

an innovative program to examine the educational quality of
zoos or aquariums

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Assessing the impact of educational activities can be difficult and very comprehensive

(Clayton *et al.*, 2008; Bartos and Kelly, 1998; Marino *et al.*, 2010). Instead of focusing on impact and visitors, the NVD (Dutch Zoo Association) implemented an educational screening program that emphasizes a zoo or aquarium's contribution to education.

The NVD Education Screening Program (NESP) is based on the premise that a park's educational profile is to some extent indicative of the quality of education. But, how can you measure educational input and output at a zoological park or aquarium? Within the NVD community there is no unambiguous way of fulfilling educational goals.

To overcome this obstacle, a gauging point or standard is needed. In 2009 an NVD educational working group consisting of three individuals developed, discussed and drafted an NVD educational standard. This standard is made up of seven interrelated domains:

1. Policy and organization
2. Educational employment
3. Target groups
4. Thematic design
5. Animals, enclosures and information
6. Products and activities
7. Conservation exposure

It was generally agreed on that the aforementioned domains are the building blocks or predictors of sound zoo or aquarium education. Within each domain a norm is laid down, describing why and how education should be practiced (Patrick *et al.*, 2007) in order to contribute to the overarching NVD goal of stimulating a positive attitude towards nature conservation and wildlife. Each NVD zoo has an institution-specific educational goal which can be lined up with the NVD educational mission. Parallel with the educational standard the working group developed a third document: a standardized educational checklist. This checklist is a spreadsheet totaling 59 questions which are unevenly distributed among the previously mentioned domains. Per domain, several content-specific questions must be completed in order to rate the sub-conclusion with either a: 1 = weak score, 2 = moderate score or 3 = acceptable/good score.

Upon completion of the sub-conclusions the final question must be answered: "Is education (within this institution) compliant with the NVD Education



An education screening committee at work.

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Standard?" This depends on the total score, when a facility scores a minimum of 14 points (i.e. 2 points per domain = moderate) the park's education profile meets the NVD Education Standard. The points system is an easy-to-administer way of quantifying the educational profile of a park.

Results

In 2010, 15 NVD member facilities were reviewed by the education screening committee consisting of three persons: an experienced educator, an NVD Executive Office employee (the person responsible for the coordination of the actual screening) and an educator from the previously screened park (in this way each park is represented in NESP). A day of education screening consists of a theoretical part during which the completed pre-screening questions are discussed and reviewed. The second (practical) part consists of the commission walking through the park, under guidance of the host educator. Thereby focusing on educational output such as the display and contents of information panels, brochures and leaflets, the way the park and enclosures are structured and designed, the exposure of the park's conservation efforts, the condition of the displayed animals and so forth. Afterwards the commission completes the post-screening questions, in the absence of the host educator, and attributes scores to the sub-conclusions. By totaling the scores of all

15 parks for each specific domain, some patterns become visible. It became evident that 'educational employment' and 'products and activities' scored highest, closely followed by 'policy and organization'. On the contrary, 'conservation exposure' scored lowest, indicating that more effort is needed in the exposure of conservation efforts at NVD facilities. On an average NVD zoos scored 17.9 points, in a range from 14 to 21 (whereby 14 is the minimum according to NVD standards). The commission drafted 93 recommendations—the most cited recommendation is to write an (annual) educational master plan, including target groups, goals and milestones. Regular recommendations also include evaluating (both process and product evaluation) educational activities and volunteers, renewing the lay-out and contents of information panels and reinforcing thematic designs.

Evaluation

A follow-up education screening is scheduled in 2013. Educators provided suggestions in order to further improve NESP. NESP is a dynamic program and will always be subject to revising and editing. Educators recommended reducing the number of commission members and, in order to reduce subjectivity, to employ the same members throughout the entire program. Also, education screenings should be carried out multiple times

The evaluation of your park's educational practices should be an ongoing, evolving process.



throughout a screening year. Another interesting recommendation is including weighing factors to the different domains. One park might place more emphasis on a certain aspect contrary to another one. By applying park-specific weighing variables a more balanced and situation-specific screening will become available. Other suggestions included the inclusion and exclusion of several items and domains on the checklist, more emphasis on keepers talks and animal feedings and greater focus on screening the educational content of a park's website.

Benefits

Many NVD educators consider NESP to be valuable; constructive criticism of fellow colleagues improves work and serves as an eye-opening experience. While preparing for a screening you become automatically involved in a self-reflection process. In a few cases recommendations formulated by the commission might stimulate the prioritization of educational topics of concern; this could be extremely helpful in relation to the park's board of directors. The major benefits of NESP are twofold. NESP stimulates collaboration between educators at fellow institutions. Collaboration by actively sharing knowledge, skills and expertise in the field of education is promoted throughout the program. Secondly, evaluating the status of education contributes to the ongoing development of

professional education. This will ultimately contribute to the overarching NVD goal of stimulating a positive attitude towards wildlife and conservation efforts.

Evaluation practices should be ongoing and methods and results should be shared with the institution and then with the whole community. The World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy (2005) emphasizes that evaluation in zoos and aquariums is vital. By sharing the story of NESP, it is hoped other institutions are inspired to develop similar educational evaluation programs. For more information on our programs, please visit www.nvddierentuinen.nl

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