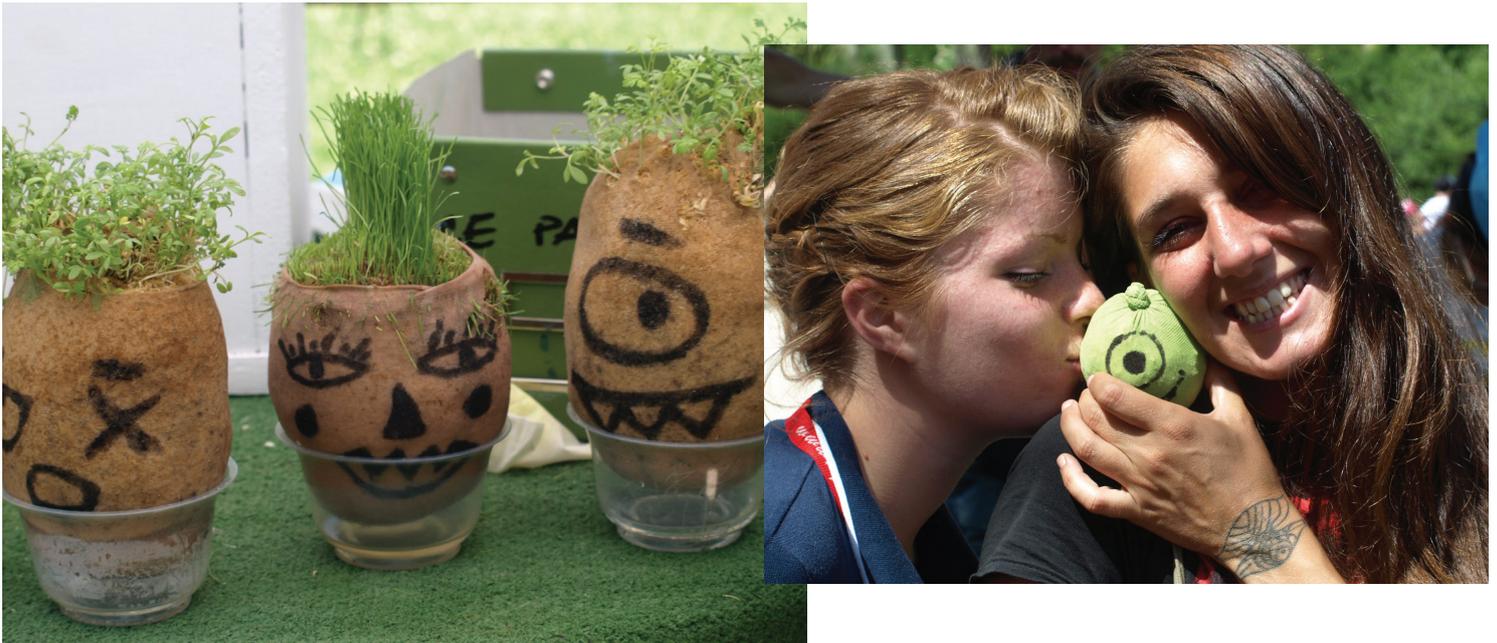


A thousand ways to educate people: the case of the 'grassmen' workshop at Zoomarine Italy

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Educating people inside an amusement theme park is everything but a simple challenge. A theme park, such as Zoomarine is a free choice setting where the public choose what to see and what to hear. Although Zoomarine is a Zoological Garden hosting many fascinating animals (dolphins, seals, sea lions, tropical birds and birds of prey) most people seem not to have the right frame of mind to be educated about them, about the wild and about conservation, as they have so many other things to think about. This makes us ask a question: is Zoomarine a real free-choice setting? Or are the choices made by the public somehow and someway guided? If the answer is yes, as it seems to be, what is the driving force guiding the choice of the visitors?

Marketing and communication. This is the answer.

Since the first grand opening of the park, communication has been directed one way only: a focus on dolphins! Dolphins are the most valuable creatures hosted at Zoomarine, the most loved animals by the visitors, the most known and unusual animals to see into a zoo. Dolphins are also the animals around which, during the last century, there have been so many legends and false beliefs, generating something like a general foolish feeling about them. Most of the people visiting a dolphinarium are convinced that dolphins are special creatures (but what about a sloth? or ants? or even cockroaches?) that need special handling (what about bats?) because they have a special power (they come from another planet or what?). Marketing and communication, the TV especially, has resulted in many misconceptions of the audience and the results is a mistaken view on the conservation priority. Dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*) are not in danger! Many bats (that people dislike), for example, need a great commitment to be saved along with many other animals and plans people are not so interested in.

Of course the Department of Education and Science, working in the park, always acts to give the public the correct view of all the animals hosted. The shows are in fact educational with a voice-over talking about them, about their biology, ecology and actions everyone can carry out to enhance their protection. And here we are, back at the very first line of this article: how difficult it is to catch the attention of someone that already possesses, or believe they have, the knowledge. So what's the solution? A Trojan Horse - a fish hook that during the past season we identified as the 'grass man'!



The majority of the visitors are represented by families with kids and kids are much more friendly and open minded about nature than their parents. So why not to catch them first with a simple but impressive craft activity and keep the parents occupied too? Try and educate, using the same tool, for parents and kids.

So the 'grassmen workshop' was born this way and gave the unexpected results shown below.

When: the do-it-yourself grassman workshop was offered to the public on three important days. The Earth Day on April 22nd, the World Environment Day on June 5th and a few days after on World Ocean Day on June 8th. The aim for the Department of Education and Science on those days was to educate people about nature conservation, about responsible fishery in the ocean and about the correct use of natural resources.

How: The biologist of the department set up a gazebo for the grassman workshop that took place all day long.

But **what is a grassman?** The grassman is a very simple craft activity for kids that is done with materials everyone can find at home. What you need to make a grassman is:

- sawdust;
- grass seeds;
- stocking;
- markers or color to draw the face of the grassman.

Put a handful of seeds inside the stocking then fill it with sawdust in order to create a round shape. Close the stocking with a knot, that will be the lower part of the grassman, and draw a face with a marker pen. Last thing to do, once at home, is to moisten the grass man so that it will have a fabulous 'green hair' in a few days!

Results: The activity was a great success. Kids stopped, magnetically attracted by the grassman and parents followed them; the skilled biologist made the rest involving everyone in interesting and educative discussions and role playing about the topic of the day. More than 400 grassmen took life in those three days, giving the biologists so many educational opportunities.

The grassman itself is a powerful educating object: it allows you to recycle materials that would usually be thrown away, it gives kids something which is ready in a few minutes they can go back home with and, most important, the grassman is a living thing you need to care about.

The do-it-yourself grassman workshop was a great success and had also the aim to collect money for an association involved in the conservation of the monk seal in the Mediterranean Sea.

