

Poets House
Language of Conservation: National Replication



Process Evaluation Summative Report

December 2010

(Revised: November 2011)

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Introduction

Language of Conservation is a collaborative project between libraries, zoos, and poets nationwide to replicate a project done at the Central Park Zoo, in which careful curation, design, and installation of poetry throughout the zoo enhanced visitor thinking about wildlife conservation. The project team sought to replicate this experiment on a national scale, creating a set of models and tools for developing partnerships and crafting essential curatorial vision for this kind of success. The project was designed to replicate the model in five unique cities in order to demonstrate the far-reaching potential of poetry in museums for creating shared language with visitors to explore new ways of thinking about conservation and poetry. Funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and led by Poets House in New York City, the project supported zoo-library partnerships in five host cities: Brookfield, Illinois; Jacksonville, Florida; Little Rock, Arkansas; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; and New Orleans, Louisiana. The three-year project focused on the building of collaborative teams between zoo staff, library staff, and poets-in-residence, exhibit installations, library program execution, and evaluation of results.

One aspect of the evaluation within the *Language of Conservation* project was to evaluate the collaborative process that took place within each of the five partner sites, across the project as a whole, and with project leadership. The purpose of this evaluation was to determine the strengths and challenges of each collaboration individually and to make recommendations for strategies and important qualities for future sites seeking to replicate the *Language of Conservation* model of collaboration between zoos, libraries, and poets.

Early in the project, evaluators asked project partners to respond to periodic journal-entry prompts, asking them to reflect on the collaborative process at that point. This was used over several months early in the project, but was generating a low response rate overall. In response to this limitation of the method, the evaluation approach was modified to focus on individual telephone interviews with key personnel from all partners and collaborators. The interviews were conducted near the conclusion of the project, after all poetry exhibits had been installed and opened in zoos and library programs were planned and scheduled, during the Fall of 2010. In total 31 interviews were conducted with project partners and leadership teams. Interview notes were analyzed for key themes, trends, and patterns across individuals within each site (for data about the city's collaborative process) and across sites (for data about whole-project elements and initiatives). This memo report summarizes the key themes that emerged from these interviews regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations for collaborative process in the *Language of Conservation* project.

Project Kick-off: Symposium

One of the first steps in the collaborative efforts on this project was the convening of a Symposium by project leadership in May 2009. This symposium was intended to be a kick-off meeting for the project and the partnerships, at which representatives from each city's zoo and library met (some for the first time), poets-in-residence were introduced and paired with their cities, and all partners were introduced to the vision of the project, examples from the Central Park Zoo project, and had the opportunity to begin to develop a shared vision within their city's partners about the goals and expectations within their city. Below we report partner reflections on this process at the end of the poetry installation, related to the key functions of this meeting and its strengths and weaknesses in terms of supporting their future work.



Management: Establishing Expectations and Guidelines

Strengths

- ***Shared Vision of the Language of Conservation***

Of those who attended the Symposium, nearly all expressed that the goals and expectations of the project were clearly communicated by the leadership team. Several people mentioned that the presentations by the poets-in-residence as well as by John Fraser were particularly helpful in communicating the project goals. Partners expressed that they left the Symposium with a strong feeling of community and commitment.

“[The research] became part of the consciousness, or sub-consciousness of people. [That presentation] made it matter, that this would do some good, not just promoting poetry. I came in thinking that it would promote the library, but it was more about conservation, and the symposium hammered that.” [library staff]

- ***Guidelines and Background Material***

Partners from all cities mentioned that the guidelines and background materials provided during and after the Symposium (including articles, essays, and Tip Sheets) were incredibly useful. Zoo partners emphasized this more than library partners. This seemed to be related to the fact that partner libraries had previous experience collaborating with Poets House from a previous project, *Poetry in the Branches*, and therefore felt more familiar with both the leadership team and the structure of their role in the project.

- ***Roles and Responsibilities***

Several participants expressed that one of the “eye-openers” of the Symposium was learning about the great differences in each institution’s structure and organization. This included realizing differences between libraries and zoos in general, but was even more about discovering differences between institutions of the same type. This led to the recognition that these vastly different structures do not allow for a “collaboration recipe,” but needed to be adaptable to each organization that undertook the project. Although several participants mentioned that they would have liked more structure and guidelines about roles and responsibilities (described later in this report), most expressed a realization that this kind of flexibility was essential.

“I think it’s nice to not be too prescriptive, you don’t want to squelch creativity of professionals that you’re giving these funds.” [library staff]

“The strength was in the flexibility of the grant. We gave them a lot of latitude to interpret it for themselves. They could interpret the rules in their own way. We didn’t tell them what to do but gave them principles that they could use in their own terms. When you look at the different interpretations of Little Rock, Milwaukee, and Brookfield, those are the ones that I know the best, they have pushed in interesting ways.” [leadership member]

- ***Opportunity to Bond with City Team Members***

Many participants mentioned that one of the most valuable aspects of the Symposium were the activities geared toward city team-building. This opportunity allowed city teams to gain a better understanding of one another’s goals, working style, and approach to problem solving. Many people mentioned that their time together in New Orleans created a strong bond between members and a sense of camaraderie. One participant mentioned that hearing the poets read a



selection of conservation poetry as well as their own poems, played a large role in helping them understand their poet's background and philosophical view-point.

- ***Opportunity to Bond with Leadership***

A few participants also mentioned that the Symposium created an opportunity to develop relationships with members of the leadership, which supported and facilitated later work of the project and trust in working with Poets House staff.

"If we had not had a personal relationship with them, we would not have been able to be so open with them. It was important to meet them and understand what their role was at Poets House as the administrator." [zoo staff]

Challenges

- ***Too Little Interaction across City Teams***

Several people expressed regret that there wasn't more time to interact with partners from other cities. They felt that this opportunity would have increased the likelihood of cross-site communication. One library participant, for instance, noted that this was one of the strengths of the *Poetry in the Branches* training offered by Poets House for libraries, and that they would have liked to feel more connected to the broader group.

"I think that seeing what others were doing and having follow-up discussions would be helpful. As much as we enjoyed meeting everyone [at the symposium], we didn't spend any focused time with others. The strength was building our team, but the broader group was less connected... Compared to the *Branching Out* training, we definitely got to know others from other cities better, but this was a different kind of project." [library staff]

- ***Lack of a Formally Articulated Role for Libraries***

While only a few city team members mentioned this directly, all members of the leadership team expressed a feeling that the role of the libraries was not as well articulated as those of the zoos and poets. For the leadership team, these reflections suggested that the partnerships may have done well to have the library's role more clearly articulated from the start to address the imbalance. Among both the leadership and library partners (who were just beginning their final year of programming), their reflection on this imbalance related to whether or not the zoos would reciprocate the support shown by the library in the earlier phases of the project.

"I think perhaps a clearer role for libraries, not that having the programs isn't a wonderful thing and getting the books, but I do think that the zoos seemed to be the center of attention... It's a slightly odd partnership, not in the sense that it was unsuccessful, maybe by June when they have had more programs, more investment in them and what they do, maybe that feeling will change. Maybe it will always be awkward." [leadership member]

"I think we are looking now to see how can we create reciprocal support, how can we get the zoos, to reciprocate and to really create a pathway back to the libraries?" [leadership member]

- ***Confusion about Deadlines and Administrative Process***

One librarian expressed that it would have been useful to spend some time at the Symposium talking more about logistics regarding progress reports and other administrative grant requirements. While the Symposium was strong at building community and shared vision, it had less of an emphasis on the administrative process, needs, and requirements of involvement. While



these topics were covered, less time was devoted to them than other topics and themes. Consequently, many partners reported that some of these aspects or tasks came as a surprise in the midst of implementation for partners. It was suggested by some partners that a timeline or other type of “checklist,” which could have been reviewed at the Symposium, would have been useful. It is worth noting that a timeline was provided and discussed by Poets House at the Symposium; this timeline outlined milestones of the project, which included deadlines for progress reports, permissions process, fabrication, etc. It was striking that no partners referred to this document specifically, and some seemed to have forgotten about it entirely. This suggests that perhaps more time could have been spent on this topic within the Symposium, with ongoing follow-up throughout project management, to extend the impact of this infrastructure created by Poets House.

Implementation Process within Each City

Brookfield

Lead by Dan Wharton and Sandra Alcosser, veterans who had established the Central Park Zoo model project, Brookfield was a unique collaboration in a number of ways. For one, it did not include a library partner at the beginning of the grant, although library partners emerged organically as the project grew. In terms of management, Wharton, a Vice President, gave the responsibility of managing this project to his exhibition and design staff. Although he maintained a role in poetry selection, he otherwise stepped back into an advisor role.

At Brookfield, the poetry selection process was conducted by the *Language of Conservation* team (including Wharton, Alcosser, and exhibition and design staff); staff members from other departments in the zoo were not included. Alcosser researched and selected 500 poems based on her site visit to Brookfield and interviews she conducted with key individuals. The team reported that it was challenging narrowing down the selection of poems from this large batch, but was overall a very positive experience and all partners agreed that this opportunity brought their team closer together. Another unique feature of Brookfield’s project was that they chose to install poetry in just one exhibit of the very large zoo, rather than across the entire park. Additionally, the poetry would be part of a brand-new exhibit, with poetry selection incorporated within the larger exhibit design process (rather than an after-the-fact installation).

As an enthusiastic group with a particular passion for poetry, the team from Brookfield Zoo went above and beyond the requirements of the grant by approaching two local libraries, Riverside Library and Brookfield Public Library, to participate as partner libraries partway through the project. The libraries became involved in ways similar to libraries in other cities, creating programs related to project themes and even received some financial support from Poets House, but to a lesser extent overall. Ultimately the zoo provided the libraries with exhibit installations of poetry (much like those that were installed at the zoo, including a fiberglass animal), an activity not seen between other zoo-library partnerships.

