Introduction
Meet the Locals He Tuku Aroha is Wellington Zoo’s newest experience, and is Wellington Zoo’s love story to Aotearoa New Zealand. The experience was designed to tell the stories of animals, people, and the land. Meet the Locals He Tuku Aroha is the realisation of our dream to become the best little zoo in the world, and it is proving to be a big hit with Zoo visitors, with research showing that some visitors are spending up to four hours at a time in the precinct, well above the norm for most of our exhibits.

A key strategic goal of the Zoo is to connect visitors with animals through the development of creative, meaningful, and holistic experiences. Spatial design, face to face visitor programmes, and interpretive media were developed side by side to ensure cohesive storytelling and messaging.

Meet the Locals He Tuku Aroha houses a variety of animals including Kororā little blue penguins, sheep, Kunekune pigs, bees, and grand and Otago skinks.

A Collaborative Approach, Programme Development
Visitor programmes were designed collaboratively, bringing together the Learning and Visitor Experience Teams, as well as a number of other specialists, including the Volunteer Manager, Conservation Manager, and Animal Care Teams at key points during the planning process. A collaborative approach ensured that the people delivering the programmes were engaged early on and had buy-in, ownership, and accountability for programming from the outset, which meant that the work was meaningful and relevant to them. We also engaged with a variety of stakeholders, referred to as ‘voices’. In addition to the Zoo’s voice (conservation, sustainability, and animal welfare), and the animal voice (a celebration of behaviours and adaptations), there is the community voice (local farmers, South Coast residents, community gardeners, conservation groups etc.), the future voice (the voice of kids/future leaders) and the iwi voice (Taranaki Whaāui, a local Māori tribal group). These voices helped to inform and guide our decisions throughout the development, and helped to build a rich narrative for the space.

The voices were represented in many different ways, for example, the Zoo voice is represented in talks and messaging; the animal and community voices through interpretive media, for example the bee waggle dance interactive; the iwi voice through five pou korero (carvings); and the future voice through drawings and quotes from children incorporated into play areas, like on the walls of the giant penguin nest boxes.
There were ten stages in the development of programming: setting the scene (what, why, and how); task allocation; brainstorming; researching; programme design (using key criteria); testing; feedback and review; resourcing; sign-off; and training. The Learning and Visitor Experience Teams met for an hour every two weeks for six months in the lead-up to the opening of the precinct; these meetings were used to share and test ideas, and find solutions to problems.

Workshops were also set-up to further support staff learning, including a session with Australian interpretation practitioner, John Pastorelli, on having purposeful, message-driven interactions with visitors, and workshops with Taranaki Whānui representative, Neavin Broughton, on developing cultural competency.

Taking a collaborative approach to programme development gave us the opportunity to develop our staff- the next generation of leaders in our workplace and industry. Hart (2015) uses the term ‘social collaboration’ to describe the learning that takes place from working together, where the emphasis is on achieving business objectives. She states that the benefits of social collaboration for a team and an organisation are wide-ranging and significant. For us this included improved communication through faster access to information, improved insights into work status, problems and issues, and the opportunity for continuous learning and performance improvement.

**Visitor Learning Experiences in Meet the Locals He Tuku Aroha**

A challenge in developing the experience in Meet the Locals He Tuku Aroha was the limited number of animals in such a large space. Therefore the learning experiences developed and visitor contact have been vital for the space to achieve our learning, conservation, and community outcomes.

Over 20 new interactive programmes have been developed for the precinct, and the space is now a hub for school programmes, like Bush Builders, our community conservation programme, and Zoo Sleepovers. The programmes have been designed to be fun, meaningful and interactive, helping visitors to learn more about animals and develop an understanding of our reliance on nature, and how we can live a positive and sustainable co-existence with animals. The programmes are thematic and contextual, giving visitors a glimpse into the Zoo’s conservation and animal care work, and an understanding of how they can take action, too.

Research has shown that 72% of zoo visitors arrive with the intention to learn something new (Roe & McConney, 2014). We also know that many visitors visit zoos simply to enjoy a family day out (Dierking et al. 2002). With this in mind, we created visitor learning experiences that promote free-choice, family learning, where participants’ curiosity and interest guide their learning, but it is influenced by the Zoo’s perspective, where key messages are shared as people are immersed in the experience (Falk, 2005).

Programming was developed for each area based on the key message for that space. For example, in Penguin Point we highlight the work the Zoo does with Places for Penguins, creating safe habitats on Wellington’s South Coast. Visitors can take part in our Nest Box Monitoring activity, to mimic the work we do monitoring boxes on the South Coast. They can learn about how important it is to keep dogs on a lead when walking them on the beaches where penguins live.

Another key component of programming was the use of contact animals, to give visitors the chance to meet and touch some of New Zealand’s rarest and most iconic animals such as Tuatara, Forest Geckos and Wētā. Seeing, touching, or in the case of the Wētā, holding animals can create emotional moments for visitors. Research has shown that emotional experiences, like conquering your fear of holding a Wētā, for example, can result in long term learning (Falk & Gillespie, 2009). People will only protect what they value and research has shown that personal and emotional connections can facilitate a desire to engage in pro-environmental behaviours (Luebke et al., 2012).

**Staff, Visitor, and Stakeholder Feedback**

Staff involved in this collaboration were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the challenges, successes, and key learnings at both the planning and implementation stages of programming. This feedback was gathered via individual email evaluations.

When asked why they chose the particular area/programming element of Meet the Locals He Tuku
Aroha to develop, all staff indicated a passion for or connection to the animal or subject, for example, ‘I love the idea of community gardens and encouraging younger people to join in and learn where their food actually comes from’ and ‘I chose the penguin area because I have always loved little blue penguins and feel a connection to them because I grew up living near wild little blue penguins.’ Encouraging staff to develop programmes for the animals and subjects they were most interested in served as great motivator.

The thing staff enjoyed the most about the process was having the freedom to be creative, getting the time to research, and learning new skills. This feedback has been great for evaluating our success and has provided evidence that a collaborative approach to programming is worthwhile.

Our visitors have also provided feedback on the new space: “I love how the kids can get up and personal with the animals the last time we were there a zoo keeper let my 2 boys 2yr and 3yr feed the bunnies in their enclosure and they loved it!” Another visitor states, “I loved the links it makes really explicitly to the way the animals enhance our lives. I really enjoy the chance our children get to be respectfully up close to native NZ animals and to domestic animals they don’t often encounter. It is a beautiful space to spend time in, really informative and gives a great hands on element.”

Feedback from stakeholders has also been positive and our partnerships with them continue to grow. Meet the Locals He Tuku Aroha has been a fantastic platform to position the Zoo in the community as a social enterprise, working collaboratively to create community benefit.

**Conclusion**

Meet the Locals He Tuku Aroha, Wellington Zoo’s love story to Aotearoa New Zealand, is providing fun, meaningful learning experiences for all ages. A big part of its success can be attributed to the collaborative approach we took to programme development. Research suggests that collaborative models of working can increase staff engagement and provide a context for continuous learning and performance improvement. Feedback from staff reflects these results, and every day we see our staff delivering programming with purpose, positivity, and pride.

Working with stakeholders to ensure their voice is accurately represented in the space means that Meet the Locals He Tuku Aroha really is a community hub. Our programming is helping visitors to connect with local animals and gain a better understanding of the living world, and their role in protecting it.

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**References**


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