



### Public Engagement

# Zoo Quests: Public Engagement Success at the Bronx and Central Park Zoos

By Bricken Sparacino

In the summer of 2015, the Wildlife Conservation Society's (WCS) Bronx Zoo in Bronx, N.Y., and Central Park Zoo in New York, N.Y., created a new public engagement experience called Zoo Quests. The goal of this program was to enhance the visitor experience through in-person interactions that fostered a greater connection to conservation, wildlife and nature.

The Central Park Zoo Quests included the interactive characters, Professor Flight and Ranger Rae. These characters led the visitors on a brief mystery inquiry. Visitors worked together to discover the biodiversity of the tropical rainforest and practice their scientific observation skills at the grizzly bear exhibit. Visitors reported findings back to the interactive characters and offered conservation suggestions. This provided visitors with the sense that they were actively participating in science. One of the Bronx Zoo Quests included the Adventure Club through which visitors donned backpacks and grabbed magnifying glasses to explore the natural world woven into the Children's Zoo exhibit. This adventure

allowed visitors to connect wild animals to animals from their own neighborhoods, helping them understand the connectivity of the natural world.

Surveys with more than 300 visitors were conducted at both facilities to gauge the success of Quests. The program received a 98 percent guest satisfaction rate. Survey data also suggested that the program met its targeted learning goals. For example, respondents were able to articulate specific science concepts they learned and conservation connections they made during their Quests experience. Throughout the summer, the Zoo Quest leaders conducted 400,000 interactions with visitors.

An institutional benefit of the new initiative was that it created a platform for interdepartmental collaboration. The Education Department created the Quests concepts and worked with the Exhibits and Graphics Arts Department and the Animal Department to develop the materials and choose the best interpretation locations. The Global Resources Department found Quests to be a great fundraising opportunity as it

generated corporate sponsorship interest. The Education Department operated the Quests, which were staffed by volunteer teens, adult educators and professional actors. From conception to execution, nearly all Zoo departments worked together to deliver the Quests experience for Zoo guests.

The success of the Zoo Quests initiative led to its expansion for the summer of 2016. Quests returned to the Bronx and Central Park Zoos, and expanded to WCS's Queens Zoo in Corona, N.Y., and Prospect Park Zoo in New York, N.Y. In addition, WCS's New York Aquarium in Brooklyn, N.Y., is developing a similar program. Common interpretive themes will be interwoven into all of the Quests in order to connect visitors to WCS's field conservation work and to enable them to take action on behalf of wildlife and the environment.

WCS Quests is sponsored by Canon U.S.A., Empire BlueCross BlueShield, JetBlue and NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital.

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