

Where do I begin?

Starting an education department from scratch

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In 2010 the Umgeni River Bird Park (URBP) underwent a change in ownership and the position of education and marketing manager was created. With 11 years of show experience, I already had a background in education and was appointed to the position. Great news... now where do I start? This article will outline my journey from past, to present, and big plans for the future with a very limited budget.



For the last 20 years, our motto has been “Inspire to Conserve”. The challenge for me is to take that motto and integrate it into a formal education programme. Inspire can mean to influence or affect (www.dictionary.com) but how do you influence without forcing your opinions onto visitors? Helen Keller wrote

“The best things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.”

This has stuck with me as I have started to implement changes to our educational material and planned for the future. It is now my aim to change hearts and let visitors decide how they will take that feeling forward. By presenting educational material in a balanced way and by creating a rounded view on conservation, we aim to give visitors an experience which will inspire them to conserve.

Creating a mission statement

As an education department, we have a mission to:

1. Inspire every visitor in a positive way to do more, learn more and be actively involved in conservation.
2. Conserve energy, natural resources, habitats and wildlife of all forms in our country, neighbourhoods and own homes.
3. Educate and engage through multi-disciplined approaches to conservation education, being positive, proactive to changes in conservation education standards, un-biased in our approach to conservation education and creating an educational approach to reach a range of levels of visitors to our park.
4. Develop a long-term educational approach to meet future needs of our park and visitor expectations.

5. To create new educational exhibits, opportunities and experiences in the park to engage visitors in new ways.

Into Practice

By applying these mission statements in everything we do, we can create the change of heart needed to inspire our visitors. It's one thing to say this. Now the question is how to put that into practice.

1 - The first step towards inspiring visitors was changing our animal signage (see photographs page 6). The old signage was very basic and contained little to no meaningful information on the birds. The signs were also very small and badly placed on the enclosures. By making them four times larger, more colourful, adding in more graphics, more information and placing them in better positions in custom-made wooden frames, the change was dramatic. For the first time in many years, we could actually see visitors stopping to read the signs and we could also hear them discussing certain things from the signs. The basic message contained in these signs is also backed up by educational posters and information in our Education Centre.

2 - Installing recycling bins around the park was the first step to encourage visitors to conserve natural resources. Throughout the park we also make use of energy-saving light bulbs, have left areas of the park untouched as natural refuges for wild birds and animals, use no pesticides in our gardens and our gardens require very little watering.

NORTHERN GROUND HORNBILL



Bucorvus abyssinicus

**LOCATED NORTH
OF THE EQUATOR**

**THE HABITAT RANGES
FROM SAVANNA AND
OPEN GRASSLAND**

An example of the old signage (above), and a new one (below) and new hand-painted board (right).



We also have a large number of visitors coming through for whom English is not a first language. The challenge here is to create something more visual and use the graphics to get the message across. We will be using pre-school children to test prototypes of these exhibits and their effectiveness before producing them for the park.

Producing material that is un-biased and also positive in its approach is also more challenging than many people realise. Coming from a show background, I always wanted visitors to leave the show knowing the real state of wildlife, but also

with a sense of hope for a better future - one they were involved in. Turning that experience and message into educational material has been more difficult. When talking one-on-one to a visitor, I can guide the conversation and have the opportunity for dialogue. A poster or sign though doesn't give any opportunity for dialogue. The message therefore needs to be the thing that guides the visitor and allows them to form their own opinion. The message needs to be brief enough to get the message across without losing impact. We are trying to limit writing on posters to what can be comfortably read in thirty seconds. Graphics with information panels make up the balance of the poster.

And then the personal touch. With just one educational staff member, having personal interactions is almost impossible. Guided tours for all schools are planned for the future and in the short-term, I am trying to get into the park at least once a week to chat with visitors, ask them about their visit, talk about birds they are looking at, ask what they would like to see and get general feedback. This helps to understand where the general knowledge level is when devising new material.

