

Let's go to the zoo!

Visitors' social expectations of a trip to the zoo

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Data were collected from zoo visitors regarding their interests and social expectations of a zoo visit and the expectations they feel others they are visiting with have. Findings suggest that visitors rate themselves as having a higher level of interest for some activities such as spending time with family. Social expectations that visitors have include interacting with others they are visiting with, learning about animals, and watching animals.



Introduction

It has been noted that education is a prominent theme in US zoo mission statements, and that zoos are in a unique position to provide environmental education to a large number of visitors (Patrick et al. 2007). It is critical for zoos to understand their visitors and provide them with unique and engaging experiences designed to further the education of visitors.

Wild Research – A whole zoo exhibit and inquiry program is a National Science Foundation funded collaboration between Project Dragonfly out of Miami University, the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Garden (CZBG), the Institute for Learning Innovation and a consortium of zoos and aquariums nationwide (Myers et al. 2007; Myers et al. 2009). A major premise of *Wild Research* is to build on the social interactions that take place in a zoo

to improve visitor learning and engagement. Visitors participate in inquiry: make predictions, gather data, and compare results all within the very social context of observing animals at different exhibits surrounded by other zoo visitors engaging in similar activities.

There is a small but growing body of literature on the motivation of visitors to free choice learning institutions such as zoos, aquariums, and science centers. Generally speaking, education and recreation are two of the biggest motivations bringing visitors to a zoo (Andereck and Caldwell 1994; Morgan and Hodgkinson 1999). Falk and colleagues have identified a typology of five visitor temporal “identity-related motivations,” suggesting that zoos and aquariums need to offer programming that will appeal to multiple types of visitor motivations (Falk 2006; Falk et al. 2008). Falk and colleagues put forth that these “identity-related motivations” have a direct effect on the learning outcomes that visitors experience from a visit to the zoo. Addressing the motivating factors that brought visitors to the zoo is critical to achieve the goals of conservation education programming. However for Wild Research and similar programming containing elements of social interaction, it is equally critical to determine the type and level of social expectations that zoo visitors have as well. The purpose of the study reported on in this article was to collect data on site at CZBG to inform the design team of Wild Research on the social expectations that zoo visitors have. This is useful to other zoos hoping to incorporate the social experiences that visitors wish to have into their educational offerings.

Method

In order to measure the social expectations of CZBG visitors, researchers from the Institute for Learning Innovation created a questionnaire listing 18 different activities that are possible to do while visiting CZBG (see table 1). Participants were also asked to rate on a seven point ranking scale how strongly they felt those whom they were visiting with were interested in these same activities. The final portion of the instrument asked participants to rate how strongly they were likely to engage in 12 types of interactions at zoos (see table 2). One hundred three visitors to CZBG participated in the study. All participants were age 18 years and older and were in groups of two or more when they were approached.

Results

The activity scale had an overall scale reliability alpha of .930. Nunnally (1978) recommends a scale reliability of at least .700 for a scale to be used in social science research. Table one (on page 38) shows how respondents overall were motivated both for themselves and what they felt the level of interest was for those whom they were visiting the zoo with on this particular visit. Seeing lots of animals, spending time with family, and spending time outdoors were all very considered activities both the individuals and others would have a high interest in doing while at CZBG. Riding the train, feeding the giraffes, having lunch/snack in the zoo, and seeing animal shows were all activities the respondents felt were stronger motivations for others in their social group.





Table 1 Mean and standard deviation for interests during zoo visit for self and for others.

| FOR ME: | | Item | FOR OTHERS: | |
|----------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| Mean | Std. Dev. | | Mean | Std. Dev. |
| 6.47 | 1.09 | Spend time with family | 6.24 | 1.32 |
| 6.31 | 1.27 | See lots of animals | 6.26 | 1.32 |
| 6.31 | 1.11 | Spend time outdoors | 6.15 | 1.17 |
| 6.07 | 1.17 | Walk outdoors | 5.74 | 1.53 |
| 5.95 | 1.85 | Educational experience for my child | 5.51 | 1.94 |
| 5.78 | 1.46 | Share something I like with others | 5.46 | 1.61 |
| 5.57 | 1.56 | Educational experience for me | 5.36 | 1.69 |
| 5.55 | 1.40 | See a specific animal | 5.80 | 1.38 |
| 5.52 | 1.49 | To "get away" for a while | 5.28 | 1.63 |
| 5.51 | 1.78 | Spend time with friends | 5.42 | 1.88 |
| 4.93 | 1.64 | Enjoy the gardens | 4.29 | 1.85 |
| 4.62 | 1.84 | Feed the giraffes | 5.10 | 1.87 |
| 4.31 | 1.91 | See the animal show(s) | 4.51 | 2.05 |
| 4.26 | 1.89 | Hear a keeper talk | 4.02 | 1.99 |
| 3.87 | 2.12 | Ride the train | 4.74 | 2.20 |
| 3.62 | 1.99 | Have lunch/snack in the zoo | 4.25 | 2.08 |
| 2.53 | 1.72 | Go to the gift shop | 3.20 | 2.05 |
| 2.10 | 1.61 | See a movie | 2.52 | 1.75 |

Table 2 Mean, and standard deviation for how visitors would like to interact at zoos.

