LORD HOWE ISLAND STICK INSECT ENCOUNTERS: DOES ANYONE CARE?

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Abstract

Close-up encounters allow zoo visitors the opportunity to view an animal at close proximity and are thought to help build a sense of care and connection between the visitor and animal. Here we tested this by surveying 258 school students who visited the Lord Howe Island Stick Insect (LHISI) exhibit at Melbourne Zoo. The students experienced one of four treatments: i) no close-up encounter, ii) a close-up encounter with the LHISI shown on the hand of a staff member, iii) a close-up encounter with the LHISI shown in a portable container, or iv) a close-up encounter with a trolley of LHISI exoskeletons and eggs but no live animal. Students who experienced any of the three close-up encounters cared more that the LHISI may become extinct, placed greater importance on the LHISI, and valued the zoo working to protect the LHISI more than students who had not experienced a close-up encounter. There was no difference in student responses between the three types of close-up encounters. Our findings indicate that close-up encounters can foster care towards animals, but that it may not always be necessary to use a live animal to achieve this increase in care.