

Catalyst for Structural Change in Small and Mid-Size City Zoos

Summary and Feedback on the Second ACT Workshop in Kunming, China

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As defined by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA), conservation education in zoos is a powerful tool for connecting people with nature. With 143 million annual visitors, AZA-accredited facilities have the potential to significantly raise conservation awareness through effective education programs. But, can these facilities extend their reach beyond borders? Discover how the Academy for Conservation Training (ACT) is bringing education best practices utilized in the U.S. to zoos in China.

ACT Graduate Lu Yan Providing Instruction, Changchun Zoo Field Trip Pilot.



Along with the swift development of society, the two hundred year-old zoological industry is also experiencing a period of unprecedented change. During the 1980s, education programming in AZA-accredited zoos in the U.S. expanded beyond school groups to look at the overall visitor experience. With this change in audience, teaching shifted to an informal education style that was more suited towards the zoo setting. At that time, zoo education was designed to increase factual information about animals and ecosystems in the hope that increased knowledge would make people better environmental stewards. This changed in the 1990s when scientific evaluations determined that knowledge does not necessarily lead to long-term behavior change. These studies demonstrated that people could be knowledgeable about an issue and yet not take action. Also, people could be inspired to take action without a lot of background knowledge. As a result of these findings, AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums determined that even though facts are intellectually interesting they are typically not enough to make an “emotional connection”. In order for people to be inspired to change their behaviors, they have to experience something on an emotional level (Ham 1992). In response, many modern zoos and aquariums are now focusing their education efforts on identifying the most effective ways to inspire and measure conservation behavior change (Falk *et al.* 2007).

According to the latest statistics, 218 Chinese zoos and animal exhibition areas are accredited by the Chinese Association of Zoological Gardens (CAZG). Many of these are large professional zoos located in capital cities, some of which have moved forward with the trend of other modern zoos. However, the majority of small and mid-sized zoos in China are still in a relatively backward situation. Of these less developed zoos, animals are exhibited in cages that visitors passively observe; popularization of science is primarily propaganda; there is a lack of long-term investment in capital infrastructure; most funds come from government subsidies and admission is the primary source of income.

In addition, the majority of Chinese zoos do not currently have education programs or departments, much less a paid educator on staff. In response, CAZG initiated a partnership with Zoo Atlanta (an AZA-accredited zoo in the U.S.) to actively promote the establishment of conservation education within the Chinese zoo industry. To reach this aim, CAZG and Zoo Atlanta developed the Academy for Conservation



Training (ACT) to bring conservation education best practices utilized by zoos in the U.S. to zoos in China. Designed specifically for Chinese zoo professionals and funded by The UPS Foundation, the 10-day ACT workshop utilizes multiple teaching methods to convey the history and development of conservation education in the U.S. and its relevance to the missions of modern zoos; combined with proven techniques to establish self-sustaining education programs.

Since its inception in June 2006, ACT has conducted training workshops in Chengdu, Kunming, Beijing and Guangzhou to graduate a total of 161 individuals who represent 42 zoos and wildlife parks throughout China. This article will include reflections from two ACT graduates currently working at mid-size zoos in China to demonstrate how this program is shaping the changing role of conservation education in small and mid-size Chinese zoos and some of the barriers that must be overcome along the way.

The situation

During the 1990s, several wildlife parks were developed in the outskirts of China's urban areas. These facilities were characterized by having large open environments that allowed people to have direct or indirect contact with free-ranging animals. The wildlife parks not only diverted visitors from urban zoos, but also confused the concept that zoos serve as public welfare institutions. This awkward situation made it very difficult for small and mid-size city zoos to carry out their responsibility to society, much less survive, and forced them to think about how to better manage their business while also keeping up with the pace of development. With the help of ACT, small and mid-size city zoos are beginning realize that one way to lead themselves out of their current difficult situation and strengthen their role in serving the public is to reorient their focus towards conservation education. To do this effectively,

Changchun Zoo Field Trip Pilot (Lu Yan pictured far right).



these zoos need to examine themselves, be aware of competition, be willing to accept criticism, and perhaps most importantly, learn how to motivate people to change their behaviors in order to live more harmoniously with the natural world.

