

Engaging the Community in Our Work

a successful school zoo partnership model

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Engaging students in real life and meaningful learning experiences, as well as allowing them to take ownership of their learning, is a challenge teachers are tackling through the implementation of the new curriculum in Victoria. Teachers are encouraged to integrate learning across the traditional learning areas. An equal challenge from a zoo perspective is how we engage students in our work so that a visit to a zoo is not seen as merely a fun day out of school or stand alone activity, but an important and relevant learning experience, supporting our vision and mission.

Primary school students tending to their browse plantation with the Zoo horticulturist.



Menyaru, one of Melbourne Zoo's orang-utans that this project connects students to.



The Orang-utan Browse Plantation Project was piloted with five schools for two years and shown to be a highly successful and innovative partnership model, with demonstrated improvement in student learning, attitude and behaviour change. From 2008 the project takes place over a two-year period where Melbourne Zoo and the partner school commit to work closely together to establish the ongoing project. This initial project is then replicated on a two-year cycle for partner schools, where students previously involved in the project are able to mentor their new cohort of students with the support of Melbourne Zoo.

How did we do it?

The project was initiated when the needs of multiple areas of the zoo coincided – the education team wanted to take on the role of extending the learning beyond a stand alone visit, primate keepers wanted a larger source of nesting browse to enrich the primates' lives and horticulture was restricted with space in an urban zoo to grow sufficient nesting browse. From initial discussions, the education team put together a joint project with the Horticulture department to develop and coordinate partnerships with interested schools to grow appropriate browse plants to be regularly harvested for the zoo's orang-utans and other primates.

How do we offer educational opportunities that genuinely fulfil the zoo's vision of building enduring relationships between people and wildlife for a future in which humans live in balance with the natural world? How can zoos meet these two needs? One solution is for zoos to develop a long-term partnership with school communities involving students in their work. This then raises another pertinent question: how can zoos develop a genuine long-term partnership, without it becoming time-consuming or losing its relevance? The answer is to find something for which the zoo has an ongoing need for assistance, without which the need could not be met. For Melbourne Zoo, in a restricted urban setting, that was a large-scale browse plantation project for additional primate nesting material.

The Orang-utan Browse Plantation Project

The Orang-utan Browse Plantation Project is a sustainable partnership with schools to grow and harvest browse plants for the enrichment of Melbourne Zoo's orang-utans. The project is sufficiently flexible to allow for schools with small urban garden spaces to those with 10,000 trees in acreage plantations. A strong curriculum is incorporated to underpin and support the project to ensure that the growth of plants is not a stand-alone activity. Educators at the zoo support students and teachers in planning authentic learning experiences that address local and global biodiversity issues. A flow on benefit of the project is that through connecting with the zoo's orang-utans, students are more engaged to learn about local and global biodiversity issues and take action towards effective solutions.

Students planting browse plants at their plantation.





The schools were offered a complete package, which underpins the learning potential of project participation, by providing curriculum resources which are scaffolded to enable students to connect with wildlife, better understand the natural world and be inspired to act to create a sustainable future.

What is involved in the project?

Once schools register for the partnership, an educator and primate keeper visit the school to generate enthusiasm for the project, engage the student's interest in orang-utans and establish the purpose of the browse plantation. Horticulture staff can also attend to assist the school in selection and preparation of a suitable site for the plantation.

The focus of the first year is on developing skills in horticulture and commencing the design, planting and site maintenance of their plantation garden. At the start of each year the zoo runs professional learning sessions for teachers on 'Green Gardening for the Future', skilling teachers in creating green spaces, site analysis, planting regimes, propagating skills and on-going garden maintenance. Back at school, students learn propagating skills from their teachers and plant out their developed or propagated plants in prepared garden or plantation areas in their school or community. Schools concurrently undertake a unit of work on endangered species in South East Asia to give context to the project and leverage off their initial connection.

Students visit Melbourne Zoo to participate in an educator led learning experience 'Planet Keeper' using orang-utans as a flagship species, to investigate and learn about biodiversity issues. Students are continuously involved in plantation maintenance and have the support of the zoo horticulture team for the first harvest of any fast growing plants.

In the second year the focus shifts to harvesting the browse and developing ongoing plantation maintenance. Students are involved in ongoing propagation of plants and extension of plantation if space permits. Schools are encouraged to bring small groups of students to the zoo to deliver the browse to the primate keepers and if possible see the orang-utans utilising their browse. Students investigate their local environments, learn more about key threats to their local habitat and take action to raise awareness and improve biodiversity. Leveraging off students skills and knowledge gained in local biodiversity issues, schools are engaged in investigating ways of supporting conservation in South East Asia. Students plan ways of raising community awareness and relevant actions they can take to support wild orang-utans in their habitats.

Teachers from partner schools are supported through curriculum materials, such as an endangered species teacher resource book, 'Planet Keeper' teacher resources and pre and post evaluation and assessment activities, which have been developed by zoo educators.

What were our goals for the partnership and did we achieve them?

One of the important objectives for the pilot project was to validate the effectiveness and sustainability of this partnership project. Our success in this goal was measured through the five pilot schools all signing agreements to become ongoing partner schools with the zoo. Additionally for the official launch of the project in 2008 we have another two schools committed, bringing our total to seven partner schools.

The goals for the project are:

- To facilitate opportunities that encourage change in beliefs, attitudes and behaviour, thus empowering students and their communities to take action and make a difference in their world;
- To encourage schools engaged in this project to explore local habitat issues and leverage off their students' skills and enthusiasm to participate in local community, environmental and conservation programs;
- To encourage schools to explore and take action for global habitat issues.

