

Close encounters - creating experiences for conservation

Simon Duffy

Animal Presentation and Visitor Education Precinct Manager
Taronga Conservation Society Australia, PO Box 20, Mosman, NSW 2088 Australia

Email: sduffy@zoo.nsw.gov.au

ABSTRACT

One of the major challenges facing zoos in the 21st Century is the balance between maximising the impact of our conservation message and the responsibilities to the animal collection. According to recent research, experiential exhibits and close encounters with animals, with an emphasis on conservation action, are the most effective ways to influence visitor's conservation behaviours (AZA, 2006). Zoos can provide memorable and motivating animal encounters. However, Government legislation, strategies, procedures and policies must be followed to ensure that zoos are meeting the health and welfare needs of the animals. This paper outlines the initiatives that the Taronga Conservation Society Australia has taken to find the balance.

Key words: Zoo, close animal encounters, conservation related attitudes, values and behaviours, conservation action, key message.

Introduction

Historically, only select zoo employees experienced animals up close as part of their animal husbandry duties. As a zoo employee, my most inspiring animal experiences have all been in situations where I have been behind the scenes, able to interact with the animals up close. My experiences have included swimming with the seals, feeding an elephant, coming eye to eye with a giraffe, walking a dingo, going behind the scenes with the tiger and lion, lying in the grass with the echidna and nursing a wombat joey. Most zoo employees would say it is these kinds of experiences that motivate them to work with animals and inspire them to make a contribution to conservation.

Traditionally, these most personal animal experiences have not been accessible to the general public. However, zoos are in a significant period of change. While providing improved and immersive animal viewing they are also offering visitors close encounters with zoo animals.

This paper will detail the philosophy behind close animal encounters, the legislative responsibilities and the goals that zoos are aiming to achieve through offering unique encounters with wildlife. It will also cover the strategies that zoos need to implement to ensure they meet their responsibilities towards the animals that are part of these programs.

How close is too close for human and wildlife interaction?

Does the goal of offering close animal encounters come at a cost? And is that cost the health and welfare of the animals?



Figure 1. Giraffe Feed at Taronga Zoo. Photo: G Ramage

If you were to ask most zoos today 'how close is too close for animal encounters?' the answer would be that it can never be close enough. I believe most zoos would say they are about 'connecting' people with wildlife and that an effective way of achieving this is through a close animal encounter.

One of the most recent and relevant research initiatives detailing the shift in what zoos offer is the Multi Institutional Research Project (MIRP) launched by the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) in 2002. The aim of the research was to measure zoos impacts and effectiveness in increasing conservation-related knowledge, attitudes, affect and behaviour (AZA, 2006). The AZA research identifies experiential exhibits and close contact with live animals as having a great deal of influence on zoo visitors (AZA, 2006). The research also indicates that the visitors' knowledge, motivation and interest in supporting conservation is enhanced when



Figure 2. A Seal close animal encounter at Taronga Zoo

they can connect to animals on a more active, personal and emotional level.

However, with over 14.5 million visitors per year to Australian and New Zealand zoos alone, the goal of getting visitors close to wildlife comes with the obligation of meeting the ethical, welfare and custodial responsibilities for the animals in zoo collections.

Zoos are obliged to ensure that the close animal encounters they offer are significant, well planned and researched and that procedures are in place to ensure the welfare of the animals involved.



Figure 3. Children participating in an echidna encounter at Taronga Zoo. Photo, R. Cheal.

What are zoos aiming to achieve?

The goal of the Taronga Conservation Society Australia (TCSA) is to influence visitors' conservation attitudes, values and behaviours and this goal is reflected in zoos worldwide. To achieve this goal, TCSA asked the following questions:

- “What inspires people to take an active role in helping the environment?”; and
- “What can we do to make the most impact?”

Research into this area has shown that experiences have impact and are inspirational (Pine & Gilmore 1999). Not a sign, not a two-dimensional display, but an interaction with an inspirational person or an experience with an animal (Pine & Gilmore 1999). Zoos are in the unique position of being able to provide both. Zoos aim to move beyond being just another option for a family day out (Naked 2005) to institutions that deliver exceptional *experiences* which leave visitors equipped with skills and motivation to become environmental stewards.

In his paper *Top Twelve Reasons Experience Beat Exhibits*, given at the 2005 American Association of Zoos and Aquariums Annual Conference, Tom Owen presented a strong case for zoos to offer close visitor/animal experiences.

