

# But crocodiles aren't really bright green are they...?

## Using art to rediscover animals at the zoo



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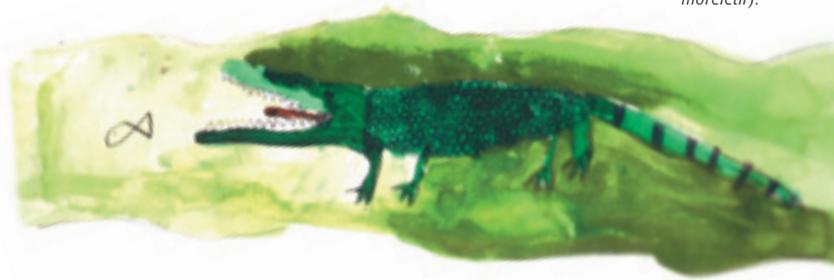
**Children in developed and developing countries are experiencing a distancing from nature as they are increasingly drawn into a 'virtual' world saturated with signs and other images (Louv 2005; Lurçat 2002). A visit to the zoo to experience close encounters with real animals can be part of an antidote to this distancing and isolation. But to what extent does zoo education help children to really 'see' their animals and to discover their uniqueness?**

This paper examines the modest experience of using sketchbooks to draw (and think about) real animals in a small zoo at Bettembourg in Luxembourg. As active observation, discovering, and learning through questioning is one of the core methods in this zoo's education, the complementary work with an artist seemed to add an interesting and vivid experience. The aim was to enhance interpretation by raising the interest of the 'little artists' for animal matters, especially the fine details one risks overlooking during a normal visit to the zoo.

The experience gained during the pilot project 'DA VINCI UND SO WEITER' confirms that the use of the sketchbook is pertinent in dealing with increasing problems of lack of patience and perseverance manifested by contemporary schoolchildren. Using a sketchbook obliges confrontations with the real world and stimulates the child's innate curiosity. These aspects are discussed more fully in a previous study (Johnston 2008). This paper deals specifically with our experience of using nature sketchbooks within the context of workshops in a small zoo.

### **The workshop 'warming up'**

In 2007 and 2008 I – Alan Johnston – was invited by Sylvie Bonne to lead a total of 15 workshops for zoo public children and school classes aged 5-16 years at the Parc Merveilleux. Each workshop lasted two hours, including a short break of about 15 minutes. Artist and



zoo educator worked together to cover artistic as well as interpretative aspects.

The children, their teachers and Zoo School staff gather in the zoo's small cinema. I present myself and my work to the children sitting in a circle using a question-answer technique. We discuss the following questions: What is an artist/naturalist and how does he differ from other wildlife artists? What is or is not nature or natural? Is man nature? We then discuss the importance of 'warming up' and practice in both sport and music.

This is followed by several simple exercises to vary the pressure on a pencil line. The resulting drawings help me to judge the children's drawing fluency and pinpoint individuals in need of extra help (e.g. children with psychomotor problems).

This interactive introduction lasts about 15 minutes and by this time we are rearing to go and draw in 'Amazonia' – the reconstructed 'jungle' space (the back door of the cinema leads directly into this zoo space).

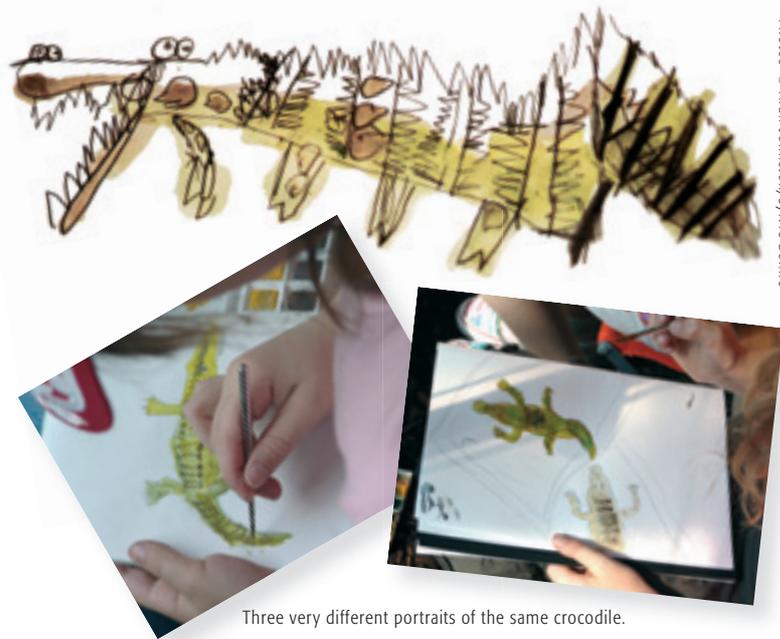
Photos © Sylvie Bonne



Children's drawing of a Morelet's crocodile (*Crocodylus moreletii*).

