

The Roles of Zoos and Aquaria in Connecting Children with Nature

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As a parent, I often compare how my daughters are growing up to my childhood. I grew up in a small farming community and the typical summer day was unstructured exploration of the world around me. Early each morning the neighborhood pack of kids would jump on their bikes and ride into the woods to build forts, hunt for frogs and crayfish at the pond, and build unsuccessful dams in the creek. We often went the entire day with little parental supervision, and our favorite days were spent being active, outdoors, social and independent. By just being in nature, we learned about it and our place in it and it helped shape us into the people we are today. This is where many of us developed our conservation ethic and love for the outdoors.

Over the past 25 years, things have changed.

Kids have become increasingly alienated from the natural world and have replaced time outside with time in front of the television or computer. Real experiences have been replaced with the virtual world. Frogs and mice have been replaced with computers with a mouse. As parents, we have become frightened from the media to the point where it is considered irresponsible to let your child play in the backyard without supervision.

In Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, he details how our children's lives have gotten out of balance. There are more children today that are obese than any time in recorded history. The use of prescription medication



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to treat behavioral disorders has increased tenfold. Academics have become so competitive that unstructured time for students to explore and discover on their own is nearly non-existent in the curriculum, having been replaced with education standards and after school activities. Parents and children are both completely “scheduled” to the point where they literally cannot stop and smell the roses. And, most disturbing, children today are not developing an environmental ethic that is critical to the protection and conservation of our natural resources.

Children today are not developing an environmental ethic that is critical to the protection and conservation of our natural resources. At the same time, there has been increased criticism over the impact of zoological education programs. Critics of zoos point to the lack of research and evidence that zoos help people gain a better appreciation for wildlife and claim that viewing animals at zoos is not an impactful way to encourage people to take actions to conserve wildlife. Zoos counter that despite the difficulty in measuring direct behavioral change, that doesn't mean it doesn't exist and point to countless visitor studies that show attitudinal change in zoo visitors vs. non-visitors.

As a zoological educator, I believe that one of our most important responsibilities is to reconnect children with nature in meaningful ways. Nearly all zoological facilities have a mission to enhance public understanding of wildlife and the conservation of the places animals live, but this is only the start. We need to identify more ways to move children from the inspiration that they get from visiting our facilities to one of taking action and encouraging the entire family to explore the zoo in their own backyards. We need to find more ways to directly connect experiences at zoos with outcomes that encourage behavior change. By taking action, children are reinforced that their actions make a difference and that the decisions that we all make have lasting effects on our environment, resulting in future generations that are better prepared to make decisions about the conservation of our environment.

Here are two simple examples of what zoos can do to encourage children to take action:

Demonstration Backyard Habitats

The National Wildlife Federation (www.nwf.org), a large non-profit conservation organization, created a program nearly 30 years ago that encouraged

homeowners to landscape and plant their property to benefit wildlife. They created a certification program where homeowners could provide the basic necessities of life for their local fauna and certify their home as a wildlife habitat. The program encourages thoughtful use of pesticides and fertilizers, use of native flora and an increase in the amount of time families spend outdoors in a safe environment. Over the years this program has grown to over 100,000 certified backyards and hundreds of schoolyard habitats. Every spring, countless families enjoy observing and connecting local wildlife in their own backyards. Entire communities have even become certified and a variety of Wildlife Watch programs have been supported with this citizen scientist initiative.

Some zoos in the United States have begun to install demonstration backyard habitats in the hopes of encouraging their visitors to create wildlife habitats on their property. Imagine the conservation impact if even a small percentage of our zoo visitors decided to participate in this effort. The result could not only help our visitors connect with nature in meaningful ways, but also result in the creation of thousands of acres of wildlife habitat.

Engaging Children in Grassroots Conservation Programs

In the summer of 2009, Busch Gardens wanted to measure their ability to get their 1,000 summer camp participants to take actions that help conserve their environment. During the week of camp, all of campers learned about local wildlife species and coastal habitats in their community and were able to meet, interact and connect with several native animals. During lunch, students participated in planting seedling upland plants and creating a shoreline marine grass wetland nursery. At the end of each week's camp, the students took the plants to a greenhouse where they continued to grow. By the end of the summer, they had planted over 2,000 upland plants and 5,000 wetland grasses. Over the next six months, the students received updates on the progress of plants, were encouraged to become members to local non-profit conservation organizations, and were invited to a celebratory restoration event where their plants would be used to help restore a section of Tampa Bay. Six months after the end of camp, nearly 50% of the campers and their families showed up on a dreary Saturday morning to plant their upland and wetland plants and help preserve their local environment. Nearly all of the students and their families had never participated in a restoration event before.



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For more information and bookings visit www.izea.net

At the 20th International Zoo Educators' (IZE) Biennial Conference in Orlando, Florida (USA) this September, we will be sharing ideas on how to better engage children in conservation action and ways that we can measure the ability of our zoos to encourage conservation behavior.

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Bill Street has been an environmental educator for over 15 years, teaching kids about the wildlife and wild places around them. He heads the Education and Conservation Departments at the SeaWorld and Busch Gardens zoological parks in the United States. His career has included positions at several major aquaria throughout North America and he was the Senior Director of Education at the National Wildlife Federation.