The Scene: As the early morning light painted arboreal art with the inspiring fauna of Lisbon Zoo a rare sighting of Educatus europaeus was recorded gathering to quench their thirst for knowledge at the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) Academy Seminar watering hole. The herd warily sated themselves with coffee and pastries as they acclimatised themselves within their new enclosure. The twenty-eight Pan-European zoo educators had found shelter in the warm hospitality of Lisbon Zoo to attend the EAZA Academy Seminar: “Communicating Biodiversity Through Visitor Engagement” delivered by Adam Senior, CREW Training and Development, UK.

The Challenge: To facilitate a day in which this collective group of educators could explore strategies and techniques for ‘starting the Biodiversity conversation’ with more visitors, more frequently, more effectively. How to communicate biodiversity, across the whole Zoo experience, with more impact and translate these methods into practical applications for use with their visitors in their own Zoos to raise awareness, alter attitude and change behaviour.

“EAZA understands both the pressing need to communicate about biodiversity conservation to a wide range of visitors, and the challenges that this task presents. EAZA is experienced in partnership working and the interactive courses offered by CREW provided an ideal way to share their various approaches to developing a coordinated visitor engagement strategy amongst our community”.

Myfanwy Griffith, EAZA Executive Director

“I was so pleased to be asked to deliver this seminar because the EAZA Seminars offer a unique opportunity to work with so many European Zoo educators, exploring best practice across the community and facilitating creative development with participants from such a wide range of Zoos. With so many differences in size, environments, demographic cultures, stages of development and staffing structures my aim was to harness and empower their one common factor…the passion to share knowledge and make a difference” Adam Senior

The Seminar

The seminar was designed to explore opportunities for delivering visitor engagements, strategically placed throughout the course of the visitor experience and explore the nuances of delivery techniques… ’what to do’, ‘where to do it’ and ‘how to do it’.

The task was to investigate a range of different visitor contact opportunities (Photo 1) and examine how to make these most effective by fine tuning ‘engagements’ and drawing as many visitors, as possible into the conversation. In my experience of staff/visitor interactions… the slightest adjustment in approach, style and technique can make a huge difference as I always emphasise in training… the difference is in the detail.

With this purpose in mind the assembly was split asunder and the Educatus europaeus were set the task of culminating their taxonomies to emerge as three single animal collectives. From the melee emerged three unified, determined and committed teams: The Lion Pride, The Giraffe Tower and The Wolf Pack.

Within the distinguished taxonomies we had a wide range of participants, providing linguistic, cultural and professional diversity. This was all very useful, as we were assembled to explore engagement opportunities throughout the whole zoo experience, embracing the importance of every job role … right across ‘The Visitor Engagement Spectrum©’.

‘The Visitor Engagement Spectrum©’

The Spectrum was explained as a way of viewing the whole Zoo experience (from car parking and admissions to fond farewells and last impressions) as a series of opportunities for encouraging visitor interaction with staff/volunteer teams.

The Visitor Engagement Spectrum© is divided up into four sections with opportunities to create lasting, memorable impressions, inspiring awareness and
behaviour change in our visitors.

- Customer Service
- Site Engagements
- Talks
- Shows

This approach encourages coordination right across the Zoo team: using ‘Pro-active Welcomes’ at admissions to drive visitors towards staff, events and talks, empowering all visitor facing staff to engage across the site, actively extending conversations into hands-on, personal and memorable experiences; harnessing talks and events to inspire change and capitalising on shows/demonstrations to get them emotionally involved… make them feel, make them care!

You can’t make them change… but you can make them want to change!

After we had discussed ways in which CREW clients had experienced practical success with these approaches (increased visitor awareness and donations and secondary spend) participants proceeded to bash their cerebra together in order to articulate clear, concise Biodiversity Mission Statements; which they were then challenged to communicate effectively through a plethora of creative engagement techniques.

**Engagement Techniques**

If music be the food of love then… enjoyment is the food of engagement!

We explored a series of human verbal and non-verbal communication skills that could be used to make conversation and hands on activities more enjoyable, engaging and ultimately more inspiring.

We tried, tested and played with the nuances of turning animal based conversations, enclosure talks and object handling into more enticing and exciting formats: ‘My Favourite Animal’ (Photo 2), ‘Observation Tests’ and ‘Secret Treasures’, etc. With much fun and frolics the group ‘wallowed in the mud bath’ of participation. In fact they not so much ‘wallowed’ as… dived in, snorkelled, backstroked and presented synchronised swimming displays of excellent engagement skills and techniques.