| | Mean | Std. Dev. |
|--|-------|-----------|
| Doing activities with my family or friends | 6.327 | 1.02 |
| Learning a new thing about different animals | 6.129 | 1.11 |
| Sitting and watching animals | 6.109 | 1.13 |
| Providing an educational experience for my child | 5.911 | 1.76 |
| Just talking with my family or friends | 5.802 | 1.35 |
| Getting family or friends involved in something new | 5.713 | 1.28 |
| Hearing what my family or friends are learning about animals | 5.584 | 1.43 |
| Watching others do things/activities | 5.109 | 1.60 |
| Trying new things with others | 4.950 | 1.65 |
| Reading signs to myself | 4.750 | 1.89 |
| Talking with people I meet | 4.455 | 1.64 |
| Reading signs to others | 4.149 | 1.85 |

Standard deviations were generally similar with a couple of exceptions. Riding the train both for the individual and for others had slightly higher deviations than expected, which suggest there is a bi-modality in the response pattern; some individuals have a high interest in this activity, while some have very little interest in this activity. This is also the case for having lunch/snack in the zoo and going to the gift shop.

There were several significant differences between what individuals expect from a visit and what they think those they are with expect. Participants rated their interest significantly higher ($p < .05$) than those whom they were visiting with, for the items spend time with family, walk outdoors, educational experience for my child, share something I like with others, and enjoy the gardens. Participants rated their interest significantly lower ($p < .05$) than those whom they were visiting with for the items feed the giraffes, ride the train, go to the gift shop, and see a movie.

Participants were also asked to consider the ways they like to interact while at the zoo. Consistent with the data reported above, doing things with family or friends and watching (and learning) about animals score most strongly. As shown in table two, all activities had overall positive scores, although reading signs to others was close to neutral but did have a larger deviation which could reflect ages of children in intergenerational groups.

Discussion

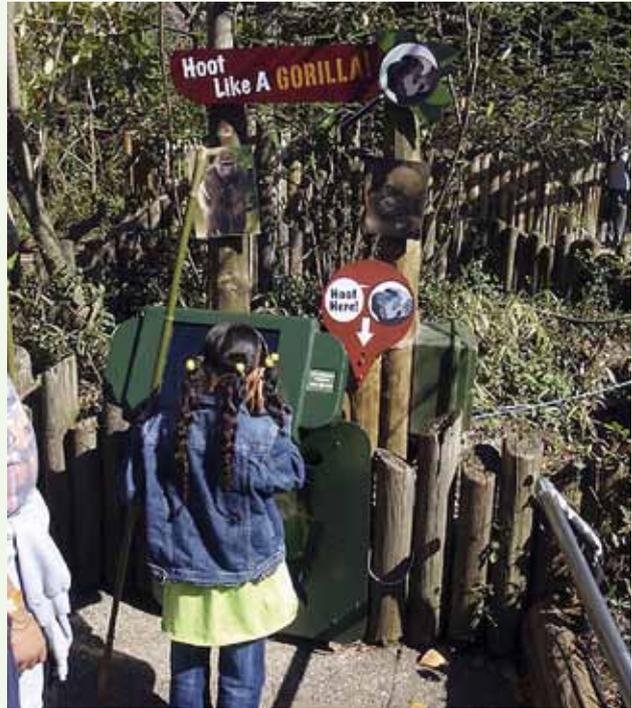
Participants report a strong desire to spend time with their family walking outdoors, seeing lots of animals while having an educational experience. This bodes well for programming such as Wild Research that in effect will attempt to capitalize off of these interests that are already expressed at zoos. These findings support those by Tomas et al. (2003) who found that family togetherness was the most important benefit listed by participants in their study of benefits visitors find in zoos. Recommendations stemming from this finding would be to ensure that the programming offered by zoos facilitates visitors participating in these family time enhancing activities. Allowing visitors to engage in activities as a family, which keep them moving and outdoors would align with the higher ranked social expectations that visitors had.

Conversely, participants have much less of a desire to ride the train, have lunch, visit the gift shop, and see a movie during their zoo visit. Programming around these activities may be less likely to be taken advantage of by visitors who do not view these as a critical part of their zoo visit. It is notable that participants rated these four lower ranked activities significantly higher for others in their group. Given that participants were over the age of 18, but often in groups containing children, this suggests that there may be a parent/child dichotomy when it comes to activities that visitors would like to engage in while at the zoo. This is also supported by the significant difference in rating that participants

Play with plants.



Display case with hidden clues and trail information.



give to “educational experiences for my children” and “to see the gardens.” Adults are assuming that the children they are with have less of a desire to have educational experience and less of a desire to view the gardens. The activities which participants rated their interest significantly higher than those they are with could be termed as “my goals” from the viewpoint of the visitor, while the activities which participants rated those they were visiting with as having higher interest could be termed “expectations of others.”

In regards to how visitors would like to interact at the zoo, visitors rated reading signs by their self and to others in the bottom four activities. This supports findings reported by other researchers (Ross and Lukas 2005; Tunnicliffe and Scheersoi 2009) that visitors spend significantly more time looking at animals than signage. Trying new things with others and talking with people I meet were also rated in the bottom four activities. This suggests that visitors are looking for a more predictable experience with those whom they are visiting with, not new experiences that they engage in with those they have just met during the visit.

Recommendations for Wild Research or other similar programming, based on the data on how visitors would like to interact, would be for programming to allow interaction between family members visiting the zoo that teaches them new things about the animals, while allowing them to observe the animals. In this regard, Wild Research has positioned itself to take advantage

of these visitor characteristics, creating research stations at a number of different exhibits which allow for visitors to pose and answer questions as groups; which are then answered through observation of the animals featured in the exhibit.

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