

Zoo Education in India: Challenges and Opportunities



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India is recognized as a country uniquely rich in all aspects of biodiversity – ecosystems, species and genetic. Over the centuries people in India have had a fascination and respect for this natural heritage. The world's first recorded conservation measures, especially for wildlife, were enacted in India during the third century BC. Through the ages this concern has manifested itself through all ages and historical periods. Today there are 33 Botanical Gardens, 275 Zoological Parks, 89 National Parks, 504 Sanctuaries, and 10 Biosphere Reserves in India. In recent years, zoo education is gaining recognition as an important tool in sustainable development.

National Zoo Policy and Zoo Education

At present there are over 180 wildlife facilities which are recognized as zoos in India. These attract as many as 50 million visitors annually. They include urban, rural, literate and illiterate populations. Zoos in India are managed as per the provisions of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 and guided by the National Zoo Policy, 1998.

The Policy details the strategy Indian zoos need to adopt so that the national efforts in conservation of the rich biodiversity of our country is strengthened.

Founded in 1855, the Arignar Anna Zoological Park was the first public zoo in India.



It further highlights the need for adequate financial and technical resources for effective functioning of zoos in the country. The Policy also lays emphasis on coordination between the zoos and eminent research and education institutions on various aspects of Zoo Management. It aims at giving proper direction and thrust to the management of zoos by mustering cooperation and participation of all concerned.

The Policy also acknowledges that in a time in which wildlife habitats are under severe pressure and a large number of species of wild fauna have become endangered, zoos should not only to sustain their own populations but also augment the depleting populations of endangered species in the wild.

The Central Zoo Authority (CZA) was constituted in 1992 by the Government of India under the Wildlife Protection Act, with a mandate to assist India's national effort to conserve wildlife. All Indian zoos are required to be officially recognized by the CZA. The CZA also regulates the trade of wildlife recognized as endangered species.

The National Zoo Policy includes clear clauses with respect to Education and Outreach Activities of zoos. These are quoted below:

SOURCE: NATIONAL ZOO POLICY 1998

- Each zoo should have a well-drawn-up plan for educating the visitors as well as others in the community. Zoos shall keep a close liaison with other ex situ facilities in this regard.
- The central theme of the zoo education programme being the linkage between the survival of various species and protection of their natural habitat, enclosures which allow the animals to display natural behaviour are crucial to zoo education. Zoos shall, therefore, display animals in such enclosure only where the animals do not suffer physiological and psychological restraint.
- Attractive and effective signage methods and interactive displays to explain activities of various species to visitors, published education material and audio-visual devices are proven methods for driving home the conservation message. A formal education programme should also be pursued for strengthening the education message.
- Besides signage, the zoos shall also use guided tours, talks by knowledgeable persons and audio-visual shows for effectively communicating the message of conservation to the visitors.
- The help of universities, colleges and non-governmental organisations shall be taken to educate the students about the benefits of supporting nature conservation programmes.
- To provide the urban population with a window to nature and to serve as green lungs for the polluting environment, zoos shall extend their expertise and help to State Governments and local authorities to create nature parks extending over extensive areas near big cities.
- Zoos shall provide basic civic amenities to the visitors like toilets, drinking-water points, shelters and first-aid facilities. Ramps shall also be provided for the benefit of visitors in wheelchairs for approach to animal enclosures and other civic amenities.
- Zoos shall not provide any infrastructure for recreation/entertainment of visitors that is inconsistent with the stated objective of zoos.

Arignar Anna Zoological Park, Chennai is one of the largest zoos of South-east Asia.



Education and Interpretation in Zoos: Challenges

The World Zoo Conservation Strategy (1993) emphasizes that the use of a variety of educational techniques,

facilities and considerations, together with knowledge, creativity and inventiveness can make zoos highly interesting, attractive and effective places for environmental, conservation and holistic life system education.

It is well recognized that living animals clearly have an enormous power of attraction and are the great and unique feature of zoos and form the very basis of zoo education. Zoos displaying live animals can capture the attention and affection of the public for wildlife and nature like no other institution.

The challenge for zoos is to provide meaningful, educational information, activities and experiences for this wide range of zoo visitors and while at the same time retaining the recreational value of the visit.

Some key areas that need to be addressed in Indian Zoos are:

A. On-site Interpretation There is a good deal of variation in the status of interpretation and educational programmes in zoos in India. Signage is of varying quality in terms of both information and design. Signage needs to be designed and developed using local skills. The text for signage needs to be developed in various vernacular languages catering to the diverse audiences visiting Indian zoos.

Interpretation centres are rare. The range of methodologies and techniques used for education/interpretation is very limited. The potential to involve volunteers and animal keepers in this area is not effectively tapped.

B. School Education Links While zoos are a popular destination for school visits, the full potential of converting such visits into enriching and meaningful education opportunities has not been adequately explored. This entails developing relevant resource material, teacher orientation, trained educational staff within the zoo and proactive outreach programmes.

C. Training and Capacity Building There is a need for more focused training and capacity building for all levels of zoo staff—from the management to the animal keepers. Developing a cadre of educators from among the zoo staff and interested individuals would greatly strengthen the education and outreach programmes of zoos. However, most zoo arrangements are constrained by shortage of resources—financial, human and expertise in this area.

D. Networking and Sharing One of the greatest training-learning opportunities is that of sharing experiences and skills with colleagues in similar facilities or situations. In the case of zoo education it is especially important for zoo managers and staff to interact with educators and interpreters as well as conservation organizations. This provides opportunities for mutual understanding of the educational potential of zoos, ideas for enhancing this potential, while also keeping in view the other mandates of the zoo as well as constraints. Such collaborations could address the requirements of getting relevant expertise for developing interpretation centres and programmes, publications, signage etc. Equally critical is identification of support to sustain zoo educational programmes and initiatives. Exploring public-private partnerships and sponsorships is increasing, and needs to be considered seriously.