**The Personal Touch**

In conjunction with these techniques we explored how to use human communication skills (personal opinions, body language, volunteer encouragement and participation rewards, etc.) to nurture and encourage visitor engagements in such a way as to provide positive and rewarding experiences for all involved. From the simplest smile, to the briefest nod, to the warmest words your staff can create a very powerful positive impression throughout the whole visitor experience.

In contrast, if a member of staff is not actively engaging or acknowledging visitors (during their daily routine), what impression does it create? Ostensibly, they are saying in a very loud voice “I do not care!” This in turn means that your visitors will not ‘care’ about you or your ‘message’. Whilst this is alarming on a conservation awareness level it is also fundamentally damaging on a commercial level. As with all service industries, these negative impressions are almost always the most memorable and ‘Trip Advisor-able’ of all.

It is so important to look at your Visitor Experience and strategically plan your visitor engagement contact points, making sure that all staff/visitors have received appropriate training and direction so that they can play their role in ensuring all visitors feel appreciated and receive ‘added value’.

We explored some of the creative ways that CREW clients had achieved this, finding solutions to the ‘usual suspects’ of lack of time, resources, money and staff. How they had overcome the issues associated with… so many visitors, so little time, so much work, so many ‘mouths’ to feed/muck-out/wash/enrich/interpret/conserve and poured these ideas into the ‘creative cooking pot’ for tasting, ingestion and consideration.

**Visitor Engagement Strategies**

The Wolves, Giraffes and Lions forgot old rivalries (and predatory tendencies) and split into creative partnerships to work out generic and site-specific Engagement Strategies. We encouraged knowledge sharing and innovative thinking to discover strategies that could work for them when faced with the harsh realities of life once they returned to their own particular jungles. They then identified the communication and engagement skills that staff/volunteers would need to be able to deliver at these points of contact. This gave them an outline for their own visitor engagement training and development strategy… all they needed to do was take the first steps to putting it into practice… start small, start simple and celebrate success.

**Participant contributions**

Throughout the day we had the pleasure of witnessing some great examples of ideas, skills, communication confidence and engagements techniques from the trainees as they participated in…

- Brainstorming (Photo 3)
- Teamwork (Photo 4)
- Problem Solving
- Practice and Presentation (Photo 5)
- Feedback and Support
- Fun! (Photo 6)
It was a great pleasure to work with such a creative, skilled and open minded collection of educators from across Europe who were so clearly united in their shared purpose… to fine-tune their skills, voice their passions, share knowledge and to make a difference.

Results and aspirations

As with all training, the results will be seen in the application of techniques and best practice within the individual zoo environments. With such a wide range of Educators at so many levels of experience, provision and location it will be really interesting to hear how they have applied the techniques and strategies to achieve real results on the ground. The EAZA Academy has committed to organising a six month survey of the course participants to ask which of the formats, techniques and strategies they have successfully used to communicate biodiversity more effectively with their visitor demographic.

Initial feedback from the participants indicated that a very high percentage learnt new knowledge and skills and would recommend the training to others. The part of the training that many identified would be most applicable back in their institutions was the detail in relation to the ‘what/why/how’ process. Participants felt that this process helped structure ideas and develop a clear goal for biodiversity engagement that could be easily understood by other people. Practical ideas about how to improve outreach with existing material/content were also appreciated. As with many training events the interactive elements and activities served not only to reinforce the theory but, also enable participants to share their personal experiences and develop stronger networks amongst their colleagues.

Conclusion

This was a great opportunity for like-minded animals to collaborate and explore together. By investigating the benefits of coordinated Visitor Engagement Strategies and scrutinising the nuances of effective communication and engagement delivery we unveiled some real gemstones of creativity that participants could embed within their own zoo staff/volunteer cultures upon their return.

My advice to all zoos and aquariums that want effective visitor engagement with the associated ‘message’ delivery benefits, is to treat your visitor engagement in the same way as your established strands of operation and develop a clear strategy, dedicate resources to its delivery and embed it across your whole team:

- Define your Engagement Ethos
- Map your strategic visitor engagement contact points
- Plan and resource staff/volunteer team engagement delivery
- Train and develop engagement skills
- Deliver across Visitor Experience
- Evaluate and Support

It will make a huge difference and… the difference is in the detail.

I am not sure what the collective noun for Educators is, I would, perhaps suggest… an Inspiration? Well, once fully sated by the EAZA academy seminar this ‘Inspiration’ migrated to another watering hole, the EZE icebreaker at the Lisbon Zoo a thoroughly enjoyable chance to enjoy the balmy evening light, meet giant insects and lock ‘conversational’ horns with the great and the good of the European Zoo Educators community.

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