Collaboration: Zoo and Library

Strengths

- **Zoo: Strong Leadership**

All partners agreed that the partnerships between the zoo and the Riverside Library and Brookfield Public Library were an outstanding success. Much of this success was attributed to the zoo’s



commitment and leadership, which led to a successful working partnership that they believe will continue outside the life of the grant. Library staff indicated that the individuals they worked with at Brookfield Zoo showed commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, and accessibility, which made the partnership work well. As the libraries were not involved in the initiation of the grant, the leadership from the zoo was necessary to bring the libraries into the programming. On the libraries' side, they placed trust in the zoo team and showed an openness to becoming part of the established vision of this project.

- ***Zoo: Buy-in from Staff***

Despite the fact that other departments were not involved directly in the project or poetry selection, the zoo discovered that they achieved substantial institutional buy-in to the project. The zoo team felt that their own personal interest and belief in the value of this project seemed to be contagious across the staff. This was perhaps influenced by the strong commitment and experience from Wharton, who was in a leadership position within the zoo. They expressed that they felt connected to and supported by one another across various departments including leadership, exhibition and design team, curators, and animal keepers.

“Once we had people engaged, it really had a lot of adrenaline in it which I find interesting... once people understand what it can do, it takes on a life of its own. I think that is what makes it successful.” [leadership member]

- ***Enthusiasm and Passion for Poetry***

Part of this city's success seemed to be related to the team members' personal interest and passion for poetry, which spurred them onto taking the project in directions beyond the original scope. For example, it was the enthusiasm of zoo staff for the project that led them to reach out to partner with local libraries. At the libraries, tapping into the enthusiasm of staff for this type of program proved a successful strategy for program creation.

“It's great to have the thing that I love [poetry] validated on scientific conservation level. I hope that we can continue to branch out. I would love to do more poetry and work on a more artistic level.” [zoo staff]

“Our Youth Services librarian is a closet poetry fan, so she took this and ran with it. She was so excited.” [library staff]

- ***Support from Zoo and Poets House for New Library Partners***

When the new library partners were added in Brookfield, it brought unanticipated dimensions to the project that were addressed very well and very supportively by Brookfield Zoo and Poets House leadership. From the libraries' perspectives, they saw the opportunity for collaboration as a very pleasant surprise and felt honored to be a part of it. This strong feeling came in large part because the Zoo and Poets House provided them with support, resources, and ways to benefit the library for participation, despite not being written into the grant. This included the zoo's commitment and delivery of poetry exhibits, and the \$500 stipend given by Poets House to support their work. This support proved essential to creating a reciprocal partnership. Regarding the installation by the zoo, one librarian indicated:

“What they gave us is going to last such a long time. We won't take it down until it falls down. It's so beautiful.” [library staff]



Challenges

- **Libraries: Competition Between Branches**

A unique challenge in the suburban community of Brookfield was the fact that the community does not have one central library system (as is the case in most large, urban communities), but has a number of small, community-based libraries that are independently run. One of the library partners in Brookfield indicated that this can create a culture of competition in a community, as multiple small, independent libraries are seeking resources. Consequently, when the zoo chooses to partner with one or two libraries, there may be other libraries in close proximity that feel left out. Brookfield addressed this challenge very well by selecting both of these nearby libraries and striving to give them equal support and resources (i.e., poetry installations), but the challenge that can be presented by this fact should be considered for other zoos located in small communities.

- **Communication and Deadlines**

Library staff felt that there was a lack of communication with the zoo during certain points of the collaboration, and overall indicated that somewhat more frequent communication about status updates would have been helpful. Although the majority of partnership experiences were positive, those instances where the library felt they were waiting on information from the zoo in order to move forward on programming ideas were challenging. It can create a sense of “feeling forgotten” (library staff). Similarly, some tension was created around the timelines, which were driven by the needs of creating the zoo exhibits. This balancing of two institutions’ timelines and partners’ workloads was difficult at times.

Collaboration: Poet-in-Residence with Zoo and Library

Strengths

- **Mutual Appreciation and Respect**

A strength in Brookfield was that the project team between the zoo and the poet-in-residence began with an established relationship between Wharton and Alcosser, which had already created a tone of mutual appreciation and respect, which permeated the rest of the project team. As new individuals became involved in the project, including zoo administration and exhibits staff, the enthusiasm and working relationship they demonstrated allowed for a flourishing of ideas and ready implementation of the project. Regarding an administration official at the zoo, the poet indicated:

“...he understands this. He is also ambitious, and I find him a joy to work with. You throw out an idea and watch it grow. Takes a good idea and wants to support it.” [leadership member]

- **Lessons and Experience from Central Park Zoo**

Another unique strength for Brookfield was that the zoo leader and poet-in-residence had the experience of having implemented this effort previously at the Central Park Zoo. Such experience was invaluable. These partners benefited from knowledge, experience, and past trial-and-error that can only come from having attempted such a project.

Challenges

- **Poetry within Design Process for a New Exhibit**

One challenge experienced was pursuing the poetry selection process within the context of a larger exhibit design effort. Whereas past experience and other zoo examples allowed the poet and zoo



team to work in a small group, planning additions to existing exhibits, this project required that poetry selection be incorporated to some degree into a larger exhibit planning process. This meant that there were many more staff involved in exhibit development work, and the poetry could seem, at times, like just another piece in the puzzle.

- ***Culture Shift from Central Park Zoo to Brookfield Zoo***

Although the past experience of the team was a great asset to the project, it also presented challenges. Specifically, some staff felt that the previous experience at another institution could lead to assumptions and contrasting opinions about the culture and visitorship of Brookfield Zoo. Because Wharton and Alcosser had this shared background and experience, it also created some instances of challenge where zoo staff felt they struggled to have their viewpoints heard regarding the unique attributes of culture of experiences and audiences at the Brookfield Zoo. For instance, staff had a sense that audience composition and expectations for zoo experiences may be different among Brookfield visitors than what may have been appropriate in the CPZ example, with Brookfield staff identifying interactivity and action as key to their audience, rather than quiet contemplation or reading.

- ***Communication***

A number of challenges experienced within the team related generally to issues with communication between the various partners. Some partners interviewed attributed this largely to the difficulties of a long-distance working relationship, relying on email and phone calls to communicate, which may have led to missed or unclear communications. In addition, both Wharton and Alcosser had responsibilities to the larger *Language of Conservation* effort, as part of its leadership team. This meant that their attention had to be focused on both efforts at the same time. One specific challenge faced by this team was some lack of clarity around process, timeline, and completion of the selection of final poems for use in exhibits. There were differences in expectations about the timeline of poetry selection, how long the poet would need, and how much time the exhibit schedule allowed. Similarly, there were instances where it was unclear to design staff as to when and what list of poems was finalized and by whom it had to be approved before use.

Jacksonville

The Jacksonville partnership was primarily led by the staff at the zoo and generally followed the established structure for the overall project, including the poet site visits, meetings, and selection of poetry. The circumstance that most substantially seemed to effect the Jacksonville partnership was the unforeseen turnover in staff among the library partner. This turnover of staff directly involved and experienced with the *Language of Conservation* project and past programming with Poets House, which created an extended period of transition and lack of continuity on the larger project team. Within this context, however, the team continued to move the project forward on their timeline.

Another notable attribute of the partnership and process in Jacksonville was the committee-based structure created by zoo staff to contribute to and guide the poetry selection in the zoo. The project's leader within the zoo, Kelliann Whitney, invited all zoo staff to participate on the poetry selection committee, and ultimately established a group of 10-12 staff, covering nearly all departments, to



participate in this process. Library staff were initially included within this committee and invited to participate in selection decisions, but the staff turnover ultimately minimized the role they played in this process. This committee reviewed the selections made by the poet-in-residence, gave feedback, and led to the final selections of 26 poems for installation at the zoo. While a smaller number of installed poems than was seen at some other partner zoos, this decision was made because of an institutional priority of maintaining extremely professional and high quality standards in terms of design and installation, the lack of in-house design or fabrication staff, and fitting within the budgetary capacity of the grant.

Collaboration: Zoo and Library

Strengths

- ***Developed Partnership with Each Other and Community***

The *Language of Conservation* project created opportunities for a partnership to build and strengthen between the zoo and library. One zoo staff member mentioned that although the zoo had a long history of collaboration with the library for school-related programs, this program offered a new opportunity to work staff from other departments in the library. In addition, the partners created an effort early on to build buy-in and interest in the project within the larger Jacksonville community. One major part of this was hosting a kick-off River Boat Cruise, to which community leaders and representatives from local cultural and environmental organizations were invited. The event included a reading by the poet-in-residence and speeches by leaders in the project.

“[We had a] wonderful community building event in the fall. Stakeholders in the community, that was terrific; a good press conference at the zoo. ... The river event was really smart, building constituency.” [poet-in-residence]

- ***Zoo: Strong Leadership and Sharing of Expertise***

In several ways, the zoo staff took the lead on promoting and advancing this project. For instance, the zoo led the publicity for the grand opening events, feeling that the final opening was very well promoted by their in-house marketing department. Coverage included media of TV, radio, and newspaper, including using existing relationships with the local TV station to have the poet-in-residence interviewed on air and zoo staff interviewed on the radio. Additionally, as the library experienced turnover in staff during the project, the zoo stepped in to provide support in getting new team members up to speed. One of the new librarians expressed that the key contact at the zoo played a huge role in helping her understand the project and get caught up, expressing gratitude about what she was able to learn from the zoo staff about creating strong community partnerships.

- ***Zoo: Generating Buy-in from Staff***

In addition to driving efforts to build community buy-in, zoo staff also made a concerted effort to generate buy-in from internal zoo staff connected to the project. For example, the zoo created a PowerPoint presentation to communicate the goals of *Language of Conservation* to the fabrication vendors and the Poetry Selection Committee, which was composed of many team members that were not at the Symposium. In addition, the project made an effort to involve staff members from across departments in the institution into the poetry selection process. This inclusive nature was a strength. The zoo felt that this was a very successful strategy, stating,

“They were awed. I made great strides in my credibility with them.” [zoo staff]



Challenges

- **Library: Change in Personnel, Loss of Continuity**

In the first year of the project, two members of the library team left the project, which created a loss of continuity and momentum on the library's side of the collaboration. This event caused some frustration and stress for both the poet and the zoo staff. In particular, original plans for programs and partnerships were lost in the transition between staff and the zoo had to start from scratch with new personnel. Due to these transitions, the momentum was frequently lost. Specifically, the library initially created a committee to work on the *Language of Conservation* project, but due to the change in personnel, the members of the committee varied from meeting to meeting, which created a loss of continuity that slowed down collaborative aspects of the project. In addition, as new staff coming in at the library, there were challenges with sense of ownership, direction, and buy-in to the project, which was particularly challenging for the zoo partners during the month before the opening, when things felt to be "up in the air."

