed for each wildlife theatrical show to a) inform about certain local species, b) discuss common misconceptions, and c) suggest ways that people can help co-exist with and help conserve wildlife in their own backyard. Native animals in the museum program collection will be selected and trained for natural behaviors to demonstrate in wildlife theatrical shows and outreach programs. Costumes, puppets, and props will be utilized to further the storyline in a way the audience finds fun and engaging. Shows and outreach programs will be produced in collaboration with the training coordinator and curator of live animals department and overseen by the vice president, collections and research. This program will likely expand through time, adding more trained staff and an enlarged program animal collection base. It will be shared with numerous educators and presented as frequently as possible to spread these important conservation messages.

By helping develop and expand the use of theatrical conventions in wildlife conservation education, and by sharing with other educators this knowledge and ability to use theatrical conventions as teaching tools, more people will be reached, be it in a classroom, a nature center, a museum, a zoo, or any other venue where learning takes place.

MELISSA PROFFITT IS A SENIOR ANIMAL KEEPER AT THE BOONSHOFT MUSEUM OF DISCOVERY

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