In an effort to develop, many of China's small and mid-size city zoos are now paying closer attention to their audiences. As a result of the country's economic and social progress, the majority of their visitors are now higher educated and more conscious about the welfare of animals and the environment. In turn, they are no longer satisfied with just passively looking at animals housed in inadequate conditions. They also have an increased interest in other aspects of the zoo experience, such as exhibition environments, landscaping, entertainment infrastructure, pictorial and written information, public order and the quality of service. Understanding audiences is one of the key concepts in the ACT workshops, but it is still a relatively new idea to zoos in China. For example, during the

Changchun Zoo Conservation Education Task Force (Zheng Qingyoung pictured second from right).



Kunming training, the ACT instructors pointed out that a large majority of Kunming Zoo visitors were seniors. Since they receive free admission to all parks and gardens in China, of which zoos are included, the instructors suggested developing a volunteer program targeted towards this audience. Upon hearing this suggestion, Kunming Zoo personnel welcomed the opportunity to create a senior volunteer program that would provide assistance to keepers and administrative personnel, while also increasing community interest and support towards their Zoo.

Awareness

Unfortunately, zoos in China must realize and accept that integrating conservation education into the Chinese zoo industry will be a long process, not a quick fix. Raising awareness, on all levels, is the first step to integrate conservation education into the daily work of Chinese zoos. Understanding the role conservation education can play in supporting a zoo's conservation mission cannot be stressed enough. To keep up with the pace of other modern zoos, zoo directors and even the directors' superiors should be well-informed of the importance of conservation education and current trends in zoo education.

To do this under the current Chinese zoo administration, it is necessary to adjust departmental set up, fully utilize human resources, increase educational function, and enhance the research and understanding of visitors. It is also necessary to view conservation education as part of the zoo's fiscal plan and central to the entire zoo operation in order to make everyone understand that the key to success depends on the participation of all zoo personnel. This way, departments



will no longer continue to be separated or uncoordinated. While practicing conservation education, zoo keepers become spokespersons for animal husbandry and wildlife conservation, gardeners become designers as well as builders in naturalizing animal exhibit areas, and management becomes leaders in market research and policy making in order to evaluate and enhance effectiveness of conservation education projects.

First steps

As the economy continues to rapidly expand and people rush to move into urban centers, many cities in China have plans to relocate or renovate their zoos. But, China has few commercial companies dedicated to designing modern zoo exhibits, so it is likely that traditional zoo exhibit designs will be utilized merely out of a lack of knowledge about alternatives. As in the case of Kunming Zoo, these traditional exhibits include animal cages in the style of “concrete + chain link fence”. To catch up with modern zoos, the architectural design of Chinese zoo exhibits should provide conservation information, be up to animal welfare standards and include enrichment elements. To continue building old-fashioned exhibits in a developed world would constitute a deep regret. Again, the problem of awareness arises.

In addition to a need for exhibit renovation, many small and mid-size city zoos in China need to update their zoo infrastructure and husbandry practices. Performing this work coupled with establishing conservation education departments and programs can appear daunting. Rather than letting these limiting factors prevent them from attempting to begin integrating education into their daily work, ACT encourages these struggling zoos to utilize their existing resources to begin the process, even if there is no financial investment in education or if it is impossible to make big changes initially.

For the welfare of the planet, the most important outcome of conservation education in zoos is to have visitors participate in education programming that result in positive long-term behavior change. Therefore, even without policy guidelines or infrastructure and exhibit improvements, small and mid-size zoos can use what is taught in the ACT program to begin to develop effective conservation messages and educational programming that meets the needs of their audiences. By doing this, zoos would begin to once again serve their local communities without too much investment.

Conclusion

The introduction of conservation education in Chinese zoos can be the catalyst of change for the entire zoological industry, especially for the small and mid-size zoos, to change their current function and to rescue themselves from a difficult situation. However, education is a gradual process, so it is not realistic to demand that conservation education change a zoo’s current situation in a short period of time. But, over the course of time, if zoos throughout China make conservation education a priority, then this will create a basic foundation to build from and structural change in small and mid-size city zoos will be possible. ♦

Kunming Training Graduates.



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