Although the team, with the support of Poets House, worked to address these unexpected challenges and build relationships with new staff at the library, the timing and effort did present difficulties for Jacksonville partners.

"Where we had the one difficulty of complete change in staff. The previous staff was very active in including them in their plans, and then suddenly, they didn't have a partner there. That was challenging, but everyone dealt with that as gracefully as possible. In that particular city, it was suddenly a whole new set of relationships at the worst time in the life of the project. So once that happened, PH worked very closely with that new staff, but there was no advanced warning. In that city, something that started out really flourishing came to a halt and it was something that was unexpected and outside of anyone's control or knowledge. [leadership member]

- **Difference in Institutional Culture**

Some small points of institutional culture differences emerged, which were not major challenges but which required some consideration in communication between the partners. One example that was mentioned was that the staffs of the two institutions themselves represented different mindsets, with each not being a frequent user or visitor of the other. For instance, a zoo staff person noted the difference on perspective about holding events indoors vs. outdoors – very different perspectives for each institution.

"The other think I learned is that library people are not outdoor people. The thought of heat is foreign to them. That was always the big question, "will it be outdoors?" I discovered that it is a challenge." [zoo staff]

- **Unbalanced Effort in Promotion**

Impacted by the difficulties faced by library staff during periods of staff transition, the library had difficulties successfully promoting their public program in the fall. This led to a disappointing program turn-out, and as a result the zoo took on a greater share of marketing and promotional efforts for *Language of Conservation* programs and events going forward, even those organized by the library, since the zoo seemed to have greater strength in this area.



Collaboration: Poet-in-Residence with Zoo and Library

Strengths

- ***Strong Working Relationship***

The zoo and the poet-in-residence, Alison Hawthorne Deming, developed a very strong working relationship throughout the project, with the poet recognizing the strong leadership of the primary point-person at the zoo who maintained consistency in the project even during transitions of zoo leadership. This ranged from within project tasks to making a concerted effort to help the poet get a true understanding of the zoo, its culture, and the region of Jacksonville, FL. Further, the poet-in-residence made a concerted effort to understand the culture and perspectives of the local region, so that this could be incorporated into her work.

“[We] gave her the behind the scenes hook-up, got to meet the keepers, birds, mammals, behind the scenes with the elephant, got to talk to the keepers one-on-one, got to know who they are as people, learn the culture of the zoo. She really came away from that understanding the passion that these people have for their animals.” [zoo staff]

“I think it’s important, each zoo and community is different. It’s not just the location. The zoo professionals and the educators know where the sensitive points are. They are in the south and there are sensitivities that wouldn’t have been the same for New York. There are fundamentalist Christians who don’t want to think about evolution, so it’s important for someone to go in and find out what *are* the sensitivities. You want to challenge, but not offend the audience. <name> told me the things she had to care about. She was such a great partner and was so frank about what her challenges were.” [poet-in-residence]

- ***Collaborative Poetry Selection Process***

Another strength was the poetry selection process established by the zoo, which used a Poetry Selection Committee composed of both zoo and library staff, and included individuals from all different departments including Marketing, Food Services, Housekeeping, Finance, Education, and Animal Keepers. Through this process, committee members reviewed a sub-set of the poet’s selections, indicating preferences, commenting, and supporting the process of creating a list of useful final selections. Zoo staff even contributed ideas for poems and quotes they would like to add. The process was democratic and generated great buy-in, although was time intensive. It was primarily successful because of the strong, respectful relationship forged between the zoo and poet-in-residence, and the poet’s willingness to engage in this dialogue with the Committee. Discussions about preferences, directions, and the portfolio of poems to be used were frank and respectful in the face of disagreements, which led to productive outcomes. In the end, all were pleased with the final selections.

“...they had a collaborative process of their own [for selection], and they liked some, didn’t like others. But we had a back and forth conversation. [After the first draft from the zoo committee] I identified gaps, like not enough cultural diversity, and brought in things to rounds that out. Those kinds of diversity really matter and there was a lot of back and forth in that period. ...There were some things I said I thought were not appropriate, and either side felt comfortable voicing their opinions about that.” [poet-in-residence]



Challenges

- **Distance of Poet**

Both the zoo and the poet felt that the geographical distance between the poet's home base and the zoo created some challenges to the work. Although the project allowed for two site visits, partners felt that they would have benefited from an additional site visit between the selection of poetry and the opening. The poet would have like to be onsite for the final poetry revision.

- **Unbalanced Effort in Hosting Visits**

In general, the zoo took the lead in hosting the visits of the poet-in-residence and the evaluation team when they came to Jacksonville. Library partners had little participation in these visits, which created an unbalanced workload from the zoo's perspective.

- **Role of Poet in Poetry Selection**

Although their collaborative process for poetry selection worked very well overall, it was noted that there may have been some lack of clarity about the role of the poet as compared to the role of the zoo's committee in making final decisions about poetry selection. While the team was able to overcome this challenge and work very well together, there was a sense that if roles and responsibilities relative to final decisions were more clearly articulated in advance, such challenges might have been reduced.

"I think probably it's a good idea to have a little more definition of who the team will be, who is to make the decisions about the poetry? The zoo has its own internal process, they had a committee with their board, staff, educators. And then [there's] the poet. So some definition of who is the review committee for the zoo and what that relationship will be with the poet [is needed]." [poet-in-residence]

Little Rock

After the Symposium, the library and zoo held their first team meeting in Little Rock. Touring the zoo grounds, they determined that given the small size of the zoo, the poetry should be placed throughout rather than in one section. A schedule for monthly meetings was established. To prepare the poet for his first site visit, he was sent a map and detailed photos of the zoo. During the poet's first visit, he met with both zoo and library staff, was given a backstage tour of the zoo, and had the opportunity to meet other staff at the zoo, including the animal keepers.

The poet and zoo staff in Little Rock established a collaborative, inclusive model for selecting poetry. The poet researched a selection of poems (~100), which were narrowed down by the zoo management staff. Once this set of initial selections were made, they sought input from the animal keeper staff. During the last phase, poetry selections were given to the library staff for a final review and the opportunity to provide feedback. While they offered their assistance to the poet during his research and selection process, staff members of the library expressed that they felt their role was not to select the poetry, but rather to focus on the library programs. Therefore, they gave little to no feedback on the poems. Ultimately, both the library and the zoo were very pleased by and impressed with the selection.



Collaboration: Zoo and Library

Strengths

- ***Shared Vision and Deep Commitment***

Both the zoo and library staff expressed a deep commitment towards accomplishing the goals of the project. They were particularly excited about the possibility of transforming community perceptions of conservation issues. Their strong, collective belief in the potential of this project played a large role in their ability to overcoming some difficult challenges throughout the project.

- ***Zoo: Generating Buy-in from Staff***

Management staff at the zoo worked very hard to make this project relevant to staff in other departments at the zoo, which they felt was of great importance for the success of the project, given the size and nature of operations within the zoo. In fact, the project was reported to have changed the culture and spirit of the zoo in some ways. The great efforts and success was noted even by the library partners in Little Rock.

“[zoo management] worked with front line staff - keepers didn’t really see poetry applying to their lives, but they literally got them to read and help pick out. The buy-in that they got [was good]. I was in a meeting with the elephant keepers, <name> told me after, ‘these are not poetry people.’” [library staff]

“They [keepers] were extremely supportive and interested. One of them even said that they write poetry and so they wrote a poem that went up in the zoo! Poetry really became part of the life of zoo.” [poet-in-residence]

- ***Zoo: Deep Level of Commitment from Staff***

While poetry was not a particular passion or interest of zoo staff members at the beginning of the project, over time, their commitment to the project transformed their relationship to poetry, research, evaluation, and the potential benefits of community collaboration. In many ways, the project had a strong impact on staff of the zoo as much as on visitors to the zoo.

“<Name> and I sat here in the office. <Name> would read the poetry to me, and we’d eliminated some and selected some.” [zoo staff]

“At the symposium there was a lot of skepticism on the zoos’ part and in the zoo community. It took some persuasion, but once they saw the signs, they were really happily surprised. We were not surprised that they were surprised, but we were happy to see that happening, poetry doing what we have deep belief it can do, which is to think about any subject. [It was] surreal to see that happen for zoos.” [leadership member]

- ***Library: Strong Leadership and Sharing of Expertise***

Over the course of the project, the library in Little Rock routinely shared their resources and expertise with the zoo staff to help the zoo in the face of difficult challenges related to budget cuts. Going above and beyond the requirements of the project, this collaboration showed great commitment from the library partner to support the zoo, even in times of difficulty and limited resources. One example of this was educational programming. With the loss of the zoo’s Education Department in the summer of 2009, the library is currently working on joint programming for school children that would include natural history lessons, providing a service that the zoo lost some capacity to deliver.



“We want the zoo to know that we want to be good neighbors. This grant put us on a different footing with the zoo. Before, we never had anything to do with the zoo. And this was good for that.” [library staff]

Challenges

- ***Difference in Institutional Culture***

A substantial challenge for this collaboration, as with others, was facing the differences in institutional cultures, philosophies, and working styles that existed between the library and the zoo. This manifested in several different ways throughout the project. Most pronounced was the difference in philosophy around admission fees; while the zoo was financially dependent on revenue from admission fees, the library was founded on a philosophy of free access to all. The realization of this difference created a significant challenge and tension early in the project. The team ultimately established compromise solutions to address this challenge at different points in the process, including the library paying the zoo a fee to allow for free admission during the Grand Opening event at the zoo. They have also discussed the library purchasing five annual memberships to the zoo, which would be available for check-out at different branches of the library system; while not yet in place, this is a strategy being considered to further bridge this challenge. In general, it was mentioned that there were cultural differences between the staffs of these two institutions, with each not being frequent visitors of the other’s institution. This created challenges from the outset at understanding and sharing each others’ directions.

