

Connect and Protect: The Benefits of Flagship Species

Jeffrey C. Skibins, Assistant Professor, Kansas State University, USA

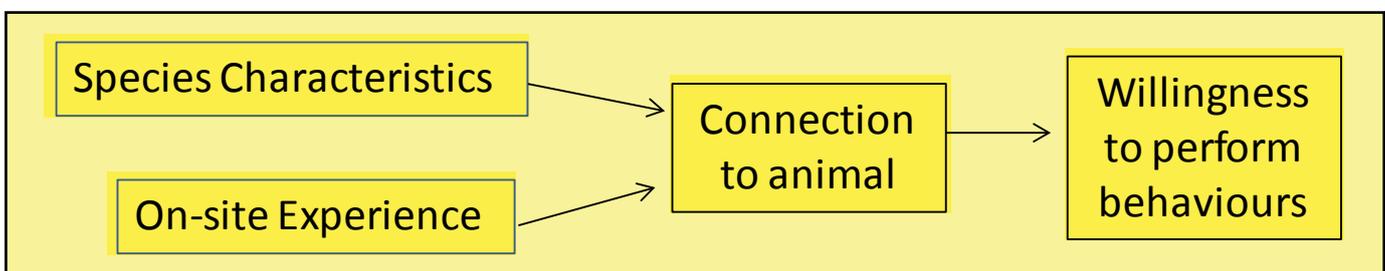


Traditionally, zoos and aquariums have relied on a select group of species to drive attendance. Popular species such as elephants, bears, great apes, and dolphins served to solidify institutions' roles as public attractions into the mid-20th century. However, as threats to biodiversity increased and habitats decreased, zoos embraced a more active role in conservation. The animals that once served to entertain the public were now being used to educate millions of visitors about the global extinction crisis.

Using an animal to highlight a threat to biodiversity and encourage public action to remediate that threat is the basis of flagship status. For example, elephants are used to discuss poaching, polar bears are linked to climate change, and orangutans demonstrate the effects of habitat loss. These species are highly effective in these roles because of their broad public appeal, or charisma. Visitors are innately drawn to these animals, in part, due to their appearance. Common descriptions of flagship species include 'cute' and 'cuddly', which

also explains their dominance in the gift shop. Another common feature of flagships is size. Bears, big cats, and rhinos are enormous animals. This has led to the label 'megafauna'. Linking cute and cuddly with enormous size, we get the overly academic term 'charismatic megafauna' to describe flagship species.

In many instances, charismatic megafauna are an excellent choice to anchor conservation campaigns. For example, the Melbourne Zoo's (Australia) 'Don't Palm Us Off' campaign and exhibit targets orangutan conservation. The focus is to raise awareness of habitat loss from palm oil production and increase participation in pro-conservation behaviours (e.g. avoiding palm oil products and donations). These efforts have been highly successful. Results show visitors are extremely satisfied with the exhibit and are significantly more likely to engage in desired behaviours upon exiting (Pearson et al. 2014).



But, are charismatic megafauna the only choice for flagships? Are not insects, amphibians, reptiles, and fish all subject to the same threats as pandas and tigers? Of course, the answer to the latter is 'yes.' And surprisingly, the answer to the former is a resounding 'no'. Zoo visitors are beginning to express a greater interest in a widening array of species. In a recent survey, more than 700 visitors were asked to identify the animal they felt the strongest connection to during their visit. Visitors responded with 164 distinct animals. Furthermore, regardless of which species a visitor identified with, the connection was a significant predictor of willingness to perform a pro-conservation behaviour (Skibins and Powell 2013).

Zoos and aquariums should feel empowered to deeply explore their collections for potential flagship species. Through purposeful interpretation and exhibit design, institutions can enable visitors to form a connection that extends well beyond the 'mammal house.' For example, visitors to the Shedd Aquarium (USA) identified jellyfish, over dolphins and whales, as the animal to which they most strongly connected (Skibins and Powell 2013). Zoos Victoria (Australia) has launched the 'Love Your Locals' campaign, which is examining visitors' connections to local species. The focus is on 20 endangered species found in Victoria including insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals. And as demonstrated by the Leadbeater's possum (*Gymnodelidius leadbeateri*) none are charismatic megafauna.

After identifying a flagship species, the second step is to determine which behaviours visitors will be asked to perform.

Behaviours should link directly to the species and be capable of being performed while on site. The ability to act in the moment is a key feature to successful zoo flagship campaigns. Smith et al. (2011) point out the emotional peak of a zoo visit quickly fades and visitors may be less likely to act after departing. Cell phone deposit (Brookfield Zoo, USA) and wipe for wildlife (Melbourne Zoo), illustrated here, show how zoo visitors can immediately act to save wildlife.

By recruiting more species to act as flagships, zoos and aquariums can help visitors connect and protect an expanding spectrum of biodiversity. In turn, this can provide greater opportunities for partnerships with in situ conservation. Visitors are capable of forming a connection with an astounding assortment of species.

This connection has great potential to motivate action. Those actions, multiplied by the millions of visitors world-wide can change the course of conservation.

contact: jeffreyskibins@gmail.com

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