

Evolution of Education Through Recreation in Uganda

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The Uganda Wildlife Centre (UWEC), formerly Entebbe Zoo, started life as an animal orphanage in 1952 and was administered by the then Game Department. During the 1960s the public interest increased and it became a popular recreational resource for many people. More attractions were subsequently added to the orphanage in the form of exotic animals and so the orphanage became a zoo.

When the zoo was created, the enclosures remained little more than prison cells for their occupants. Mortality rates were unacceptably high with low birth rates failing to compensate. No development was taking place and no real effort was made to turn Entebbe into a modern zoo.

Due to poor management and political instability in Uganda, almost all the animals died and the zoo slowly descended into ruin.

It wasn't until 1994 that an autonomous body, the Uganda Wildlife Education Centre Trust, was formed to save the zoo from total collapse. The primary function of the Trust is to transform Entebbe Zoo into an education centre with the aim of educating the public about the need to conserve the environment and the planet's dwindling resources.

The mission statement of the Trust is, "To create awareness and appreciation of wildlife through conservation of Uganda's biodiversity, among the public, especially targeting the younger generation through UWEC's facility at Entebbe."

UWEC sees it as an important task to involve its visitors in the protection of nature as much as possible.

Now, four years later, more has changed than was ever hoped for. The Master Plan has been completed and is expected to change the appearance of UWEC drastically. With a grant from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), efforts to modernize UWEC began with the construction of a perimeter fence and expansion of the enclosures into semi-natural habitats. The enclosure and exhibits will be grouped according to the major ecosystem types in Uganda: savanna, wetlands and forest.

All the enclosures and exhibits will have an inbuilt education component. The point here is the belief that the best form of education is via recreation. People visit zoos not to be educated, but for pleasure and they learn completely imperceptibly.

Another important task for the Trust is to build a classroom and a dormitory for students coming from distant places. The Trust has also been charged with the responsibility of setting up a Trust Fund. Although classrooms have not yet been built due to financial constraints, efforts are being made to develop an education program for UWEC. The

program will be developed in line with the Ministry of Education's School Curriculum and is intended in parts to be as interactive as possible.

The education officer with his two education assistants gives lectures and guided tours to school groups around the centre. However, some school groups and the public are given self-guiding leaflets with interactive information about different animals and exhibits at the centre. The education sector is now in the process of making resources materials such as environmental games and activities, booklets for primary school teachers, brochures and posters for people to take back home with them.

Major events, like World Environment Day and International Tourism Day, provide opportunities for other educational activities. Special programs we based on the theme of the day are prepared with the aim of acquainting visitors with wildlife and the environment generally.

Although zoo education has started at UWEC, there are still several obstacles to progress. Not all the education staff are skilled educators in this field and facilities like classrooms, furniture etc. for these activities are lacking. There are few reference materials and financial resources are insufficient to carry out some of the programs.

In addition, international zoo educators' courses offered at different institutions throughout the world are very expensive to attend.

During my recent tour of some zoos in the Netherlands, I found out that zoo education is being made as interactive and fun as possible. Different zoos have different methods and approaches to convey messages about animals and wildlife generally. In all the zoos I have visited Rotterdam Zoo, Burger's Zoo, Safari Beekes Bergen, Noorder Dierenpark and Apenheul - interpretation is entertaining. Signs, tables, guided tours and other educational presentations like Zoofoon in Rotterdam are all interactive and fun. Learning here is not entirely formal and school-like; instead it is characterized by learning through discovery, learning by doing and learning by participation.

When compared with most zoos in Europe, African educators still have a long way to go. This is a great challenge to us. Despite financial constraints, UWEC is trying on its part to use simple materials within its reach, and it is our wish and hope that we shall also make education as fun and interactive as possible. Most of all to educate the visitors through recreation.