## Drawing on location

We start by drawing relatively sedentary animals: the Morelet's crocodiles (*Crocodylus moreletii*) and yellow-foot tortoises (*Geochelone denticulata*). We look at their form and try to stop drawing stereotypic models out of our heads. We look at the individual animal and its details: the different colours, bands on tail, dragon-like scales on top of tail, other types of scales and folds. I use the metaphor of articulated armour to explain how the folds work. We count toes and look at hind foot webbing. Thus we learn to 'see' a crocodile that is very different from the bright green stereotypic dragon-like animals children tend to imagine. Here one should be aware of the danger of being too directive. A drawing of a moving crocodile with more than four legs is in fact quite realistic for the child. What is important is that we observe four legs and see the differences between the fore and hind legs even if we do not draw them the first time around. Equally important is to try to paint the crocodile's greys and yellows. We do not sanction a bright green crocodile but ask the question "Are crocodiles really bright green?".



Three very different portraits of the same crocodile.

## Applying Helpful Positive Criticism (HPC)

I am always very positive and encouraging about a child's artwork in the first instance. It is amazing to see the number of faces that light up at this and I sometimes wonder if my encouragement was the first they had ever received? This paves the way for a dose of HPC (Helpful Positive Criticism). We try to encourage self-evaluation by asking the children what they think could be better. I do not like to use the words 'wrong' or 'fault' because we can always do better. Many of our children are so afraid to make errors that they are completely blocked in their art-making. I use the

pretence of being allergic to eraser dust to encourage no correction. We do new sketches instead, sometimes creating an unexpected 'multiple'. The exception is for children that manifest an absolute need to use an eraser as in the case of children with dyspraxia or other disorders (Blake and Cassidy 1999; Penketh 2007). The children get into their drawings very quickly and we try to involve teaching and zoo school staff in follow up of individuals and their artworks. The children will soon compare their work with that of their peers! Therefore, we try not to favour any one drawing (or its maker) but try to underline the positive aspects in each drawing.

## Getting the details in

Having drawn our crocodiles (in pencil, calligraphic black markers, bamboo pens or black biros), we go on to the application of colour washes. Depending on their previous level of instruction, the children will have to be shown how to mix the colours. Again faces light up with pleasure as they discover that they can get the colours they want and the mixed colours keep their brilliance.

The Amazonian river fish are great subject matter (especially for the 5-8 year olds). They often do the same slow tour so a drawing can be made in steps. The thick glass walls of the aquarium can be transformed into a transparent 'whiteboard' with some fast drawing and a black marker pen to compare the fishes' form and structure, the position of the mouth and its feeding. Our drawing of the boa constrictors was aided by Sylvie's handling of a young boa which the children (and teachers) could touch. This hands-on approach reduces distancing to zero.

## Using active subjects

Then the workshop progresses onto drawing moving subjects like the squirrel monkeys (*Saimiri boliviensis*). I try to get the children to draw lots of unfinished bits – details; to work on several drawings at the same time

Drawing Amazonian river fish from life.



Photos © Alan Johnston



Photo © Sylvie Bonne



(8-12 years), and to draw in fast flowing lines from head to tail. We try to draw the subject without looking at the paper to 'activate' our so-called 'right brain mode' (Edwards 1989). We discuss how they move and how their structural anatomy helps them do it by using comparisons with our own legs, arms, etc. Drawing also obviously helps us to appreciate the monkey's behavioural interactions.

