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What's the Message? Exhibit Design for Education

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While most zoo and aquarium professionals admit (sometimes reluctantly) they are in the recreation business, many do not fully realize that they are also communicators. The AAZPA estimates that 91 million people visit member zoos and aquariums each year (Wagner, 1986). This represents 91 million communication opportunities. In fact, if we assume that each of these visitors spends two hours at your facilities and that some communication at some level (conscious or subconscious) is possible every minute (a very conservative figure), then we could have almost 11 billion communication opportunities in only a year! Think of it - this would be almost 150 billion communication opportunities by the year 2000!

By now you must be wondering what I mean by communication. Webster defines "communicate," in part, as "...to impart...to make known," and suggests synonyms such as, "...reveal, impart...promulgate." (Webster 1983).

Transfer of simple bits of information can be nearly instantaneous, as subliminal advertising techniques have shown. And how long does it take for us to form an opinion when we experience something upsetting?

Whether we are aware of it or not, we are constantly receiving and sorting input from the surrounding environment. Is it safe? Is it congenial? Is it advantageous? These and a multitude of other messages surround our waking moments. We read then in the environmental "context" or "perceptual surround," (Coe 1982) and interpret them through our previous experiences, prejudices and expectations (Coe 1985).

What messages, conscious and subconscious, do we read at the zoo or aquarium? Linda Taylor (1983) in her excellent article, "Potholes and Potoroos," showed how common features like broken benches, overflowing trash receptacles and poorly maintained restrooms communicate staff carelessness and perhaps hostility toward the public.

Let's imagine typical zoo or aquarium settings and visualize their inherent message. Imagine gorillas, orangutans, baboons and spider monkeys presented in rows of glass-fronted, barred cages with aqua-colored tile back walls, concrete floors, and chain and pipe trapezes. The strong smell of disinfectant can't cover up other unpleasant odors. School children are screaming and squealing; their echoing cacophony combined with the shriek of baboons is deafening. What is the message? Since the place sounds like bedlam and is obviously a place or incarceration, we might associate the "unnatural" looking beasts with insane genetic deviates.

The young gorilla reaching through the bars might be assumed to be a dangerous felon, even if the graphic above the cage says otherwise. Is this the message we want to communicate about our primates and their care? Robert Sommer (1972) stated that "Despite excellent intentions, even the best zoos may be creating animal stereotypes that are not only incorrect but that actually work against the interests of wildlife preservation."

Let's look at a more moderate example. A bear splashes in a bathtub-sized pool in a large grotto of carved concrete. The implicit message might be that Bruin and his kind live a benign existence in arid box canyons. The more literal view might be simply that "bears live at the zoo"! The true facts of this major predator's existence may be explicated on adjacent signboards but the information is overwhelmed by the stronger contrary message of the hard, barren exhibit.

For a third example, let's picture a Koala exhibit. The Koala lives on a post and platform elevated above a beautifully kept lawn surrounded by flower beds and hedges. Visitors view over the hedges or from overlooking wood decks. The obvious message? The Koala is having a garden party in a prosperous Southern California suburb.

Homocentricity

The first example might illicit feelings of pity or revulsion, the second a mood of low comedy and banality, and the third a Disney-like fantasy of a Teddy Bear tea party. All three exhibits have one message in common: homocentricity - the concept of a human-dominated universe. In fact, this is the central message of nearly every zoo and aquarium. Animals are presented in man made edifices or gardens, surrounded by human spectators and dependent on human keepers for their every need. The animals are shown to have lost every reason for existence except one - to amuse us. How can we teach respect and understanding for these creatures as well as their valuable ecological roles? Why should citizens be concerned about legislation to protect grizzly habitats in Alaska when we teach people that "bears live in the zoo?"

Biocentricity

Henry Beston wrote (1928):

> "*For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete, gifted with extensions of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings; they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendor and travail of the earth."*

The ecological processes that affect nature ultimately affect us. As Chief Sealth (1855) said, "...all things are connected." This complex web of co-evolution and adaptation is a wonderful thing, and a source of endless fascination. And, if we consider the *heliconia* flower or the brightly hued beautiful sunbird, how much more beautiful in its subtlety, grandeur and antiquity is the entire tropical forest organism of which the flower and the bird are but minor players?

Homocentricity is a fine and fitting theme for urban parks and museums of technology and art. It is a very limiting theme for zoological institutions. Themes such as "Diversity of

Life," "Living Desert," "Emerald Forests" and "Seas of Darkness, Seas of Light" embrace a "biocentric" or life-centered view of nature and provide an ideal contrast to other competing urban attractions. But remember, as we showed earlier, there is more to communicating a message than a catchy title. The exhibit context must support the message.

Picture an exhibit in which visitors follow narrow paths between willow thickets and rough boulders toward the sound of falling water. Through a small clearing they see a powerful cascade and, chest deep in the torrent, a grizzly fishes for dinner. There is no visible separating moat or other sign of obvious containment. The grizzly ignores us because he has better things to do. He has an independent occupation in a good facsimile of his native home. The visitors are surrounded by and immersed in the grizzly's world, a world that only a few generations ago might also have been theirs. The message is no longer one of comfortable, complacent domination, but one tinged with awe, grandeur and, perhaps, humility. The effectiveness of the communication is measured with the pulse rate of the visitor

This is zoo education of the first order. Education of the second order is interpretation of the message and explication or unweaving of fascinating components. This is the area that our education department usually addresses — the intellectual and informational component. The myriad forms of display available are beyond the scope of this discussion, but designers must take care that the vehicles they chose to display the information not detract from the primary living exhibit.

The Role of Zoo Education

AAZPA members hold that zoological institutions serve four primary areas of responsibility: recreation, education, research and conservation. Most authorities agree that visitors come to zoos and aquariums primarily for recreation. Most have little special concern for conservation or research though some education is expected. Thus, education becomes the logical conduit to promulgate concerns of research and conservation to the public. If the educational vehicle resembles the traditional classroom approach or is offered as an alternative to recreation, it will meet limited success. Alternatively, if the recreational experience is itself educational, as in the case of the grizzly exhibit mentioned earlier, I predict great success in transmitting both the primary message and related subjects. Information about grizzly research, both at the zoo and in the field, can be imparted as a participatory experience. Likewise, the value of conservation of grizzlies and their habitat is implicit in the exhibit context waiting to be interpreted by the educational materials. Direct research into visitor and grizzly behavior is also promising and should yield data valuable to grizzly conservation. Finally, exciting, moving exhibits together with well-phrased exhortations and helpful suggestions can motivate some visitors to become thoughtful, sensitive conservation activists.

Zoo education is essential to joining the mixed goals of recreation, education, research and conservation. Educators deserve a voice equal to this role. However, a bigger business-as-usual education department is not the answer. Every element in the zoo or aquarium that affects the zoo experience must be examined and its implicit communication tuned to resonate your overall message. Everything from benches to beverage containers should demonstrate an environmental consciousness. Homocentric habitats should be limited to people areas of the zoo while biocentric habitats immerse visitors in wonderful replications of wild landscapes and aquatic realms. Everywhere the visitor ventures should testify that everyone, from director to custodian, shows a real concern for the facility and its living inhabitants, both as individuals and

species, that they are knowledgeable and professional and worthy stewards, that they are sensitive to and care about their public, and that they are actively concerned about the future of the world around them. Thus, education will be raised to its purest and most effective level, teaching by example and by participation.

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