To evaluate our effectiveness each year Pre and Post Project Assessment data was collected from teachers and students to assess our goals and specifically skills and knowledge of students, conservation action, both local and global and shifts in belief and attitudes.

Project assessment data showed positive shifts in:

- Learning gained about orang-utans and other endangered species and threats to wildlife (see Figure 1);
- Attitude in the belief that children and individuals can make a difference (see Figure 2);
- Belief system and attitude regarding conservation issues and the importance of wildlife and habitats.

Teacher evaluations of the project have commented on the pride and interest generated by participation in the project with demonstrable flow-on effects to individual student's commitment to their own learning and willingness to attempt other subjects they find difficult, such as maths.

This project, owing to its unique nature, has generated a lot of interest in the school communities. Students are proud of their role in supporting the zoo and wildlife conservation. Schools have profiled their plantations and involvement in local newspapers, school newsletters, and official garden openings with one school's plantation receiving a Highly Commended in Victoria's School Garden Awards. For the zoo this exposure is valuable in promoting awareness of the importance of wildlife conservation.

Through the different learning opportunities available, this project has shown that it is effective in fostering behaviours and attitudes sensitive to conservation. Schools are empowered to take ownership for how they will raise awareness and take action for both local and global biodiversity issues. On a local level, two partner schools made links with local municipal environmental officers and plant nurseries for support with area-specific, sustainable plant selection, propagation and preparation of plants for their plantations. These schools also held discussions with local landowners and farming communities that wish to participate in the project, agreeing to donate part of their land for indigenous revegetation plantations with the additional purposes of creating wind breaks and wildlife corridors for native species, which they will both maintain and harvest for zoo browse.

On a global level each school has chosen different paths to raise awareness and take effective action; including running a community awareness campaign in a local shopping centre, newspaper and school

Figure 1. Research into knowledge gained about conservation and endangered species from this project.

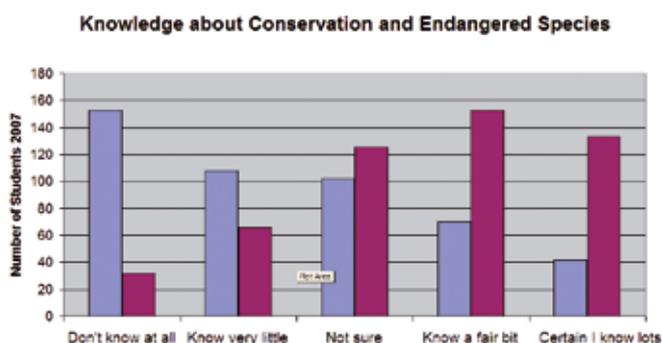
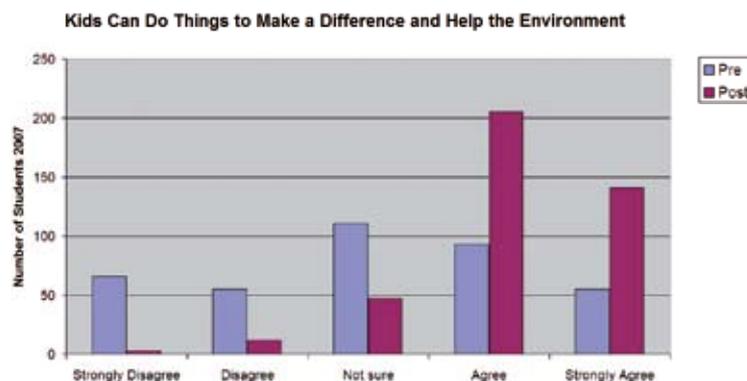


Figure 2. Research into the belief that kids can make a difference and help the environment from this project.



website, creating information displays for public forums, petitions against inappropriate palm oil plantations, raising funds for FFI Sumatran Conservation Project, and students using their own initiative to raise money and sponsor orphaned orang-utans in Indonesia. Each of these schools has demonstrated positive attitudes change to conservation through the belief that communities can make a difference.

The vital ingredients for a successful zoo school partnership

The elements that are essential in creating and maintaining a successful zoo school partnership start with gaining the support of the whole zoo. There are a multitude of opportunities and needs within any zoo, but the best ones for a holistic partnership are when cross departmental needs are met. The commitment of various departments across the zoo was essential for the success of this project.

The next crucial element is to find something that is relevant for schools, and will engage students. For this project the relevance lay in creating green spaces and improving biodiversity in school grounds. Additionally incorporating an iconic animal, such as an orang-utan, is vital for increased student engagement.

It is also important to create rich and rewarding learning resources to entice teachers. This project supports teachers to deliver the curriculum with best practice teaching and learning through student led

Students with their browse delivery at the Zoo's Orang-utan Sanctuary.



investigations, challenging deeper levels of thinking and connecting learning to the community.

Another element that became apparent through the pilot period was engaging the Victorian education departments. Government and Catholic school departments have been seeking authentic learning opportunities for their schools and have proved to be great supporters of our partnership project. The Catholic Education Office in Melbourne has provided various grants to their catholic partner schools to support plantation set up, funding zoo visits and teacher professional development.

Zoo and school partnerships are rewarding for all!

By ensuring ongoing engagement, communities are empowered in their belief and ability to make a difference. If well supported these partnerships can offer rich, authentic experiences that have a genuine impact on deeper learning and changes in beliefs and attitudes, which could be a lever for effective community action beyond the classroom. A zoo school partnership can achieve that ongoing engagement and provide the support to mobilise the community to join us in creating a future where humans live in balance with nature. ◊

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