### Understanding structure and anatomy

The Humboldt penguins (*Spheniscus humboldti*) are great to draw. They are amorphous: changing shapes whether on land or in the water. For the kindergarten children, drawing the cages can be important. We looked at the many colours of the water and how the streams of bubbles rose from their backs. With older children, we try to compare gape-beak and gape-eye angles in order to appreciate proportions and individual face details. While struggling with the quasi-impossible proportions of Bennett's wallabies (*Macropus rufogriseus*), or a guanaco's (*Lama guanicoe*) face, I encourage some children to try to make small sculptures out of clay to help understand structure and anatomy.

Clay modelling works well with children of all ages. Working with clay calms them and re-centres their energy. It is fun and provides a complementary activity

to concentrated observational drawing, opening up the fingers and three dimensional thinking! Zoo schools could perhaps consider inviting sculptors 'in residence' or profit from other artist's residences.

Sculpting animals in a zoo is, in my opinion, important as it helps to counteract the effect of the stereotypic models in the form of soft toys that unfortunately overpopulate the shelves of many a zoo shop. How about trying to replace some of the soft toys with good quality sketchbooks and 4 b pencils embossed with the zoo's logo?

Modelling a Bennett's wallaby (*Macropus rufogriseus*), from life in clay.

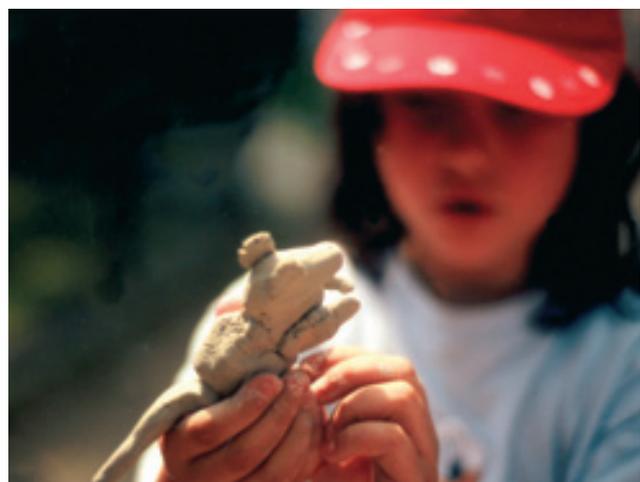


Photo © Alan Johnston

## Drawing stimulates questioning

I have been drawing animals for over thirty years now and it incessantly makes me question all sorts of things. Why are the upper parts of the Morelet's crocodile's teeth grey? Why do moustached emperor tamarins (*Saguinus imperator*) make bird-like calls? (Interestingly, the tamarins got very excited and started whistling loudly at my imitations of a tropical pigeon). Do pigeons reveal food sources for tamarins and vice-versa? Are the disc-like depressions on the body of the electric-eel (*Electrophorus electricus*) pressure sensors as in European pike (*Esox lucius*)? Are Amazonian indian pottery decorations inspired by the graphic camouflaging diamonds of the boa constrictor?

Sloughed skin of a boa constrictor.



Photo © Alan Johnston

I do not have all the answers to these questions but this questioning-through-drawing has great potential for zoo education staff if they draw themselves. It will take one out of the humdrum of seeing and being with the same animals day after day and provide one with much material for further research, not to mention the immense pleasure of drawing animals from life!

## Conclusion

A 'close encounter of the real kind' with zoo animals is a positive experience, in a world where a growing number of children are being distanced from nature or a natural environment. Drawing from life during this encounter is, in our opinion, extremely beneficial to children of all ages. The wise use of relatively simple (but good quality) art materials can help children to learn to 'look' and 'see' real, live animals. The use of sketchbooks provokes a confrontation with the immediate environment and observational drawing can help to combat problems of lack of patience, perseverance and alienation from nature, providing an alternative to stereotypic models and image saturation in children and adults. The use of clay modelling can be an important complementary activity as is the keeping of a sketchbook by the zoo school's staff.

A group of children working from life. If the workshop works well, the children soon learn to work increasingly on their own.



Photo © Sylvie Bonne

This modest initiative was a very positive experience for ourselves, the children and the zoo education department. We had several classes and individuals returning for more. Rather than propose a model to be copied, we recommend that each zoo should try to fathom its own situation as a resource in terms of species, enclosures, children, artists and the school class facilities. In our opinion there is great potential for this kind of workshop activity. We hope that this paper will encourage readers to 'have a go' and organise art workshops themselves.

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A kindergarten pupil works quietly from memory.



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