“We didn’t find there were too many zoo people [staff] who would come here [the library], and a lot of our staff are older and don’t go to the zoo. That was kind of a missed connection.” [library staff]

- ***Zoo: Financial and Staff Limitations***

As indicated, although all project partners were impacted by the economic challenges that occurred in the U.S. during the grant period, Little Rock Zoo seemed to experience the most substantial effects overall. This created stress internally within zoo staff and with library partners, particularly as their reliance on admission fees for revenue (indicated earlier) became even more important. The financial circumstances also led to a significant decrease in the size of staff at Little Rock Zoo, resulting in circumstances where existing staff were covering multiple job responsibilities, the zoo’s Director was handling many competing priorities, and the zoo struggled to determine which department would manage the *Language of Conservation* effort. Ultimately the project was made the responsibility of the Facilities Department, who took leadership in efforts to get the buy-in of other staff across the institution, as the small size of the staff would require that the majority of staff help implement the project.

- ***Unbalanced Effort and Expertise in Promotion***

Both zoo and library staff indicated that promotion of events felt unbalanced. Since the project leads within the zoo were based in Facilities, they depended heavily on the expertise of the library and the poet when it came to event promotion. The team overcame this challenge, with the library partners stepping up and lending their expertise and guidance to promotion and advertising, for which the zoo staff indicated they learned a great deal and expressed tremendous gratitude for their partner’s efforts, knowing it was above-and-beyond. Nevertheless, it did present some frustration for the library staff as they negotiated these challenges, understanding the limitations of the zoo in this area through trial-and-error, and finding ways to provide the zoo with greater



support and direction. Ultimately, the promotion done by the Little Rock team appeared to be successful and wide-ranging, with the poet noting particularly coverage through local newspapers, YouTube clips, and the local TV station.

Another promotional challenge experienced in Little Rock was a lack of reciprocity in terms of cross-promoting each other's venues to current audiences. This was a challenge for library partners who had brought their users to the zoo through various programs, but noted a lack of reciprocation from the zoo in terms of promoting library programs or events to zoo visitors. Some library staff expressed that they had hoped this project would generate more "cross-pollinating in terms of advertising." Feedback from the leadership team indicates that this is something they hope will happen in the last year of the grant during library programming, with zoos contributing more concretely to driving library program attendance.

Collaboration: Poet-in-Residence with Zoo and Library

Strengths

Overall, both the zoo and the library partners felt that Joe Bruchac was a perfect fit as poet-in-residence for Little Rock due to his interest and background in conservation, his ability to connect to the culture of Arkansas, and his strong leadership skills.

- **Poet: Background in Conservation**

One of the requirements for selection of all poets-in-residence for this project was their commitment to issues of conservation and public engagement with these themes and ideas. The specific expertise of Little Rock's poet in this area was greatly respected by the project team, particularly the value of his work relative to zoos and natural spaces for the project sites.

"I was a major at Cornell for 3 years in wildlife conservation and then switched to English, graduated with a minor in zoology. Also written several books [in that vein] Keepers of the Earth series, sold in national parks and zoos, there were people who had copies at the readings who came to get those signed. I can't think of a project better built for me." [poet-in-residence]

- **Poet: Ability to Connect to the Regional Culture**

Multiple Little Rock partners stressed the great value that came from Joe's ability to connect to the regional culture of Arkansas and their relationship to the natural world. In the process of selecting poems for the zoo and the tone of public events, this understanding proved to be an essential element that connected the project to the community and its people.

"Being a Native American, he fit in to a lot of the Arkansas culture. He was aware of the big population of hunters that are here in the State. He related some of his poems and such to them... He just related really well with the team all the way around." [zoo staff]

"[I] kept thinking, 'he's from New York State. I thought we'd have a southern poet.' [But] it worked out better that we had someone whose whole life has been devoted to conserving and traditions." [library staff]

- **Poet: Strong Leadership, Created an Atmosphere of Inclusion**

In Little Rock, the poet played a large role in fostering a collaborative spirit between the zoo and library. He also served as their link to the leadership team at Poets House, which was a great asset to this team. Nearly every partner interviewed stressed the value that the poet contributed to the



project through leadership and inclusion, which brought the project team together despite other challenges faced.

“We were very impressed with how he was able to get everything done and use his time wisely when here. He just helped everybody by being, part of it is temperament; he was very professional. He was very nice and appreciative. Made us feel like he was happy to be here.
”[library staff]

“Frankly, the way that the library runs and the way the zoo runs could not be more different. Just poles apart. He was able to cross-pollinate between everybody and everybody was happy.”
[library staff]

“My big thing is Joe. His leadership the whole time really moved this thing forward.” [zoo staff]

Challenges

Across the interviews with all partners in Little Rock, no one discussed any notable challenges related to the process of poetry selection or overall collaboration between partners and the poet-in-residence. Communication, mutual understanding, and leadership of individuals seemed to carry partners through the process relatively smoothly.

Milwaukee

One unique attribute of the Milwaukee partnership had to do with the organizational structure of the zoo, which included two organizations: the zoo itself, which is run by the county, and the Zoo Society, which is the non-profit arm that is responsible for education, exhibits, and outreach efforts. In effect, this meant that there were three organizations collaborating from the start within the Milwaukee partnership: the two zoo organizations and the library. Within this context, this partnership also generally followed the structure outlined by the project, although they did immediately point out the need to adjust the project’s timeline, noting that an April exhibit opening was not feasible due to their regional climate, which would require installation to occur after the end of winter.

Poetry selection was led by a small team at the zoo. The poet-in-residence worked independently to select a first list of poems, supported by the library in researching for specific poem needs, and then a small team of the poet-in-residence, zoo director, and creative director led the process of identifying final poems, placements, and designs. In the end, the poet-in-residence made most of the final decisions about the poetry and the zoo team made final decisions about their placement and design. Overall, a strong work ethic, high standards for quality, and commitment to success led all partners in this city’s team.

Collaboration: Zoo and Library

Strengths

- ***Established a Strong Working Group***
After the Symposium, staff from the library and zoo quickly established a very strong working group, deepening their relationship by giving each other tours of their institutions and setting up meetings. Both teams expressed that they were very excited about the project and the opportunity to work with one another and that their early discussions generated lots of ideas about collaboration and cross-promotion.



- **Variety of Collaborative Efforts**

The partners in Milwaukee enacted many different efforts that supported the collaboration, mutual support, and promotion of the *Language of Conservation* efforts, using strategies beyond those seen in other sites. This included the zoo's contribution of education staff within the library's children's program and collaboration between the docent/volunteer coordinators at the two sites to generate enthusiasm and support for the *Language of Conservation* project among both volunteer corps. These efforts were generally beneficial for both partners, with even additional benefits emerging, as they learned more about each other's strategies and efforts.

- **Zoo: Sharing Resources and Expertise**

The zoo was able to offer expertise from two main areas of strength: (1) in-house design team and (2) education staff. The zoo's strong in-house design team not only created the poetry installations, but also developed materials for cross-promotion with the library, including *Language of Conservation* banners that were installed in the library branches, posters for library events, and bookmarks for the *Language of Conservation*. The library mentioned that the zoo also shared resources from their educational staff, with the library inviting a zoo educator to come to some of their children's programming. The library expressed that this was a great benefit, and one area they would like to continue collaborating on, which it emerged would be dependent on budgetary limitations within the zoo.

- **Constant Communication**

The partners in Milwaukee expressed that they were able to establish a strong system of frequent, ongoing communication. Although it took some time to establish (there were challenges early on), ultimately they felt they reached a level of regular communication and checking in on the process, and in fact saw communication as a way for them to "help each other out" [zoo staff].

"I think that's basically what was important to me is just the strong communication between our two entities to making sure that, "OK, if you guys can't do it, then we'll pick up the slack." ... "If you feel you can't do it, great, we'll take it and run with it, we'll fill in the blanks." I think that establishing that great partnership and the give and take over the project." [library staff]

This extended to clear communication and collaboration to avoid duplication of efforts, and extended well beyond the boundaries of exhibit and program staff. For instance, the two communications offices were in touch in a detailed way to establish a shared plan for publication and communication of the project at large.

"I'd already known people at the zoo in their communications office, but this is a great opportunity to know them a little bit better and how their operation is set up, and how our two operations could work together. We didn't want to necessarily duplicate the effort, but we each have different audiences and publics, so it was important to me that we identify who would do what, who would send things out to who, who'd be making the media contacts or coverage, all those kinds of coordinated efforts." [library staff]

- **Created Strong Relationship between Directors**

A substantial strength of this collaboration was the relationship that was built at the highest levels of the organizations. Interviews revealed that the communication and sharing of ideas and



strategies extended even to the Directors of the two institutions, and which the staff of both institutions expected would continue to support a good working relationship between their organizations in the future.

“It’s a nice, close working relationship and I think anything we would want to do in the future would be so much easier, our ability to talk would be much easier.” [library staff]

“I check in now and then [with the library staff]. We’ve got all these budget issues with the county; zoo is going through the same thing, have a number of people who take furlough for a month. The same type of thing is happening in the city, so we’re always trying to boost each others’ morale.” [zoo staff]

Challenges

- **Communication**

Although communication was generally a strength in this collaboration, as indicated, there were challenges at the outset, which the partners were able to overcome. Specifically, the library partners noted that early on in the project there was a lack of communication from the zoo, which was troubling for the library, until they discovered the reason for the silence (a large event that took everyone’s attention). Following this, the team established greater understanding of each other’s schedules and rhythms, stressing the importance of just communicating when one is unavailable.

