

2010 International Year of Biodiversity: zoo's role in teaching zoology as a holistic subject



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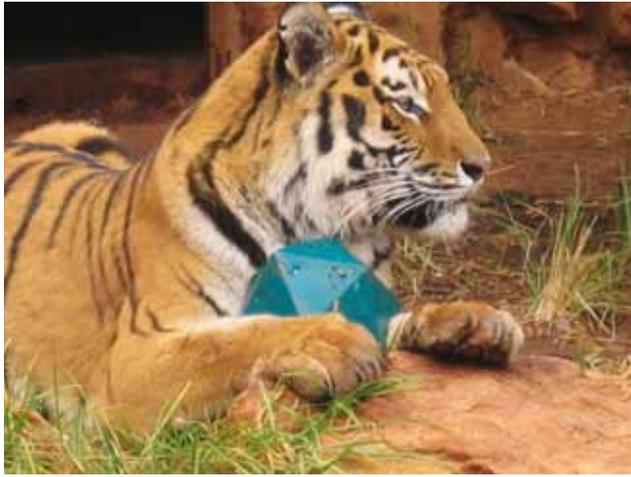
Often when speaking to educators at schools in Johannesburg, South Africa, one gets the impression that zoology is broken into so many segments, according to the curriculum, that some educators struggle to see the relevance of linking these different segments, for example – they focus on ecology but fail to see how it connects to conservation.

When they do classification, they struggle to see that the very animals they are using as examples in classification are the ones that are endangered and can be incorporated into an ongoing lesson plan. If educators struggle with these concepts, how do learners form a holistic concept of zoology?

As zoo educators we may be guilty of contributing to the problem. We are often intent on educating about a specific topic in limited time periods and fail to provide or refer to the wider connections for the

participants. Frogs are classic examples, not the most charismatic animals to most, but often the only example used when talking about Amphibians as a Class. However, when we want to talk about conservation and inspire our audience to participate and become emotive – we often do not include frogs but would rather go for cheetahs or the cute tiger cubs. There are obvious reasons for using charismatic species as you do want to create the 'ah cute' emotive moment and you may be able to get people to sign up or contribute far more easily than with non-charismatic





animals. These animals are also on display in our zoos and we educate about the plight they face in different countries. If one ignores the animals we actually live with in our day to day lives, we can face the danger of distancing our audiences from conservation, instead of making them an integral part of the process. If you live in Johannesburg, what can you really do, apart from raising money, to save Siberian tigers? So conservation may become something that you pay for so that somebody else can do it. There is no close connection to your life and so no consequent changes to how you live. Even when raising awareness – does this really inspire our audiences to look at the way they live? Our audiences may find it more difficult to believe

our messages of saving the planet (reduce, reuse, recycle and rethink) in order to save animals they do not live with. Conservation, like charity, starts at home and this is where we can encourage the most participation and necessary changes required to reduce our effect on our environment. Our education programmes should always be aimed at making our audiences part of conservation and not just a passive crowd that loves animals but carries on killing the planet. When using examples for teaching our topics, we should look at a holistic picture. Again let's look at the example of the amazing frogs that are found in Johannesburg. People see them in their gardens, see them crossing roads, hear them at night and often refer to them when discussing warts and witches. Can we include them in ecology, classification, conservation and biodiversity? A resounding yes! By teaching in a holistic manner, we can connect some of the dots and explain what would happen to that food web if the frogs become extinct? Why would they become extinct? There are many reasons including the use of harmful chemicals for cleaning clothes or dishes, polluting water bodies. Let's make audiences aware of their choices when shopping and their direct connection to conservation. City people are often not connected to nature, but the loss of frogs has a direct influence on their quality of life. A result of the loss of frogs can be that millions of mosquitoes breed without control.



I have yet to meet a person who truly loves a mosquito. In general they are regarded as irritating pests, causing loss of sleep, the cause of some serious illnesses and costing us money. See what happens if we don't look after the animals we live with!

It is an essential part of our education programmes to make sure that we connect our audiences with their effect on nature and how easy it is to contribute to a better way of life. Their effect is not just restricted to their own small area but has an influence on the rest of the world.

Global campaigns can be ignored by some institutions as they do not exhibit the animals featured in these campaigns. This sounds like a contradiction to my first argument. Inland zoos often do not educate about marine animals simply as they do not see the relevance. In Johannesburg Zoo, a five hour drive from our nearest coast line, we participate in the National Marine Week programme. Why is this important for us? Simply because our sister organisations, uShaka aquarium in Kwazulu-Natal and Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town, inform us that most of the litter found in our oceans comes from inland cities like Johannesburg. Children living in Johannesburg may have never experienced the sea or seen the beach, let alone any sea-living creature, but they should know where their litter goes and what happens to the pollutants we so easily use. Our effect on our environment is not limited



to our immediate area and by using animals we live with, and nature systems we live in, we can connect to the bigger picture. Our water streams become rivers flowing into the sea, so we are directly responsible. Yet when you include Marine Week in your education programmes, the trick is once again to connect it with your everyday life, the animals you live with, within the nature systems you share with other organisms. In this way global campaigns like 2010 The Year of Biodiversity start making sense as we can connect those dots with our audiences.

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Biodiversity is Life Education Manual

The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity. The World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) and IZE have created the education manual 'Biodiversity is Life'-aimed at zoo and aquarium educators, teachers and environmentalists.

Check it out on www.izea.net