- Exhibits are passive, experiences compel visitors to participate
- Exhibits are intellectual, while experiences leverage the power of emotions
- Exhibits are places where animals hide or sleep. Experiences can be managed around animal behaviour to engage visitors
- Exhibits are visual. Experiences consciously involve all the senses
- Exhibits are backdrops for animals. Experiences put the guest in the dramatic environment with the animal
- Exhibits present facts. Experiences immerse guests in a story
- Exhibits are static, but experiences can change constantly because the involvement can vary with each visit
- Guests walk past an exhibit, while experiences encourage exploration
- Exhibits have floor drains that don't work. Experiences don't
- Exhibits keep animals and people apart. Experiences create connections
- Exhibits educate. Experiences transform visitors
- Exhibits are about animals. Experiences focus on visitors because that is who we want to change

As zoos develop close animal encounters, it is imperative that animal welfare is never compromised. There must be a balance between the zoo's visitor learning goals and the responsibility for animal welfare.



Figure 4. 'Roar & Snore' guests participating in a phasmid close encounter at Taronga zoo. Photo: J Alcock

The legislative Acts and the Taronga Conservation Society Australia's (TCSA) policies, structures and procedures are aimed at ensuring that the responsibilities for the care and welfare of the animal collection are met whilst providing visitors with opportunities for close encounters with wildlife.

Government Legislation

Most Australian State and Territory Governments provide legislation that regulates animal exhibitions, including permanent displays such as zoos, as well as temporary exhibitions such as zoomobiles and travelling animal farms.

In New South Wales, the display of animals is regulated by the NSW Department of Primary Industries through the *Exhibited Animals Protection Act* (EAPA). The Act was established in 1986 due to pressure from the community concerned about the poor conditions provided for animals exhibited in some circuses and fauna parks. The Act pertains to the exhibition of all native, exotic and domestic vertebrate animals. The Act requires the exhibitor of animals to hold an authority issued by the Director-General of NSW Department of Primary Industries. The quality of the animal exhibits and the facilities provided by the exhibitors are required to meet a high standard of husbandry and presentation.



Figure 5. A keeper offering a close animal encounter with crocodile coupled with education message. Photo: R Cheal

All projects involving animal interactions or encounters also need to be conducted in accordance with the *NSW Animal Research Act 1985*, *Animal Research Regulation 2005* and the *Australian Code of Practice for the Care and Use of Animals for Scientific Purposes* as the specific handling of an animal for educational purposes is also covered by that legislation.

The TCSA operates with an Animal Ethics Committee (AEC), a statutory committee to oversee the conduct of research and teaching using animals under the *NSW Animal Research Act 1985*. It is the responsibility of the AEC to assist in the protection of the welfare of the animals by ensuring that their use in encounters is always humane, respectful, considerate, responsible and justified. The committee requires details of the length of time that an animal will interact with the public, the species of animals that can be used, the training requirements for staff and volunteers to present animals and the requirement for educational messages when presenting animals.

These Acts provide enforceable legislation governing visitor-animal close encounters but they alone may not be enough to ensure the health and welfare of the animals in zoo collections. Therefore many zoos have created policies, structures and procedures which go beyond their legal requirements to further ensure they are meeting their responsibilities and obligations to the animals in their collections. The policies and procedures developed and implemented by the TCSA in recent years provide specific examples below.

TCSA Policy Development

In addition to the regulations set out in the aforementioned Acts, TCSA has prepared animal welfare policies to detail practices and procedures to bring about improvement in the health and welfare of the animal collection. The TCSA promotes an animal welfare ethos and a strong commitment to maintaining the highest possible care of the animal collection.

The TCSA developed an Animal Welfare Policy with reference to the the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) Code of Animal Welfare, 2002. The WAZA Code was modified to relate to the operations and goals of the TCSA. The policy will be reviewed regularly to reflect changes in legislation and to address community attitudes and topical issues.

Subsequent to the Animal Welfare Policy the TCSA developed an Animal Encounter Policy to inform and promote best practice in regards to providing animal experiences. The detailed Government Acts and animal welfare policies outlined above were used to inform this policy. The Animal Encounter Policy details the competency based training required for all staff and volunteers handling and presenting animals to visitors, the length of an animal encounter, recording procedures and health/hygiene considerations for staff, visitors and the animals. All employees and volunteers involved with encounters are expected to understand and adhere to the policy.

Structures

Zoo veterinarians are specialists in their field and they are an essential component in the protection of the welfare of zoo animals. They are trained and experienced in the care and welfare of native and exotic species. Zoo animal care, medicine and husbandry are now on a level comparable to that provided to pets and other domestic animals (BANR, 2004). This specialist care is a result of many years of research and specialist training of zoo veterinarians as well as an increased awareness of the physical and physiological needs of animals in zoos.

Although variation exists within the animal display industry, most significant zoos now provide an adequate number of qualified veterinarians and veterinary nurses, with well equipped and designed veterinary hospitals and retrievable medical record systems. Organisational structures and procedures are also in place in large zoos to ensure that medical and welfare decisions are the responsibility of the veterinarians who may consult with other specialists such as keepers and curators.