“Initially [the zoo staff] weren’t communicating as much as we’d like. What we didn’t realize, they were in an intense ramp-up period for something else, but they weren’t letting us know why we weren’t hearing from them. There was a period where the communication wasn’t good, but once we got over that hump the collaboration worked really well.” [library staff]

- **Coordination with the Zoo and Society**

The organizational structure of the zoo presented some challenges to library staff as they tried to navigate and build partnerships with various staff there. Initially, the library struggled to make connections with the education staff (for thinking about programs) because the structure of the zoo had two organizations: the zoo itself (animals, exhibits) and the Zoo Society (programs, outreach). Although connections were eventually made, the library staff expressed it was difficult trying to work with both organizations.

- **Differences in Timelines**

The library staff expressed some challenges related to the differences in timelines for event planning between the zoo and the library. Specifically, while the library plans out events 6 months in advance, the zoo plans events on a shorter time schedule. The group worked to compromise and reach a solution, but it presents a challenge for deeper integration. Additionally, the library expressed a need for more time in the overall project schedule of the grant to prepare for the poet’s first visit and to promote the project.

- **Unbalanced Cross-Promotion**

Library expressed that they were very excited to have poetry reach the zoo audience, but they also felt that the poetry in the zoo was the extent of this cross-promotion. They felt that there were opportunities to try to drive zoo visitors to libraries and programs, but that this was not occurring.



“We can give them booklists to disseminate and their visitors can take them home to where ever their home is, and look for book material and things that we have linked. The potential is there, but I don’t know if we haven’t reached that potential.” [library staff]

Collaboration: Poet-in-Residence with Zoo and Library

Strengths

- **Strong Working Relationship**

All partners indicated that they quickly established a strong working relationship and found their poet, Pattiann Rogers, to be a good fit for the partners of Milwaukee. They all indicated that they hit it off right away at the symposium, zoo and poet shared a similar work ethic that saw them through the effort required by this project. Similarly, they developed a strong pattern of communication, including phone conversations between the zoo and poet nearly every day at the start of the project.

“I think she is demanding of herself, very competitive, which I like. And she took it very seriously, and I think she achieved that. Really happy to work with her.” [library staff]

“But I think it was really fun to have her here, show off Milwaukee a little bit. And she also kinda got to know what our residence is like, what we stand for, and what would be appreciated from her end with our audiences here. And, as we got to know her better, and she got to know us, I think the ideas were just free flowing. It just kinda came one after another and, you know, “How about this? What can we do about that?” A very good give and take that we had. We had a pretty open relationship, and we always appreciated her candor and her ideas. We took what we could and we ran with it. We ran with it.” [library staff]

- **Library: Assisted Poet-in-Residence**

The library and poet had tremendous respect for one another and very much enjoyed the process of working together. The poet had less interaction with the library overall, but did for library partners’ input for poetry selection. Rogers expressed that one of her favorite poems came from one of the library’s suggestions. Poet expressed surprise at,

“how few serious respectful poems are about major zoo animals! It’s hard to find a serious poem about a hippo. But we did and I was thrilled!” [poet-in-residence]

Additionally, the library’s staff was willing to engage in this assistance to the poet-in-residence and showed great ability to come up with creative solutions to her requests. For instance, library staff created an online resource to search for *Language of Conservation* books based on poem title.

Challenges

- **Role of Poet in Poetry Selection**

The open-endedness of the negotiation process between poets and zoos was, at times, challenging for partners. There were some difficult decisions that had to be made during the poetry selection process, during which the partners had sometimes conflicting opinions. For example, the poet wanted to include a poem, “Asian Elephants,” but and the zoo’s elephants are African elephants. Another example of this was a poem that had a darker tone, which was not the tone that the zoo wanted to have for this exhibit. It is notable that these discussions are similar to experiences had in the Central Park Zoo model and showed the ability of the Milwaukee team to overcome these



challenges as a team through mutual respect and understanding. In the end two poets expressed their mindset when approaching these disagreements:

“...I felt, they have to live there, that is where they work.” [poet-in-residence]

“A large part is honoring the ideas of those who are investing their lives and careers in this work. You are honoring the animals, conservation. This is one of the things that I stressed to the poets, it is important to listen very closely to the scientists, to the installation people, the exhibits and graphics people. We are passing through but we are leaving something that involves their place in the community.” [poet-in-residence]

It was suggested from partners that some challenges in this area may have related to their feeling that there was a lack of clear definition in the role of the poet and the role of the zoo in making final decisions about selections of poetry. While the Milwaukee team worked through these challenges effectively, there was a sense from the partners that perhaps a more clearly defined list of responsibilities for each party, established in advance by Poets House, might have helped in dealing with these challenges.

It is worth noting that Poets House and the leadership team were aware of this potential challenge and incorporated specific activities at the outset of the project to try to define these roles and provide guidance for wrestling with this specific challenge. Most notably this occurred via an extensive discussion at the Kick-off Symposium; to a lesser extent, these topics were intended to be addressed in Tip Sheet documents (although were only addressed indirectly). As stated by a member of the leadership team:

“...this was known to be a problem and addressed with significant care in the early stages of the project, in the tip sheets and in comments by Dan and Sandra at the Symposium.” [leadership team member]

The goal of these efforts by the leadership team was to provide as much initial guidance as possible, knowing that individual cases would have to be negotiated between individuals. Despite these resources of support early on, from the perspective of the partners, these difficulties were still experienced as challenges for which they desired greater clarity from leadership (whether or not such clarity was considered possible or appropriate).

- **Timeline and Budget**

The partners worked hard to meet deadlines set within the overall project timeline by Poets House; however all parties agreed that more time was needed for certain aspects of the project, particularly promotion and permissions. Similarly, the original schedule for zoo openings had to be modified to accommodate the regional seasonal differences of the sites, specifically Milwaukee’s need to wait until after winter to begin installing exhibit components. Project management from Poets House was supportive of this necessary change in timeline. Similarly, the partners would have liked a larger budget for printed advertising, noting that electronic communications did not seem sufficient.

New Orleans

The partnership in New Orleans implemented the project with a slightly different overall process than the other partnerships. In general, partners in New Orleans each identified and took responsibility for



their portions of the project, conducting the bulk of their work independently, with little active collaboration during the poetry identification and selection process. For instance, the process began with a group site visit at the Audubon Zoo, where the poet, zoo, and library staff took photos and discussed possible locations for poetry. From there, the poet worked independently, making a set of selected poems and corresponding locations to give to the zoo. In contrast to other cities, the poet did not present a large volume of options for zoo staff to assist in whittling down; instead, he provided a culled list of recommended poems and locations. Similarly, the zoo's representative did not engage in an extensive process of critical feedback, review, and dialogue about these selections (which was seen in other cities). With the zoo's approval to the poet's selections, the work shifted to the design team and the poet, to develop the display strategies, logistics, and feasibility for the identified poems and locations.

Overall, the team that contributed to the project was small, led by individual representatives from each institution or key department (i.e., education and exhibits at the zoo). There was no direct involvement by staff committees or administrative personnel, as the project remained in the hands of the immediate project team.

Collaboration: Zoo and Library

Strengths

- **Good Working Relationship**

Although, this was the first time zoo and library partners had worked together on a project, both sides of the collaboration felt like the process of working together was straightforward and smooth. The number of partners was relatively small, with library staff working primarily with one main contact person at the zoo. Zoo staff felt that everything “flowed seamlessly” and described the work with words such as *personal, relaxed, as needed, good fit, comfortable*. The library staff expressed that everyone on the team had a good attitude, were interested in the project, and wanted to help one another. This working relationship helped create a stronger connection between the zoo and the library now.

“I feel like I can email them, even something not related to *Language of Conservation*.” [library staff]

- **Library: Strengthened Internal Library Team**

One librarian mentioned that this project gave the library staff the opportunity to work with each other more, which “made us more willing to work together,” an unexpected team-building benefit of the project. This has continued as the project wraps up, with excitement among library staff about the upcoming ALA Conference, which will be hosted in New Orleans. The library is currently in the process of working with the poets, zoo programs, and Poets House to plan ways to highlight the project at that conference.

Challenges

- **Lack of Clear Roles, Sense of Priority within the Larger Project**

A notable challenge mentioned by partners in New Orleans related to a lack of clarity around the roles and priority of each institution type within the larger grant and project, with both zoo and library staff feeling their institutions were not the central focus of the project or its attention. This was similar to comments heard from other library partners in the project, that the emphasis seemed



to be on the exhibits in the zoos and that libraries were an afterthought, lacking a clear role and function for the project. Additionally, however, some zoo staff expressed a feeling that the zoos were a lower priority in the overall project, seen more as a venue than a true partner. While the partners worked well together, this lack of clarity and sense of alienation from the larger project (both seeing themselves as a vehicle for another organization's priorities) may have impacted their working experience.

"...It seemed to me like, like they got the idea to do it in zoos and worked backwards to the library. It was kind of a strange fit. A lot of times, we were not sure of our role. In the end we felt like a vehicle for publicity. ...Instead of involving the library, just take out the library and give more money to the zoo." [library staff]

"Zoos are kind of an afterthought in this project. If I could rank the whole grant, the poetry was the big chunk of, like, 90% or maybe 70% of this grant - the poets, the poem selection, the book. And then the library. And then the zoos are just a tiny part at the end; they're just where the poems go. ... It's a poetry grant, and the zoos are just the place to distribute the poetry." [zoo staff]

- **Zoo: Generating Buy-in from Staff**

Zoo staff explained that one of the most difficult aspects of this project was generating buy-in from other staff members. Despite efforts to communicate and engage staff in the project and its purpose, including giving a PowerPoint presentation of the Central Park Zoo project to staff, it was felt that this was not successful in generating interest. Overall, the team working on the project felt that it did not hold interest for other staff there was little support beyond the team itself, and in fact the team worked independent of seeking approval from others in the organization. There was some effort made to involve zoo staff as designs and installation plans were finalized, with the graphic design team emphasizing the importance of communicating with other staff members including the keeper staff, maintenance staff, and the horticulture department to make sure logistical details of placement were acceptable and that others were aware these installations would be added to the exhibits.