E. PR and Marketing Relations with media and attracting sponsorship have always been difficult areas. Marketing and Publicity of the zoo and its programmes is a crucial issue that needs to be addressed in zoos. A detailed communication strategy needs to be developed for this, and collaborations, partnerships and networks with zoo and its activities and programmes needs to be strengthened.

Towards a Zoo Education Master Plan for India

Zoos are ideally placed to encourage public support for conservation campaigns, action and political advocacy. Through focused activities, displays, campaigns and information about the choices people can make in their everyday lives, zoos can help visitors make a difference to wildlife. This role takes on an added importance in the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005 - 2014).

The Centre for Environment Education (CEE) has been commissioned by the Central Zoo Authority of India (CZA) to develop a Zoo Education Master Plan for the Zoos of India. The process currently underway seeks to address some of the felt needs, and recommend ways to address the challenges.

Zoos in India attract as many as 50 million visitors every year.



The principal components of the Zoo Education Master Plan are:

Understanding the Visitors

Who are the zoo visitors? Why do they visit zoos? What do they expect from the visit? And what will make them come back? While developing a Zoo education plan it is vital to know for whom the programmes are being developed. A sample visitor survey/profile study is to be undertaken to understand better the composition of zoo audiences in different parts of the country, before developing any education and interpretation package/programme. This would be useful baseline data.

Interpretation

Interpretation is a tool as well as a technique for doing education and communication. The plan will suggest strategies and methodologies to introduce and enhance interpretation opportunities including signage, exhibits, enclosures and interpretation centres. Examples and case studies will demonstrate how exhibitions, displays, visitor interactions, trails, keeper talks all provide opportunities for visitors to learn and appreciate wildlife, diversity of life, habitat needs and conservation issues and interpretation programmes aim to convey strong messages about biodiversity and conservation.

Education for the General Public

As zoos are visited by large numbers of people and form a potent mass education tool about the close linkages between protection of natural areas and maintaining the life supporting processes of nature. The plan will highlight how well-planned and appropriately designed zoos can sensitize visitors to the dangers of a hostile or indifferent attitude towards nature and inspire in zoo visitors empathy for wild animals, as well as an understanding and awareness about the need for conservation of natural resources and for maintaining the ecological balance.

Zoos are popular destination for school visits.



Interpretive signage in many zoos leaves much to be desired.



School Programmes

Children and school groups constitute a major part of visitors. Zoos can therefore, be used by teachers as places to sensitize students regarding the need for conservation of our biodiversity. As part of the plan, a variety of publications are planned for educators to facilitate how an array of biological and other themes can be explained through zoo education. These include themes such as animal adaptations, behaviour, reproduction, nutrition, and also complex subjects such as evolution and ecology. Suggestions and guidelines will be designed for outreach programmes for school and college groups, which help them understand curricular concepts. Celebration of events like Wildlife Week, World Forestry Day, Animal Welfare Fortnight etc., school visits, training programmes, celebration of animal births, new animal enclosures talks, lectures, screening of wildlife films, live animal shows, keeper talks, conservation clubs are different kinds of outreach programmes that will be explored.

Appropriate Resource Material

Handbooks for zoo management as well as institutions doing zoo education will include ideas on a variety of resource materials like activity kits, manuals, handbooks, workbooks, charts, brochures, posters, stickers, labels etc. These will draw upon examples from around the world as well as India. Basic information on flora and fauna common to most zoos will be provided in reader friendly formats, while ensuring factual accuracy.

Training and Capacity Building

The plan will address the needs of training and capacity building programmes for zoo staff, animal keepers, veterinary staff, volunteers, teachers, and NGOs. These training programmes aim at developing skills for education and interpretation in zoo staff, animal keepers and other personnel. Internships and exchange programmes with zoos of the country and abroad would also be explored. An overview and exposure to the different types and

CEE's Zoo Education and Interpretation Programmes

The Centre for Environment Education (CEE) is a national institution engaged in developing programmes and material to increase awareness about the environment and sustainable development. CEE was established in 1984 as a Centre of Excellence in Environmental Education, supported by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF), Government of India.

CEE aims at increasing the value of environmental education in zoos and other similar facilities. The thrust of CEE's Zoo Education programme is to enhance the nature experience by providing on-site information through signages, exhibits, orientation and visitor centres encouraging visitor awareness and public commitment to the cause of conservation.

CEE also develops publications and relevant zoo literature like zoo brochures, guides, manual, handbook etc. for students, teachers and also zoo visitors, and organizes training programmes for teachers and zoo staff, aimed at developing skills for using zoos as effective educational opportunities.

For more information: www.ceeindia.org
and www.kidsgreen.org



CEE Publications developed for Zoo Education Programmes.

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range of programmes executed by zoos all over the world would be included.

Networking

Networking and building partnerships with like minded institutions locally, nationally and internationally is a critical need. The plan will examine the scope and strategies for liaisoning closely within and between zoos and their programmes, as well as sponsorships and lobbying for funds and grants from corporate bodies and companies.

The work on developing the Master Zoo Education Plan for India commenced in July 2006.

The process includes compilation of data from zoos

across the country and interactions with zoo directors and other stakeholders in zoo education, towards formulating recommendations and developing a blue print for action. The process will be completed by July 2008. ♦

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Interpretation Centre at a Butterfly Park in a Zoo.



Even butterflies can be interpreted.

