

What do kids think about Frogs?

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Johannesburg Zoo has engaged in a frog-breeding programme to determine how to breed with endangered frogs in South Africa. This is part of our contribution to the Global Amphibian Conservation project. The World Association of Zoos and Aquaria (WAZA) committed itself during the 2005 conference to address the Amphibian crisis. It has pledged to liaise with the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and Captive Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG). From this WAZA and CBSG have been working in partnership with the Amphibian Specialist Group (ASG) to implement components of the IUCN Amphibian Conservation Action Plan into supporting the conservation of amphibians. This forms part of the Global Amphibian Conservation Project – a broad, high-level, stakeholder group representing both in situ and ex situ interests*.

In preparation for our planned Amphibian Resource pack, which will form part of our contribution to the 2008 Year of the Frog global awareness campaign (coordinated by The Amphibian Ark**) we did a survey with Grade 7 learners (aged 12 to 13 years) in primary schools. The results of this survey were surprising to say the least.

The schools which took part in this survey varied from more affluent to less affluent areas and in most cases, English is not their first language. Amphibians are traditionally included in the lesson plans only as a Vertebrate class in comparison to the other four classes. Teachers do not often give examples of amphibians apart from a general frog.

The questionnaires investigated a variety of facts and started off with a query with regards to what the term “endangered” means and if learners could give some examples of endangered animals. It was obvious from the results that there is some confusion as to “endangered” and “being in danger”. Some learners stated that endangered meant being abused, or that you had to call the police to save endangered animals. Examples of endangered animals focused mostly on the charismatic species such as polar bears, cheetahs spelt as cheeters, dolphins, whales, wild dogs, leopards, elephants, Riverine rabbit, gorillas, chimpanzees and Ant bears. Some of the other animals mentioned included giraffe spelt as geraph, cows, donkeys, goats, horses, chickens and ducks. Very few listed reptiles, fish, birds or amphibians.

In response to asking if they would hold frogs the answers were mostly **NO !!!!** written in a very large font with a few exclamation marks added. Remarks such as slimy, gross, disgusting accompanied their response. One learner said that if they were not poisonous, he would touch a frog. The YES answers were followed by remarks such as yes please, I



would like to know what they feel like, I like slimy things, I love frogs and I have my own frogs.

Frogs are not a popular pet species in South Africa. When queried if learners would like to keep them as pets, the minority said they would even though they

said they would never touch a frog. One learner said that his mother said one could not get warts from touching a frog and that is why he would like to keep a frog as a pet. A number of them responded that it was not fair to keep frogs as pets because they are wild, used to the wild and used to having lots of space. A connected question asked what they would do if they could no longer keep this pet. The majority said they would give it to the Zoo. Some mentioned pet shops and others said they would release them in dams, ponds and pools.

When queried about the uses of frogs by people, it resulted in a number of different responses, from people putting frogs on guard to eat mosquitoes to people using frogs as food for other pets such as snakes. Frogs are used as bait for fishing. People eat frogs but there was no mention of the French, only the Chinese populations. Learners also stated that frogs could be used to produce poison for hunting, especially when using a bow and arrow. Three respondents mentioned that you can play with frogs (one said it was especially boys that play with frogs but that they do treat them badly by throwing stones at them) and two respondents mentioned that you could use the skin of frogs to make clothes.

Other uses include pictures, arts and crafts, to scare your teachers (ha ha), decorations, stuffed animals, entertainment like television shows, characters in books and movies, frog fights and you could put them in zoos.

The question “How would you save frogs if they were endangered?” resulted in answers such as opening a frog shelter, frog farms or put them in zoos. The majority answered that they needed a safe space to breed and that they should have water and enough to eat.

The questionnaire queried a number of other facts but in my opinion it is quite clear that they have different ideas of frogs. Children these days are not as concerned about myths of animals as their parents or grandparents might be. None of the respondents were too worried about getting warts or that frogs are a bad omen when you see them. They were more concerned if frogs were harmless or poisonous. Some of the teachers expressed their absolute fear of frogs believing that people that ate frogs, had many facial warts and that if somebody wished you bad luck, they would put a frog in your house. Urban children are less exposed to these myths.

The one concern in education is that when one teaches about conservation is that you have difficulty in connecting it with real-life experiences and bringing it back home to see what your life style contributes as an ecological footprint. Saving frogs or other

wildlife is regarded as somebody else's job or issue. Very few respondents related to their own life styles or habits. Teachers often use the more charismatic species as examples of endangered animals but how do learners that live in Johannesburg, an inland urban city, save wild dogs or polar bears? How do they connect their own existence with these animals?

Zoos and Aquaria should definitely teach about charismatic species and their wonderful adaptations to create an ever-growing appreciation of wildlife but we should not forget about our own impact and what we can do in our own habitat to contribute to conservation.

The survey have given us some guidelines for our new resource pack as to what children know about frogs and to their general attitude towards frogs. The older generation is quite scared of frogs and will easily kill them but the children are horrified at killing any living animals. Children are also taught about the basic biology of frogs in schools and in the resource pack we can unpack the wonderful variety and adaptations of frogs. We are aiming to complete the resource pack in November 2007. Should you have any ideas to share, please do not hesitate to contact us.



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* For more information on the WAZA campaign addressing the Amphibian crisis please visit www.waza.org/conservation/campaigns21.php?view=campaigns&id=1

** For more information on The Amphibian Ark and the 2008 Year of the Frog campaign please visit www.amphibianark.org