Collaboration: Poet-in-Residence with Zoo and Library

Strengths

- **Positive Working Relationship**

One of the greatest strengths of the New Orleans partnership with their poet, Mark Doty, was the similar approach and working style that all of the partners took. There were initial concerns about styles meshing, but in the end, they felt that their poet was a great fit with the organization. The zoo, in particular, was aware of the risk of problems if they could not mesh well with their poet-in-residence, and ultimately felt that one of the primary factors for their success was that all team members had a similar, "New Orleans, laid-back style," and if this had not been the case, the project would have been more difficult.

"But at the beginning I wasn't sure he would get our zoo, and we're a quirky and lower-educated area. Because he was a NY poet, I worried it might be too lofty and I didn't know how I would combat that. But then it didn't happen." [zoo staff]



The library staff also seemed to have a positive response to working with their poet, particularly since one of the librarians had worked with the poet previously through the Poetry in the Branches project, providing a foundation of familiarity.

- ***Zoo: Opportunity for Creativity***

The zoo's Graphic Design team expressed that they were particularly excited to work on this project because they were both English majors in college and were thrilled to have an opportunity to work on a language-focused project with a poet-in-residence. They described collaboration going successfully because they were all "on the same wavelength." It also emerged that the project provided the designers with an opportunity for creativity and to try new things with their work. They reported working well with Doty, both expressing strong opinions, but feeling that they found a way to negotiate and communicate about ideas.

"[Designers] met Mark, clicked, and he gave them the poetry. Without supervision, they went into each section and decided how to design it. It was their one chance to be creative. Normally they get a work order and it's to just print this sign. We gave them the poems and said, go ahead and create whatever you want. First time they got to be creative in their work. They were not micro-managed. We gave them the poems and they created installations." [zoo staff]

- ***Program Collaboration with Poet***

Library staff talked about successful programs that were developed with the poet-in-residence, which seemed to be appreciated by all. This included a program called "Poetry after Dark" and another for which the library staff created a PowerPoint presentation of the installations, and the poet presented a program about his inspirations for the project and selection process.

Challenges

- ***Lack of Communication between Partners***

A notable feature of the partnership in New Orleans is that it involved minimal communication, collaboration, or sharing of ideas. The general working relationship was one in which each person took their portion of the project and worked in relative isolation. This extended to include communication between the poet and the zoo. Both library and zoo partners expressed that communication with the poet-in-residence was quite limited throughout the process, which created frustrations and apprehension that deadlines would not be met or that they would not be pleased with the work that was provided. In the end, however, they found that the poet always met the deadlines and they were, in fact, extremely pleased with what they received.

"We were worried the poems wouldn't come in time, but then on the day they were due, they would show up and be great. If he didn't get our vision, it would have been hard. But luckily he was in tune with the area and the poems we wanted in the zoo. Had he not been what we were looking for, had we had differences, that would have been a problem because of the lack of communication. The good fit was key." [zoo staff]

- ***Non-Collaborative Poetry Selection Process***

Although the partners generally did not address this as a factor they saw as a challenge in the process, New Orleans' partnership was notable for the lack of collaboration and input from the zoo staff on the selection of poems for their zoo. As noted, the working style seemed to be for each partner to work in relative isolation, delivering their piece to the others. All partners seemed to be pleased with what was created in this process, but it is possible that this contributed to multiple



partners feeling isolated or that they had limited involvement in the overall project. The way in which they interpreted and implemented the process led to less involvement or empowerment for the zoo staff, perhaps minimizing their sense of ownership over the project and emphasizing a feeling that the zoo's role was primarily as a venue for displaying the poetry, rather than a contributor to the selection of the poetry.

- **Zoo: Generating Buy-in from Leadership**

Another attribute of the project in New Orleans was less involvement and oversight from the zoo's leadership in the project and its implementation. Again, this was not seen as a tremendous challenge by the partners within this team, but it was notable in its difference from other sites, and did seem to have implications to the implementation process. In general, it seems that there was minimal communication, sharing of ideas, and collaboration on the work of the project. Each individual in the team took their part of the workload and achieved deliverables in isolation. As with the poetry selection process, there was little feedback or input from other members of the partnership to any of this work. This included the leadership and administration of the zoo, who were reported to be pleased with the final outcome, but who were otherwise involved very little in the effort. In fact, this extended to the team's sense and decisions to make most of the installations in temporary, rather than permanent forms, given the uncertainty of the administration's willingness or interest to commit to this approach in the long-term.

"I never got a feel of whether my administration wanted permanent things. We did things that are about 3 to 5 years [of durability], so that we could remove them. We sandblasted into two [features]. [We] painted into our central pond in really big letters. More zoos were doing permanent stuff." [zoo staff]

Collaboration: Leadership Team with Partners

From the perspectives of the zoo and library project partners, input, support, and guidance on the project came primarily from one source on the Leadership Team, which was the project coordinator of Poets House. Partners generally expressed great satisfaction with the communication and connection with the project coordinator, however they often could recall very little contact or interaction from the Leadership Team (beyond the Symposium), with many being unable to recall the individuals who comprised that team. This varied in individual circumstances, but partners provided some insights into the strengths provided by the Leadership Team and challenges faced or recommendations for leadership support that could have been valuable.

Strengths

- **Strong Communication from Poets House**

Across the partnerships, participants expressed appreciation for the strong and professional communication that came from the Poets House team, led by the project coordinator. Many specific examples were given of instances when Poets House addressed concerns, answered questions, and helped point teams in the right direction throughout the process. This was always an appreciated part of the process and included the coordination of logistical and administrative aspects, such as the poets' site visits and annual reporting requirements. Words used to describe communication from Poets House included: *accessible, helpful, responsive, proactive, supportive, gracious, answered all questions, and communicated deadlines.*



“Poets House was accessible. Totally, extremely helpful. Do they ever sleep?! <laughs> I would get emails in the middle of the night and wondered, “What is wrong with you?!” Whenever there was a problem they were there, proactive and responsive, they almost overdid it.” [poet-in-residence]

- **Support and Response to Challenges**

Another strength mentioned by a number of partners was the support received by Poets House in response to various unexpected challenges or opportunities that emerged over the course of the project. These also ranged across specific examples, but included Poets House’s response to the opportunity to involve two library partners in Brookfield who were not included in the original grant. All partners in Brookfield expressed that they were very impressed by the flexibility to support the partnership with two local libraries, including providing funds for acquisitions at both libraries. Other examples included providing support to new team members in cities (particularly Jacksonville) as staffing changes took place during the project and ongoing support of poets-in-residence with resources and materials.

Challenges, Needs, and Suggestions

- **Communication was Primarily Reactive**

While all partners felt that the team at Poets House went above and beyond their expectations in responding quickly when they had questions, concerns, or faced problems, there was less of a sense about communication on an ongoing basis to check-in, support, or provide positive encouragement to assure partners that they were on the right track. This was not mentioned by all partners, but it did come up most strongly among those who had not been in touch as frequently about problems or concerns. For those without crises in their project, they felt they lacked the support and encouragement that can help an effort. Overall, it seemed as though there would have been a benefit for supporting work in an ongoing way and perhaps heading off problems before they emerged.

“We were running with it, but would have been nice to have a “love the direction you’re going,” pep-talk once in a while.” [zoo staff]

“I never even heard a kudos for having gotten it [the poetry exhibits] up.” [zoo staff]

- **Administrative Support, Guidelines, and Templates**

Partners expressed a need for additional information, resources, and clarity around many administrative and management aspects of this project. Although the vision and big-picture of the project was clear and shared by all partners, smaller details of implementation, ranging from deadlines, reporting, cost sharing, and policies, were less clearly communicated and understood by partners. These were often aspects that seemed to be addressed as problems emerged, rather than being clearly articulated in advance. It might be advised to dedicate some significant time in a kick-off symposium to sharing documentation, templates, and clearly laid out plans for the administrative aspects of project management, as the difference in clarity between project vision and project management were notable by participants. Some specific aspects that were noted or requested from partners:

- **Deadlines and Timelines:** Several sites mentioned that they would have benefited from a clear set of deadlines or timelines (i.e., for final poem selection, for reports, for programs, etc.). This included a suggestion for recommended “time spent per task,”



noting that they would have benefited from knowing how many months to devote to each phase of the project, so as not to be bogged down in the selection phase.

- **Policies and Procedures:** Most seemed to see these as emerging throughout the process of this project, but some indicated they would have liked having more written documentation and guidance about policies and procedures assumed or required within this project that guided the work of each phase.
- **Explanation of Budget:** There was a request to have greater guidance and clarity around the explanation of the budget, what it would provide each site, and (most importantly) about cost sharing responsibilities and reporting.
- **Templates for Each Partner:** There was a comment that the invoicing template seemed more appropriate for library partners than zoo partners and a more broadly applicable (or different) template would be beneficial.

- ***Support and Consistency for Promotion***

Promotion for events and the project as a whole emerged as a current challenge for many partners. Partners in two cities mentioned that more support from the Leadership Team on promotion would have helped to insure quality and consistency, saved time, and created a stronger sense of unity across the five cities. There was a sense that cities were creating very different products and that there were no guidelines for branding or acknowledgements. An example given by one library partner included the eye-catching and high quality promotional materials (e.g., postcards) that were provided in the *Poetry in the Branches* project. Additionally, another partner suggested that the budget for printing should be increased by at least 50% to cover the costs of bookmarks, color maps, a brochure for the gift shop, and posters.

- ***Increased Installation Budgets***

As was mentioned in discussions of promotional support, some partners felt that elements of the project budget needed to be larger to support the full scope of the project. Promotional material production was one item mentioned. The other major area mentioned was the installation, fabrication, and maintenance of zoo exhibit materials for each city. Some sites felt that they needed more funds than were provided for fabrication and perhaps that budgets should be developed specifically for sites, rather than with a fixed amount for each location, citing issues of installation plan (permanent vs. temporary), process for installation (in-house vs. outside fabrication), maintenance, and city type (costs vary significantly across the U.S.).