4 - This is largely covered by the above points but also includes a lot of research of other facilities,



Future plans include a compost heap, earthworm farm, solar energy use in some areas, re-installing our bore-hole system, replacing as much exotic vegetation with indigenous plants as possible and also creating a seedling nursery with the aim of giving all learners a seedling to take back to their homes to plant as a way of offsetting some of their carbon footprint.

3. This is probably the most difficult mission statement to fulfil. The sheer diversity of visitors we have makes it difficult to put together a plan that will fit everybody. Being in a facility that is almost 30 years old also means that space was never allocated for educational exhibits during development. Space therefore is limited and any exhibit we create needs to take up as little room as possible whilst still being accessible and able to reach as wide an audience as possible. This means get creative and make a high impact with what we install.

Some of the exhibits we have already installed have made use of areas scheduled for development in the future and will move to other areas or stored for future use. Other planned exhibits will be mobile, allowing us to move them around the park, group them and also change them for different needs.

joining organisations like the International Zoo Educators Association and online research. We are in the process of creating a library of reference material and surveys done in the park and this material will be used when looking at new educational exhibits, devising new programmes and for new ideas on engaging visitors in what we do.

Incorporating different learning styles

Leo Buscaglia said, *“It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them.”* This is a mistake we have made in the past and we are motivated to ensuring that what we do in the future marries the two together. Neil Fleming’s VAK/VARK model describes three main learning styles: Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic. By acknowledging these styles and designing our programmes and material around them, we will have greater success in reaching our visitors.

Visual - in order to learn, the material needs to be seen. People with this learning style respond well to signage, information boards, posters and graphics. They also like to make their own notes and do well with worksheets where they can fill in the answers as they go around the facility. They also tend to remember more of what they have seen than what they have heard. As well as existing signs, posters, etc. we have more information boards being designed. These contain a limited amount of graphics and more general information. There are also plans in the future for electronic guides that can be loaded onto smartphones and tablets.

Auditory - in order to learn, the material needs to be heard. People with this learning style respond well to hearing information. They have good memories and can remember much of the information that they have heard. The free-flight bird show is the main area that caters for people with this learning style. Plans for the future include the electronic guides mentioned above, audio/visual presentations in our Education Centre and guided tours.

Kinesthetic - interacting with the information is how people with this learning style respond best. Touching exhibits, making enrichment devices, being a volunteer in a demonstration or presentation and being able to manipulate items on an exhibit work well for people with this learning style. Current exhibits include measuring signs, worksheets and a collection of bird skulls, feet, nests and eggs. Planned for the future are flip-cards on some enclosures, an interactive map, electronic guides and the volunteer section in the free-flight bird show.

Whilst we are aware of the different learning styles and how to create exhibits that appeal to each, our current and planned exhibits combine all three learning styles and appeal to all visitors to some degree.

Dealing with visitors on a more personal level

This is possibly the most important part of our job. Not everybody has the ability and charisma to deal with visitors. I have been to facilities where I have not been able to understand what the guide has been saying and where the keepers haven’t got much idea about the animals in their care. I have also been to facilities where I have been more interested in what I am being told than what I am looking at. Animal keepers are in general some of the most passionate people I have met and usually have a wealth of information that they are happy to share. The problem is how this information is presented to the visitors. By knowing how to talk to visitors, engaging them, understanding the different learning styles and how to be professional, an interaction with a visitor can be the most rewarding experience for both the staff member and the visitor.

The same rules apply to ‘show staff’ as they are currently the people having the most contact with visitors. We are still in the process of formalising the education plan to be followed by them which will be in line with our guidelines and protocols. We have five different presenters - all have their own style of and way of passing the message on to the visitors. This is very good on one hand as it allows them to add their own personality to their shows. The disadvantage is that there are vast differences in how messages are passed on. I have stressed they must make a connection between the birds and the visitors. We are more likely to appreciate something we can relate to on some level.

