

# in CONSERVATION EDUCATION

## A PRIMER

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"This home schooling – it seems like a growing trend.  
How should we be addressing this audience?"

"Wow – the demographics in our community are really changing.  
How will – or should – this impact our education programs?"

"There's an increasing focus on animal welfare.  
That's great, but how does that impact us when we use animals in education?"

"Our world is changing so fast - how can we keep up with it?  
How can we stay truly innovative?  
How can we keep current on what's going on with education?  
With the environment?"

**D**o you find yourself asking these questions? Well, you are not alone! These and other education trends are of particular interest to zoo and aquarium educators, and need to be addressed if we are to continue to excel in conservation education programming and achieve our vision of inspiring people to care for wildlife and wild places.

In the past twenty years, we've seen a revolution within AZA's education community. As you'll recall, the Conservation Education Committee (CEC) was once referred to as the Public Education Committee. That changed in 1997, as we responded to the times – and to trends of the outside world.

We used to focus primarily on teaching animal facts to school-aged children. We certainly still do some of that, but our focus has shifted to addressing a whole slew of other audiences, and focusing more on instilling caring for animals (affective goals) and inspiring conservation action (behavioral goals), as well as animal facts (cognitive goals). You might say that there is a trend toward more of a focus on affective and behavioral goals.

### WHAT HAS GUIDED THESE CHANGES?

First, we know much more about how to educate effectively. We have data on the value that staff and volunteers play in interpretation. We have data on the importance of interactive learning, and the tremendous value of providing animal experiences as an aid to learn-

ing. We have also learned to take a more strategic approach in developing conservation education messages, and in addressing our different audiences more strategically. And we are beginning to better understand how to instill caring and change behavior. For example, we used to think that knowledge would lead to behavior change. That is, "If they only knew what was going on in the world, they would change." We all know that's not necessarily true – a look at the number of gas-guzzling cars in the parking lot of any conservation organization will tell you that. Now we're starting to learn different ways of impacting conservation-related behavior.

### AND HOW ARE WE DOING THIS?

It's pretty simple: we're doing a lot of research. Some of it is internally-focused. In the past decade, we've seen much more evaluation and research related to the visitor experience at AZA zoos and aquariums. As part of the AZA's Multi-Institutional Research Project (MIRP), we've done a review of that literature. And thanks to a generous grant from the National Science Foundation, MIRP is working with the Institution for Learning Innovation to commission some of our own research to assess our impact.

But much of our research is externally focused. Through MIRP and other programs like The Ocean Project, we've looked to related fields to see how we can increase our impact on our guests – in particular, how to better instill caring and change behavior.

We've also begun looking outside our boundaries to see what other things we should be paying attention to. In conjunction with the AZA Trends Committee, the CEC has been focusing on trends related to conservation education. This started with a simple list of possible trends, coordinated by CEC Members Barbara Revard and Nancy Falasco.

This list was then vetted by a number of folks outside the AZA world, including representatives from the formal education community (George Lucas Education Foundation, teachers), conservation NGOs (the National Park Foundation, World Wildlife Fund), and the environmental education community (Environmental Education and Training Partnership, Biodiversity Project, and the Sustainability Education Center). And then – thanks to the generosity of the Philadelphia Zoo – a group of AZA educators met to review this external feedback and develop a “trends tool” that we hoped would be useful to the AZA community.

This meeting resulted in a total of 16 trends that we felt are critical to conservation education within the AZA. Because a simple list of trends didn't seem terribly actionable, we also explored the implications of each trend to AZA institutions, and addressed potential strategies for addressing these implications. The resulting document has been shared with AZA members at the regional workshops this year, and will be ready for public viewing at the AZA Annual Conference in New Orleans, at which point it will also be placed in an electronic format on the AZA Resource Center.

The list of 16 trends is presented in the sidebar. Some of those key trends are:

**We are seeing an increased disconnect between people and nature.** Increased urbanization has led to fewer opportunities to interact with nature – particularly in younger years. And while there is less authentic interaction with the natural world, superficial exposure to representations of nature has increased (i.e., Discovery Channel). This means that many of our guests may be armed with a greater breadth of animal information than previous generations; however, their depth of knowledge may be less. This trend also suggests that a “nature” niche may be available for urban institutions; AZA institutions are perfectly positioned to provide authentic experiences with wildlife albeit in an urban setting.

