Introduction

Conservation education is the process of influencing people’s attitudes, emotions, knowledge, and behaviors about wildlife and wild places (IZE, 2014). It is through the efforts of skilled educators and interpreters that adults and children alike given opportunities to learn more and make informed decisions about their role in nature. Students are increasingly becoming disconnected from the natural world and this necessitates using methods that generate a sense of wonder and stewardship to interact positively with nature (Louve, 2008). As zoological institutions move towards a more active role in conservation, education becomes the vehicle to move the public to support these initiatives both financially and politically.

One method that has been used by zoos is making particular animals available for visitors to touch through petting zoos, or interpretive programming. In many institutions, it is a common belief that being able to have active interactions, for instance touching an animal versus passive interaction by simply viewing it on exhibit will have a positive effect in the choices people make when it comes to conservation attitudes and behaviors. This study was completed to begin to answer the question: Is there a connection between physical interaction with animals and conservation attitudes? Middle school students in Lufkin, Texas USA were surveyed about their local conservation attitudes toward the habitat of the Louisiana Pine Snake (Pituophis ruthveni). There was a percentage of the students surveyed that had touched Pineapple - the pine snake at the Ellen Trout Zoo during an interpretive program. The survey results of those that had touched the zoo’s pine snake were compared to those who had not touched the snake. The results showed that students’ conservation attitudes that had touched the pine snake were more positive than those that had not.

Most people would agree that if children had the opportunity to touch or directly observe an animal that those children would develop an affinity or compassion toward that animal. In doing so, it would seem that those children would also be more conscious of that animal's threats to survival or its conservation. The key to overcoming the challenges to biodiversity conservation have to begin with our own species (Saunders et al, 2006). We have to understand what some of the psychological forces are that would drive a person to care about animals and try to save those animals from extinction.

From pollution, global climate change, to depletion of the world's natural resources, environmental issues threaten the individuals, communities, and living organisms on the planet. In an effort to address these issues, it is important to understand what motivates people to conserve and preserve the natural environment (Bruni, Chance, & Shultz, 2012). Is using animals in captivity as part of educational services at zoos an effective tool to motivate the conservation of that animal and its habitat? It is important to remember that many people will not get to see these animals in the wild, so zoos are bring the nature to the people.

Development of effective interpretive techniques are important from the aspect of both school aged audiences and managers of zoological institutions. As students are increasingly becoming disconnected from the natural world, there is a necessity to use methods that generate a sense of wonder and stewardship to prepare our youth to live and interact positively with nature. Also, as zoological institutions more towards a more active role in conservation, education becomes a vehicle to move the public to support these initiatives both financially and politically.

Methods

The Ellen Trout Zoo in Lufkin, Texas uses live animals in many of their education programs both at the zoo and through outreach programming. Several of those animals have been education animals for many years and some of the public recognize these animals by name. The following survey was given to students that live in Lufkin, Texas. The study was comprised of one survey broken into a before and after question survey. The focus of the survey was to evaluate the attitudes of 10-12 year old students concerning the conservation of a local endangered animal, the Louisiana pine snake (Pituophis ruthveni) and its habitat- Long Leaf pine tree stands. Pineapple is a Pine Snake (Pituophis melanoleucus) and an education animal at the
Ellen Trout Zoo in Lufkin, Texas.

In most cases, children and adults recognize Pineapple and have been allowed to touch him as part of education programs that the zoo offers. Once the before section of the survey/questionnaire was complete, a photograph of Pineapple was displayed and identified. The students were then asked to complete the second portion of the survey.

Results:

One hundred percent of students surveyed had visited the zoo. Nineteen of the 20 marked that they had touched an animal from the zoo and responded that it was good experience. The question “Do you “know” Pineapple the Pine Snake? And have you ever been able to touch him?” revealed that 10 out of 24 claimed to know Pineapple. While 14 out the 24 responded that they did not know Pineapple. those 10 that knew Pineapple the pine snake had scores that reflected an elevated awareness in conservation in contrast to the 14 that did not claim to know him. They were also more likely to leave their comments in the additional comments section of the survey. Here are few of those comments:

“I think that trees should be preserved and no one should be able to cut them down”

“Animals are like people and we are destroying their homes by doing this.”

“It affects other animals that live in the long leaf pines”

Discussion

Most of the time, zoos and aquariums are trying to convey a message of understanding of wildlife and conservation (Street, 2010). The personal benefits of viewing and learning about wildlife are the basis for conservation actions (Manfredo & Driver, 2002). This study focused on effectiveness of zoos using particular animals as education animals for the public to be able to have physical contact. In another study of marine animals, it showed that “providing wildlife experiences that elicit from visitors a combination of affective and cognitive responses to marine wildlife increases environmental awareness, modifies intentions to act and fosters conservation appreciation and actions by visitors” (Zeppel, 2008). Based on the results of the Pineapple the pine snake study, there is a significant difference in the feeling and attitudes of children on conservation issues based on whether or not they have come in physical contact with zoo education animals. This research would benefit from the administration of more surveys with a wide variety of education animals i.e. mammals, birds, insects and amphibians. It would be beneficial to zoos and aquariums to evaluate their interpretive educational programming including allowing the public to touch animals to determine efficiency both qualitatively and financially in order to persuade children and adults to invest positively in our natural world.

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References


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