

Communicating Conservation: Using Volunteers to Spread Your Message

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Abstract

In recent years, conservation issues have increased in importance to the average interpreter. Not only do we want visitors at zoos, aquariums and parks to learn about the animals and natural world around them, but also to learn about the threats facing wild places and wild things, including what they can do to help. At the Oakland Zoo, we have been able to exponentially increase our visitors' knowledge and awareness of the issues by using our strong volunteer corps to get the message out there. In this presentation, we will outline the initiatives and programs we have been using to successfully meet this mission.

Keywords

Conservation, conservation messaging, volunteers, visitor engagement

Introduction

Conservation is central to the mission of the Oakland Zoo. When our visitors come to the zoo, we want them to be awed by the creatures they see, to remember the special experiences they had, and above all, to go home wanting to help save wild places and wild things. Educating these nearly 700,000 visitors each year about issues surrounding habitat, poaching, palm oil, and pollution is not a duty we take lightly. In looking to increase the amount of conservation messaging experienced by our visitors on a daily basis, we looked to our sizable volunteer base as a natural solution.

Our docents have developed a variety of programs to help us meet this mission, including:

Docent Animal Conservation Messages:

The Docents conservation goal at the zoo is to get guests of all ages excited about how to better conserve and to make informed choices when purchasing items. The Docent Conservation Committee was instrumental in developing 43 conservation connection messages on some of the Oakland Zoo's Animal Collection. The information includes IUCN & Cites updates & the threats animals face in both the wild & captivity & what the Oakland Zoo is doing to help. These messages help visitors/students understand their own connection to each species, & what they can do to help as individuals.

CCC Project (Conservation, Community & Children)

Monica Tyler (Conservation Committee Docent) along with Ed. Staff has spearheaded a conservation project where she is working closely with Dr. Siefert at the Queen Elizabeth National Park in Uganda to support all aspects of a new community education center. This project is multi layered as it involves the buy-in from the local community members, teachers, students & pastoralists on the topic of Human-Wildlife conflict.

Palm Oil Shopping Guide/Game and Station:

The Docents & TWGs at the Oakland Zoo educate & share ideas with zoo guests at our Rainforest stations on how to help with making informed choices when you go shopping so that you are not adding to the destruction of rainforests & the decimation of palm oil trees. Boycotting palm oil is not the solution..... Supporting companies who are members of the RSPO (roundtable on sustainable palm oil) is the most responsible solution.

Conservation Zoo Mobile Docents:

The Conservation Zoo Mobile team consists of 7 Docents who teach small groups/ classes about conservation issues and solutions. The program covers 4 stations:

The Rainforest:

A simulated rainforest complete with sounds and smells where we introduce students to the wonders of this unique, threatened habitat, encourage children to come up with solutions.

The Four R's: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and Rot even Refuse

Bio facts & Artifacts: 5 main threats to wildlife. (HIPPO) (Habitat, Invasive Species, Pollution, Population & Over Consumption).

4 Live Animals: 4 animals from our Education Department Animal collection are shown & smart pet choices are discussed.

Conservation Cart

The Conservation Cart is used as an on-site educational tool at the zoo or at tabling events, fairs & schools to help guests develop sustainable habits & walk a little lighter on the earth. The station enables guests to learn & participate in practical daily activities that will help keep the environment safer for all animals. The exhibits are designed to help guests leave the Conservation Station feeling empowered to do something about helping wildlife. We want to help guests make the connection between what they do and the immediate effect on wildlife both locally and worldwide.

Quarters for Conservation:

Our Conservation Department launched the Q4C zoo wide program in 2012 where guests save wildlife with each visit to the zoo. 25c of each admission fee goes towards supporting one of the zoo's local or worldwide wildlife partners. Docents & TWGs interact with our zoo guests & the zoo guest can then make a choice of which partner they would like to support by inserting their token in to one of the 3 containers.

All of the Docents efforts in the area of conservation at the Oakland Zoo focus educating zoo guests/zoo partners locally and worldwide on the importance of conserving wildlife and how man and wildlife can co-exist together.

Additionally, we have a strong youth volunteer program, most notably our Teen Wild Guide program. A long term volunteer program with a graduated “leadership ladder” system, in which teens can earn additional opportunities through service and performance, the Teen Wild Guides (or TWGs) are encouraged to play a role in creating new stations, events and educational opportunities. Teens have a wealth of energy, enthusiasm and drive. They are eager to try new things and are very motivated by seeing one of their ideas come to life at the zoo. This benefits the zoo, but also the teens- part of the mission of our program is to give teens opportunities in the zoo, and create a new generation of conservationists. Much like the docents, they took eagerly to the challenge of finding new ways to communicate conservation messages to our visitors.

TWG Conservation Messages:

Like the docents, the teens also use “Key Messages” at their stations, which include a conservation focus. They distribute Seafood Watch cards at the otter exhibit to educate about sustainable seafood choices and how it relates to aquatic animals and habitats.

TWG Tiger Station:

One of our longtime TWGs created a tiger station as a way to educate visitors about the problem of tigers in captivity. Our five tigers all came from unhappy captivity situations. She included info on the number of tigers in captivity, problems with tiger breeding and housing, and ways to help. This has greatly increased our visitor’s knowledge of this little known yet rampant problem in the US.

Additionally, our Lead TWGs work regularly on projects benefitting conservation issues they identify. Past TWGs have created events educating about rhinos, illegal poaching and native California biodiversity.

TWG Face Painting:

The Teen Wild Guides frequently host a face painting station in the Children’s Zoo. Though the face painting is free, donations are accepted, which the teens must then spend wisely on conservation projects. At our annual meeting, teens make presentations on conservation organizations they would like to donate to and must include info on what this organization does, why they think this organization is worthy, how much they would like to give and what our money would be spent on. This teaches teens how to be wise philanthropists and research organizations properly. A democratic voting process is used to decide the winners who will receive a donation. Past donations have gone to hornbill nest protection in Thailand, wildlife rehabilitation in Guatemala, and mountain gorilla veterinary care in East Africa. Visitors benefit by learning about where their donations go.

Conclusion

By supporting these conservation efforts from our volunteers, we have managed to successfully increase our conservation messaging in the zoo, increase volunteer morale, and create a collaborative partnership between our volunteers and the Education and Conservation staff. Consider using volunteers and their talents to help meet your interpretive goals at your institution!