- ***Further Mentoring on Partnerships and Collaboration Strategy***

One partner mentioned that the cities might have benefited from direct support and guidance on developing the partnerships and collaborative process from the start, providing individuals with guidance and modeling to alleviate the early challenges faced (and overcome) at many partner sites.

“Focusing on stronger partnerships from the beginning, more frequent meetings before things get going. Translating theory to practice... Next time, more facilitated exercises to create shared culture.” [leadership member]

- ***Site Visits from Leadership***

Team member at one site expressed that they would have loved to share the opening event with Poets House and suggested the possibility for having a greater degree of contact or participation from members of the leadership team to the sites. An example where this worked really well was John Fraser’s visit to Little Rock early in the project, which helped build support and momentum



around the project with multiple partners at that site. This suggests that incorporating such visits from leadership throughout the project might help development and buy-in at sites.

- **Permissions Process**

For legal reasons, it was necessary for Poets House to make permissions requests and the process developed for permissions was that each city's poetry collection would be submitted from the city to Sandra Alcosser, to Poets House, to the permissions specialist. For most cities this process seemed to work smoothly, but in at least one case, the partners found the process needed a more formalized, streamlined system, as they encountered significant delays and challenges in acquiring the needed permissions for their project plans. Reviewing and reassessing the best function for this process and for communicating needed information may be advised.

Cross-Site Collaboration

Overall, partners at the five partner cities indicated there was not substantial collaboration or communication across the cities. Most felt they had little to no communication with the other cities or information about what the other cities were doing. On the whole, partners did not feel that this had a negative impact on their work in the project, although some (primarily from libraries) indicated that more opportunities to see or hear about examples about what their counterparts in other cities were doing may have been an added resource to enhance their work.

"Sometimes our best ideas are borrowed from other places. You share ideas. And sometimes they'll have a program and even if we change it, that would be cool." [library staff]

"I feel bad that I don't know what's going on in other libraries... Listserv, maybe that would be alright... Access to others ideas, so we don't reinvent the wheel. [library staff]

In implementation, there were three specific mechanisms used to allow for some cross-site collaboration: the project wiki, a conference call with the five zoos during the design phase, and the Poets House Institute for libraries. Partners felt that each of these mechanisms had certain areas of strength and value, but also provided feedback on how they could have been improved.

Project Wiki

At the start of the project, the leadership established a project website using a wiki format. The wiki format was chosen to allow for all project partners to continually contribute to the site, not just viewing project information distributed by leadership, but for the partners to be actively contributing and sharing their project work as a collective resource and collaboration tool for everyone on the project. The wiki was introduced to the partners during the kick-off Symposium meeting and how-to manuals created, since most of the partners were unfamiliar with using this type of technology. However, as the project proceeded, it generally appeared to fail at its goals of supporting cross-project communication and sharing of resources. The vast majority of individuals on partner teams used the site minimally (if at all) to share information, documents, or resources about their team's progress or planning. In the end, it became a tool used primarily for the Coordinator from Poets House to store and share documents easily across the five sites. At the conclusion of the project, the partners provided feedback on why this mechanism was minimally successful, and lessons that could be taken away for the future.



The primary strength of the wiki strategy was its utility as a space to store information and documents. Partners used it to access needed materials, including book lists, ordering information, and contact information for partners, which was particularly helpful for new people coming onto the project. For a few individuals, they saw the potential of this as a resource to share and communicate information with others in the project.

“[I could] see who was involved and I could just email [them], ‘Do you have ideas.’ [It’s] so nice to put faces to the people who were able to do this in other cities.” [library staff]

“I loved using the wiki. I had never don’t that before. Having that as a resource, I loved posting pictures and being able to share. [It was a] neat way to share with [Poets House].” [zoo staff]

The reasons for the wiki’s overall failure as a tool to foster cross-site collaboration included:

- Unfamiliarity with the technology
- Difficulty of the interface, including the need for an additional name/password, navigation structure, and bothersome notifications.
- Lack of activity, frequency, and reciprocity at the start led to discouragement and loss of buy-in
- No modeling, concrete examples of value-added by time spent contributing

Partners tended to request that the project had used technologies they were already using, such as email or flickr mechanisms for communication.

Zoo Partner Conference Call: Exhibition Strategies

In March of 2010, John Fraser facilitated a conference call with zoo partners to generate a conversation about the installation design process. Each institution was asked to briefly present their design strategy, providing context for how they chose their design solutions. Afterward, there was an opportunity for partners to discuss challenges and problems with the team to share and learn from one another and to collaborate on creative responses. The opinions on the degree of benefit for this experience were mixed.

Many saw this opportunity as a valuable resource to the project, particularly in its role for sharing design innovation. These team members were excited to hear about what others were doing and learning from the different resources and expertise of each zoo. However, several of these partners also indicated that this session should have come earlier in the process, during the brainstorming and early development, in order to have greatest impact and/or to occur more frequently. Its timing allowed for few changes to be made based upon this conversation.

“There were such creative ideas that were so different from ours, it would have been great to see those earlier to make out installation better, at that point it was too late to change or modify. It would be cool to video a conference, send favorite installations so we could see what everyone is doing. Some other zoos did really creative things. [zoo staff]

“That was an interesting thing to do, but at that point we were set and we didn’t know what anyone else was doing. It might have been better to do that earlier on, have some interaction while we’re still brainstorming, maybe right after the poets had visited.” [zoo staff]

Other zoo staff indicated that the conference call was less helpful, either because they felt experienced as exhibit/graphic designers or because they felt it was unlikely to change their approach in any way.



“It depends on what your level of experience is. It might be helpful for like a junior designer. But I’ve been doing this for a long time, so I was comfortable with what I was doing.” [zoo staff]

“The conference call was interesting. It’s interesting to see how another creative person approaches a project. It was interesting to hear their ideas, not necessarily going to change your idea of what you’re going to do.” [zoo staff]

Poets House Institute for Libraries

In Fall 2009, Poets House hosted representatives from the partner libraries to an Institute at Poets House to support and prepare the partners for the development and implementation of poetry- and conservation-related programming. The Institute was modeled from a successful Institute program (Poetry in the Branches) also managed by Poets House, and allowed library partners to visit the Poets House library in New York, collaborate with one another, and learn about tools, resources, and techniques for developing programs.

Overall, the Institute seemed to be a strong element of the project, providing opportunities for collaboration and conversation across the partner sites. In particular, participants indicated that benefited from the opportunity to meet one another and see examples of programming ideas, especially for individuals who were came into the project partway through or who had not participated n Poetry in the Branches previously.

“[I] visited with a librarian from Little Rock and Jacksonville. The librarian from Jacksonville, she was new to the *Language of Conservation*. I don’t know how she was thrown in to it, but we talked to her a lot about what was happening. Milwaukee, they were great too. Talked about how things were going, just networked.” [library staff]

It also helped the library partners feel more connected to the Poets House leadership team generally, and for newer librarians, it gave them the opportunity to ask their questions of leadership and other partners face-to-face. One participant indicated that the Institute was encouraging and left her feeling positive about the overall field, even beyond the scope of the present project.

“I was so impressed with their intelligence, liveliness, enthusiasm! I am at the end of my career and I worry about the state of libraries going forward. Made me feel that the profession was in good hands.” [library staff]

The weaknesses of the Institute were few, but primarily centered around the structure of the Institute being more focused on general poetry programming in libraries, with little or less attention paid to the main themes of the *Language of Conservation* project specifically. There was not a specific, planned opportunity for *Language of Conservation* librarians to meet or focus their attention on the added aspect of incorporating conservation themes into the poetry programming. In a related vein, some librarians did not attend because they had previously attended for the Poetry in the Branches program, thus missing the opportunity to connect with librarians from the other partner cities in this project.

Poets-in-Residence

Much like the zoo and library partners, the project’s poets-in-residence had minimal, if any, communication with one another outside of the kick-off symposium. This was generally not seen as a



shortcoming, as poets-in-residence had a large volume of work to do within the project and each had their own process for working through the material.

“I had a lot of work to do, I felt like I had enough people to collaborate with at a distance ... I have worked alone a lot in my life. As a writer you work alone, I don’t know that it would work for me particularly... I felt like I needed to concentrate on understating <my zoo> and their visitors and focus on that.” [poet-in-residence]

However, there were instances when some poets felt that the opportunity for discussion or sharing with one another may have been helpful. This typically occurred during the poetry research and selection phase, with two poets mentioning in interviews that there would have been a benefit from a discussion among the poets about the process of selection, the challenges of identifying works, and some of the political and negotiation challenges that emerged. Poets’ communication was generally directly with those on the Leadership Team (either Sandra Alcosser or Poets House), rather than with one another. This created a few instances of tension, with work of poets being shared indirectly by leadership, rather than through discussion of challenges and sharing of ideas directly from one poet to another. Facilitating and encouraging the network of poets may have helped prevent some of these challenges.

“I think it would be really helpful for the poets to talk a little bit about their process of how they handled the politics of handing off the big list, talking about that, have some peer exchange, it is a very anxious moment, I think that would be a time when it would be great to have more exchange with the poets, reflecting.” [poet-in-residence]

Partner Outcomes

Interest in Future Collaborations

An intended outcome of this project was to promote the interest in community collaborations across the staff and leadership of the partner institutions. Interviews with partners at all zoos and libraries indicated that community collaboration was not new to partners, so while the interest in collaboration was not created through the project, it did help strengthen and reinforce their existing interest and commitment to engage in collaborations in the future.

Specific changes in collaboration related to the project included the development of new, strong relationships between zoos and libraries where they did not previously exist. Staff from partner libraries in Brookfield and Little Rock, for instance, noted that the project gave them a great opportunity to form a new and valuable relationship with the zoo, which was seen as a valuable asset to the institutions and community. These partners discussed how the relationships were planned to continue in the future.