**The public's concern for animal welfare is increasing, as is a general concern regarding institutional accountability.** Amongst the general public, we are seeing an increasing focus on ensuring that animals are provided with appropriate care. This also coincides with an increased focus in our society on institutional accountability.

Through the National Awareness Campaign, our goal is to ensure that the general public knows that

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## DRAFT CONSERVATION EDUCATION TRENDS

### Audience Focused Education

**Trend I** • Educators will continue to lack resources to provide quality science and environmental education.

**Trend II** • Schools are redefining themselves in many areas: changes in the definition of the “classroom,” length of time spent in a classroom, budgets, the use of technology, teaching methods, and learning standards are all challenging the traditional image of education. These changes will impact the interaction between AZA Zoos and Aquariums and schools.

**Trend III** • Middle school and high school students become disengaged from science education, animals and social organizations in general.

**Trend IV** • There continues to be a growing awareness of the importance of education during the early formative years from parents and government, although there continues to be a related lack of funding.

**Trend V** • Students have more out-of-school, unsupervised time to fill.

**Trend VI** • There is a growing diversity in the American population that is not reflected in our visiting audience or workforce.

**Trend VII** • People are seeking both entertaining and meaningful experiences.

### Public Attitudes and Knowledge

**Trend VIII** • Fundamentalist belief systems are emerging that challenge the impact of our conservation messages (e.g., creationism, animal rights groups).

**Trend IX** • The public's concern for animal welfare is increasing.

**Trend X** • With the increase in urbanization and technology, people are increasingly separated from authentic experiences with the natural world while exposure to superficial representations of nature has increased.

**Trend XI** • There is an increasing focus on accountability amongst the media, funders and the general public (i.e. fiscal responsibility, evaluation of impact).

### The Profession

**Trend XII** • Perceptions are changing positively regarding the role and value of conservation educators and departments in AZA institutions.

**Trend XIII** • Many organizations are creating messages to influence the public perception of environmental education.

### Administration and Business

**Trend XIV** • As resource limitations persist, there is an increased demand to look at creative, non-traditional approaches to labor and staffing.

**Trend XV** • There is a growing expectation by the general public that conservation institutions have green practices.

**Trend XVI** • Partnerships will play an increasing role in Zoo and Aquarium education.

AZA members are trusted experts on animal care, wildlife conservation, and public education about wildlife issues.

This suggests that the public may ask about animal care, as well as be motivated to learn more about it – such as through “behind the scenes” sorts of experiences. This also suggests that the public may be more concerned about animal shows, or about animal enrichment. Incorporating clear animal care messages into our demonstrations and shows is therefore critical. This also suggests that we will see increased focus on whether or not we are “walking the talk” from the perspective of environmental practices.

**Beliefs are increasingly emerging that challenge the missions of AZA institutions (e.g., animal rights groups; creationism).** We are all

receiving increased attention from groups that challenge our mission. These groups primarily include animal rights organizations, but also other groups such as creationists who challenge our teaching of evolution. The media, and thus the general public, are picking up on these messages. This suggests that we need both to develop clear messages and to provide training on these sensitive subjects to our interpretive staff and volunteers.

**There is growing diversity in the American population; this diversity is not necessarily reflected in our visiting audience or our work force.** As the demographics in our audiences shift, we must find ways to attract and engage these audiences. The implication is two-fold. First, we must better understand how to market our programs to these audiences, but perhaps most importantly, we must understand the needs of these new audiences and modify the experience to accommodate these audiences’ needs. Similarly, just as we need to address our visiting audience, we must also address that the fact that, for most of us, our work force currently is not reflective of these changing demographics.

**We are seeing increased competition for leisure time/dollars, at the same time as people are seeking both entertaining and meaningful experiences.** This competition for leisure time suggests that AZA zoos and aquariums must remember their role as fun, safe places for families. However, while people are seeking pure entertainment, there is also a trend of people seeking meaning in their lives. This suggests that AZA institutions are perfectly positioned both to recognize our role as entertainment facilities, while also touting the “meaningfulness” of our mission.

To ensure that we remain innovative—in fact, to ensure that we can keep up at all—we feel that it is critical to periodically examine external factors. We have committed to reviewing this list, and doing

an additional “external scan” at least every three years. The CEC will also continually examine the method in which are providing this information, and ensure that it is meeting the needs of the AZA community.

Our goal, overall, is to inspire our visitors to conserve wildlife and wild places. Only through a better understanding of our visitors, and the external forces affecting all of us, can we be successful.

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