



# 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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