

Safari Adventure: Designing & Evaluating for Better Connections to Nature

Exhibition and Graphic Arts Department Wildlife Conservation Society/Bronx Zoo

How can zoo exhibits better connect people to nature?

By what methods can we explore such themes to best suit our visitors?

In 2011, the Institute of Museum and Library Services awarded WCS a grant to explore the development of a new family exhibit at the Bronx Zoo—*Safari Adventure*—to be organized along the themes of child nature play, intergenerational learning, and community engagement.

This project marks the first time we have undergone a multi-faceted approach of exploratory tactics to inform our current thoughts about useful nature exhibit practices. A unique step for our institution, this speaks to an effort of capacity building and establishes a baseline of investigative practices we can draw from for future projects.

Visitor Evaluation

FRONT-END STUDY

In-depth interviews with adults and children explored strategies and aspects of our proposed exhibit that most promote nature connection and family group experiences.

RESULTS

- Visitors favored immersive, interactive experiences with animals
- Interviewees approved of activities that re-imagined staple concepts (e.g., proposed rhino-feeding)
- No one-size-fits-all solution when creating family-oriented activities; hands-on, yes, but also engaging, sedentary activities like monorail rides support family interests
- Visitors view their interactions at the Zoo as their primary nature experience, so WCS's role is crucial in creating first connections

CONGO: 15 YEARS LATER

We revisited one of our most highly regarded and award-winning exhibits to evaluate what kind of nature connections people make today.

RESULTS

- No significant change in proportion who identify as "active" supporters of environmental issues
- New issues in the media such as climate change and fracking have replaced rain forest decline as a top environmental issue. Fewer people report themselves as very knowledgeable about rain forests
- Fewer visitors use the media components of the exhibit (i.e. video and voting for conservation support)
- Visitors are interested in potential new interactive components, but they don't have to be high-tech

Prototype Evaluation

We evaluated several proposed *Safari Adventure* interactives to identify what made the strongest connections to nature and family learning.

TAKEAWAYS

- Hands-on interactive elements enhanced visitor satisfaction with their overall experience and allowed for greater learning
- Play involving perspective-taking increased appreciation for and knowledge about animals
- Direct animal experiences and role-play resulted in stronger connections to nature



Prototyping Area



Animal Masks Interactive

Benchmarking Trips

We traveled to California and the Midwest to investigate well-regarded exhibits that promote nature play and serve kids, families, and communities.

TAKEAWAYS

- Noted learning playspaces with activities designed at kids' scale
- Observed role-playing activities
- Encountered authentic, exploratory spaces
- Observed spaces arranged for families to discover together



Bay Area Discovery Museum



Science Museum of Minnesota

Expert Workshops

Scholars and community professionals provided significant input into our exhibit's nature education and family learning themes.

TAKEAWAYS

- Prioritize exploration versus instruction
- Identified design elements for kids' play and family learning: designing at kids' scale, experiences promoting "joint attention," need for shade and comfort zones
- Learn how other local cultural institutions handle challenges of nature access, nature interaction, caretaker involvement, and set the stage for potential future collaboration



Local Cultural Institutions Workshop

Community Focus Groups

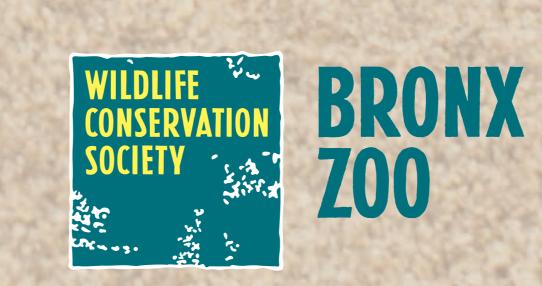
Interviews with parents in our community identified reasons they do not visit the Bronx Zoo with their families.

RESULTS

- All the participants were adamant that the reason they do not visit the Zoo is the high price of admission
- Despite awareness of the Zoo's pay-what-you-wish Wednesdays, participants' work/school schedules do not allow them to take advantage of it
- ◆ Participants would be more likely to visit the Zoo with a large group of extended family and friends, but gathering such a group on a "free" Wednesday is unrealistic



Interviews with non-visitors in our community





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