Significant Goals

While experiences such as close animal encounters are provided in zoos with the goal of influencing visitors' long-term attitudes, values and behaviours, short-term changes in these domains are undoubtedly easier. An example of a short-term behaviour is when a visitor places money in a donation box at the zoo for conservation projects.

However, to influence visitor behaviours long-term, it is believed that experiences must be coupled with relevant and thought provoking messages and opportunities to take action (Smith 2006). A relevant zoo example can be illustrated by the experience of painting with an Orang-utan. Would visitors link this experience with the impact of buying teak furniture or products that include palm oil on wild Orang-utans? The experience might be enough to influence the visitor's short-term attitude to make a donation to help conserve Orang-utans, but in order to motivate the visitor to make significant behavioural changes, the experience needs to incorporate relevant information on conservation. This should include supporting behaviours and actions that the visitor can take as well as opportunities to elaborate on this information.



Figure 6. A visitor learning how to build a possum box. Photo, G. Ramage

Strategy

Many zoos have implemented strategies to ensure the effectiveness of learning and the potential to influence visitors during close animal encounters. They detail goals, conservation messages and skills to be given during close encounters. Below are the actions taken by the TCSA to assist in the effectiveness of close animal encounters in influencing visitor's conservation attitudes, skills and behaviours.

The World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) recommends that all zoos develop an Education Strategy in an effort to improve the learning experiences within zoos. Education strategies provide a co-ordinated approach to visitor learning and maximise the educational potential of all zoo experiences including close animal encounters.

The TCSA developed an Education Strategy in 2005. It outlines the principles which underpin all TCSA education programs. These are:

- Fun, relevant and engaging
- Animal focused
- Accessible to all staff and public
- Educationally valid
- Ethical
- Scientifically accurate

The TCSA Education Strategy defines the key educational outcomes to be achieved via the many programs and experiences that are delivered by the TCSA. The TCSA education outcomes are:

- Knowledge of living things and their environment
- Appreciation of the role of zoos in conservation
- Awareness of human impacts on animals and their environments
- Empathy with animals and a feeling of awe and appreciation
- Knowledge and commitment to contribute to conservation (TCSA 2005).

The AZA MIRP recommends that the most important thing zoos can do to positively influence visitors conservation behaviours is to be clear about the message. They need to be communicate it directly, simply and succinctly, use staff and volunteers to reinforce it personally and build long-term visitor relationships (AZA 2006).

Many zoos, including TCSA, are researching and developing relevant messages to promote long term conservation action. These are to be communicated at all appropriate opportunities, including during close animal encounters, in an effort to pass on the impetus for conservation to the broader community. The TCSA is currently developing consistent key messages. They are:



Figure 7. Close animal encounter with tortoise. Photo: G Ramage

Save and create animal habitats

- Choose sustainable timber for building and furniture needs
- Plant local native plants to create a wildlife refuge in your backyard, balcony and courtyard
- Add a frog pond, bird bath, possum box or a lizard lounge to your backyard

Be a responsible pet owner

- Even your pet can harm wildlife – keep your pet inside at night and on a leash where there is wildlife

‘Do the right thing’ with waste

- Put your rubbish and cigarette butts in the bin
- Avoid waste production by reusing or recycling your waste
- Buy a worm farm or compost for your food scraps and organic waste
- Say no to plastic bags

Think, then ask before you buy – ‘Will what I’m buying affect wildlife?’

- Look for and purchase products that are friendly to the environment.
- Use sustainable energy, it is good for the earth and good for animal habitat

Speak out, get involved and take action for wildlife

- Tell local, state and federal ministers that you care, want support and action taken to help protect animals and their habitats. For example Zoos and aquariums across Australasia have joined together to enlist one million supporters to encourage the Government of China to phase out the ‘farming’ of bears used to extract their bile to be used in traditional medicine
- Donate to conservation organisations such as the Taronga Foundation or the Australasian Regional Association of Zoological Parks and Aquaria’s Wildlife Conservation Fund
- Join wildlife and conservation groups
- Contact local conservation groups to find out what they are doing and get involved. For example, join Taronga’s bush care group

Conclusion

This paper describes the Acts, policies and structures that provide the framework within which the TCSA provides close animal encounters and which aim to motivate and show visitors how they can take action and implement sustainable practices within their daily lives. This illustrates how zoos can achieve a balance between changing visitor attitudes, values and behaviours and the health and welfare of the animals in zoo collections.

Zoos don’t claim to have all the answers. However, with further research, more effective partnerships and a greater effort to create motivating and influencing experiences, zoos can have a positive impact on people’s behaviour creating a broad and motivated community of environmental stewards while always ensuring that in providing these experiences animal welfare remains the highest priority.

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