I have put in place the 4 P’s of presenting a show for our staff - make it personal, positive, professional and passionate. The same guidelines are also being put in place for all our staff. Some of the P’s can be taught, but most should be part of our everyday lives as animal care professionals. How do we go about applying them in real life?

Personal - Without a personal connection to what is being seen or learnt, there is little chance a visitor will appreciate what they are experiencing.

An example of a lack of this personal touch came from one of our old presenters. Whilst presenting our barn owl in a show her dialogue was, “This is a barn owl. As you can see the barn owl has a heart-shaped face. They are found almost all over the world. They eat meat.” In a routine that lasted three minutes, this was her total dialogue. Whilst strictly speaking the facts were accurate, the style of speaking showed no connection between presenter, bird and audience. By weaving a story and using the owls’ name, the dialogue automatically becomes more personal and the audience forms a bond with the bird. The same rules apply if a keeper is talking to a visitor about birds in their sections.

By bringing in our own experiences with the birds, history in the park, and linking in with the visitors' own experiences and interests, we start the visitor on a road of awareness and appreciation that can last a lifetime. I have spent many hours talking to visitors about our birds, park, my history in the park and sharing stories and it is the personal connection with the birds and staff that can make or break a visitor's experience.

Positive - There is nothing more depressing to me than hearing about habitat destruction, illegal wildlife trade and dwindling animal numbers. Whilst it may be the reality, how it is presented can make the difference between depression and action. We have tried to balance our educational material around the park to not only show the reality, but also highlight the work being done to conserve and protect what is left. In the show too, humour is used along with a strong conservation message to create awareness and also foster hope for a better future. It is important to me to have our visitors leave with a sense of optimism and that their involvement can make a difference. If faced with the grim reality and hearing only the negative side of things, what is the point of supporting conservation bodies and projects? Our message needs to be uplifting and empowering if we are to change our visitor's hearts and minds.

Professional - This is one aspect of the job that cannot be compromised. Everything we do affects our animals and our visitors. Our Education Department's guidelines and protocols have been distributed to all staff and they will soon be taken through this document in great detail. Being a professional is not just about our general behaviour or knowledge, it is about being passionate about what we do, dealing in the correct manner with visitors, having a broad knowledge of conservation and our park, doing our work to the highest standards, being well presented in appearance and maintaining a positive attitude. By doing what we do to the highest standards possible, our visitors will notice and it will have a positive impact on their experience. This professional code also applies to our educational material with all posters, signage and other material being screened for errors and accuracy before being produced. We have had issues in the past with information being given being outdated and inaccurate. These errors can be avoided by proper planning and preparation. Being professional should be a way of life - not just part of our jobs.

Passion - This is one thing that cannot be taught. It is also for me the most important part of the job. Our passion for what we do shows in our body language, communications with the public, work ethic and enthusiasm for our facility.

There is a vast difference between passion and enthusiasm. We can be enthusiastic about our work but if we don't have a passion for what we do then the enthusiasm will fade and our work ethic and professionalism fades with it. Our passion also has the ability to affect our visitors in many ways. It can influence their perception of our facilities, what they are seeing and learning, and what they take away with them.

So with all the above points in mind, how do we put this into practice?

None of what we have done or propose to do would be possible without proper and thorough planning and research. One advantage I have had was that there weren't any educational structures in place so I could start with a clean slate. The difficulty though was trying to create a programme that will suit different ages, social backgrounds, interest levels, learning styles and make this work on a very limited budget and with a staff compliment of one person. By breaking the park down into sections, it was easier to formulate ideas as opposed to trying to create for the park as a whole. Having a common theme planned for all material also meant continuity. Creating a policy and procedure document played a large part in educating the staff on what we do, how we do it, how to deal with the public, and our plans for the future. This has created a common goal not only for the education department but for all the staff. It has not been a quick or easy road and I know there are still many challenges to come but I can already see the impact of the changes we have made.

By giving our visitors the tools they need to form their own opinions, to nurture a seed which may have already been planted and most importantly, to change their hearts, we will achieve our mission statements and goals.