“We told them from the beginning that this is not a ‘one hit wonder,’ really wanted the program to be sustainable... I saw firsthand how excited the library was, saw their visitors experience something that they wouldn’t have unless they came to the zoo. We were able to provide them something different. It was great to see how excited they got about the installation - this whole community that we had never tacked into, and they were right there and they want to utilize us.” [zoo staff]

“They are opening a Children’s Library behind the zoo... We are talking about path connecting the zoo to the library, maybe a train or something. Very thankful for the opportunity to work with them.” [zoo staff]



“The best I can remember, the zoo has stopped providing after school classes for kids, but they have a structure for that. We’re going to talk to them about having classes and writing and drawing, natural history kind of thing. It’s going to be a library plus. It’s going to be more than books and materials. There will be a lot of programming and we want to involve the zoo in all of this... Heifer International is headquartered in Little Rock and it’s two blocks down the road, I could see the library, zoo, and Heifer doing something in the future. ... Children’s and family programs at each location.” [library staff]

Other partners had some degree of previous experience collaborating with the library, such as Milwaukee and Jacksonville, but many of these partners found that this project deepened that relationship in a way that made it stronger, larger, and, in some ways, as though it was a new partnership. These sites also talked about the potential for new ways to maintain and grow the opportunities that collaboration provided.

“And our relationship with the zoo, I’ve been really, really pleased with how it has grown. Our previous relationship had been with their education department, part of their outreach programming, and it was really with the children’s librarian. This has been the first opportunity for me to have a relationship with <the zoo director>.” [library staff]

“As far as I’m concerned, the relationship with the zoo is new. And it’s great to have new partners. At least some part of your mission is shared. It’s always important to have that to expand your capacity. [We are] always looking for ways to leverage.” [library staff]

In addition to interest in future collaborations with their immediate *Language of Conservation* partner, many sites indicated that they already had in progress plans and opportunities for collaboration with other community institutions or groups. These partnerships included projects with for-profit companies (Little Rock), non-profit and community groups (Little Rock, Milwaukee), government agencies (Milwaukee), and elementary, middle, high school, and university teachers and students (all sites and Poets House). These examples they provided underscored their sustained belief in the power of such partnerships.

“And one of the other things we did was tie-in the green roof project and the Language of Conservation – we got money from Milwaukee Sewer District to incorporate an education program in the green roof. That’s a capital project with a roof that will last much longer, but then had an educational program, now we have an area on the first floor ... educating about the green roof benefits. On the banners we incorporated poetry from the Language of Conservation.” [library staff]

“I received a letter from someone attending a zoo, wanting to put together curricula for her 10th grade class, she wanted to know if there were curricula available; that could be a next project! <reading from an email> ‘last night I spoke at length about developing curricula for my 10th grade English class. This morning, I met with the biology teacher about a unit for 10th grade based on conservation and poetry, an authentic learning experience based on the exhibit. Are there any materials that center on this exhibit? If not, are you planning on pulling something together?...’ I think that it could be really interesting development.” [leadership member]

Some partners also noted the pragmatic circumstances that tended to foster or hinder collaborations, indicating a realistic perspective on how they may come about in the future.

“There is a traditional separation of organizations. They feel like they have to protect their audiences. I’ve seen more of that collaboration as people’s budgets are cut, more open collaboration. It’s a push pull kind of thing. Mixed bag, a lot of times it’s the leadership and their



mindset, traditionally it hasn't seemed like they did much. Every time you do it you make more contacts." [library staff]

"But a lot of the partnerships are program based, "let's work on this grant together" and I don't know if there is a more fundamental way to develop partnerships... A city has certain goals, groups have goals, do we have an over arching goal? Is it enhancing education? how do we contribute? Are we duplicating things?" [library staff]

Changes in Exhibit Design Strategies

Among the zoo partners, the project intended to impact the way they thought about exhibit design and, specifically, their interest and intention to continue the use of poetry (or similar strategies) within exhibit interpretation. Based upon the interviews, this impact was, by and large, achieved with the partner sites. Two of the zoo partner institutions, Brookfield and Jacksonville, reported concrete plans already being made to continue the use of poetry within exhibition and interpretation beyond this project. At Brookfield, the staff plan to use selections from other conservation-themed authors and literature, all of which was due to the degree of buy-in they generated among exhibition and keeper staff.

" [Animal keepers] were not involved in the process for selection. They basically saw it as it was going up. I was nervous about that, but they have loved it and have a new awareness about the things that they love so much. Curators have approached us about other areas of the zoo. In Big Cats we're planning something that is more of a literature perspective, Dr. Seuss, others. [We] want to convey the same type of thing, and I credit that desire to Language of Conservation." [zoo staff]

Similarly, the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens noted that they are currently working on a new Asian exhibit that may include poetry. The zoo has started discussion with their poet-in-residence about participating in the process. Lead by the Director of Education, the goals of this project had a particular resonance in Jacksonville, where they see the possibility of incorporating this strategy to achieve their educational mission and school-focused program planning.

"We want to spread it throughout the zoo. I want this to be something we incorporate in everything we do going forward. Because I am in education, what I try to do with the schools is see that [the zoo] is not limited to Life Science. When we take a look at the curriculum, depending on the fad of the year, science writing and science reading is big right now, AND poetry can do that. It doesn't have to be limited to boring things, it can still be scientific. Any program I can do to make it relevant beyond Life Science is huge to me." [zoo staff]

Other partners indicated that they were open to the idea of incorporating poetry in exhibits in the future with varying degrees of commitment at this stage. Milwaukee Zoo seemed to have substantial interest in pursuing this direction further in the future, taking into consideration the process and cost for permissions, rights, and other elements covered by Poets House. They also mentioned the way that the project had allowed their design department to innovate and use new approaches for exhibit and signage, including sculpture, theater lamps, and other unconventional materials. The different approach to messaging seemed to provide the foundation for this innovation, which was attractive to the zoo.

"When you have cognitive information that you're trying to get across, you don't want to reach out to do something out of the ordinary. You're not going into a different format because you only have so much time and funding to create what you need... This project gave [staff] freedom. It is a dept. that was [typically] limited to standard signage." [zoo staff]



Zoo staff in Little Rock and New Orleans also expressed a sense that they would be open to the idea of poetry for future installations, but were not sure the degree to which it would be possible or supported by administration, where such decision-making authority lies. Among Little Rock staff, for instance, partners reported that although they were not involved in the exhibit design process typically, they felt they would advocate for poetry use when they have the opportunity to provide input. In New Orleans, staff indicated that there was generally a positive response to the poetry exhibits among the design staff and administration, which could lead to opportunities for inclusion in the future. On the whole, however, these staff members did not think that it would greatly change their approach to exhibit design, as it was seen as a “quiet,” typical, grant-funded project, not as an institution-wide initiative.

“I think we are generally pretty open-minded [to exhibit strategies]. It definitely helped that there was a nice grant involved. [Administration is] open to new things when there’s a clear way to pay for it. I think it was well-received by our administration. Think they like it and are open to more in the future.” [zoo staff]

Beyond these statements, when project partners considered the impact of this project on their professional work, a substantial number of partners (zoo staff, library staff, and poets-in-residence) talked about the potential they saw for the expansion of this project’s underlying approach of incorporating conservation themed poetry in unconventional spaces or environments. Jacksonville Zoo partners, for instance, mentioned ongoing conversations with a place called the Desert Laboratory, one of the oldest, continuously-studied pieces of land in the United States, about the possibility of doing a poetry installation at their space. Other sentiments about the value of pursuing these directions included:

“I think it’s worth doing, fighting that battle, the idea that it [poetry] is not something for ordinary people... with the general public, there’s lots of prejudice, and that might have been because they had poetry read them when they weren’t ready in school with a teacher who didn’t care.” [poet-in-residence]

“That is something that could easily be expanded to numerous communities at a much lower cost than doing it in the zoo... Hospitals, big gathering spaces.” [zoo staff]

“...This is great! Could be done in so many places and to serve that particular place” [poet-in-residence]

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall, the *Language of Conservation* project was seen to be a success by all of its partners and collaborators, with a sense that individuals, institutions, and communities all benefited from the implementation of the project’s vision for using poetry as a language for communicating conservation themes in zoos and libraries.

In terms of the project’s secondary, process-related goals to foster collaboration and partnerships between its diversity of institutional partners, the project seemed, by and large, to successfully achieve its outcomes. On the whole, most sites were satisfied with their experience and reported a number of ways in which they were able to develop reasonably strong collaborations between zoo and library, as well as with poets-in-residence. As is reasonable, the depth and balance of these collaborations varied



by city, expertise of each partner, and systems of working that were developed. Looking at the strengths and challenges that were reported across the five city-partnerships highlights several key factors that seemed to consistently play into the development of partnerships and their ability to overcome challenges.

Across many of these cities, one of the partner organizations seemed to take leadership in the project and the collaboration, supporting the other institution in a number of ways. This occurred primarily in instances where one of the partners was struggling with circumstances such as staff turnover, staffing cuts, or being new to the project. By taking on the leadership role in these situations, the stronger institution was able to recognize the challenge and support the struggling partner, sharing expertise, guidance, and resources, in order to move the project forward productively. The challenge inherent in this was that feelings of unbalanced efforts in the project were observed. While this imbalance may have been a short-term issue due to the timing of the project, it seems important that any longer-term collaboration would require the partners to develop more balanced responsibilities and efforts for the partnership to survive.

Another extremely important factor of strength seen in these collaborations was the development of strong and positive working relationships, between zoo, library, and poet-in-residence. Nearly all of the partner cities described this as a key factor to their success, stressing the importance of building systems of working together and mutual understanding to create a positive, collaborative working relationship. As a crucial factor of partnership success, this was an area in which partners often had to overcome early challenges to find a strong working relationship. At the heart of many of these challenges was communication. The need for clear, consistent, and frequent communication between all partners seemed essential for preventing and addressing challenges and creating a strong working relationship. With different institutions and poets working at a distance, when communication between any partners would dwindle, struggles often emerged. Partners recommended strategies such as regular communication, even if to make a partner aware that one would be out of touch due to other, immediate priorities.

Zoos and libraries that seek to develop these types of collaborations also face the challenge of differences in institutional culture, structure, and audience bases. This emerged in a number of different ways across the project, but it was clear that zoos and libraries often had very different styles of working or philosophies about serving the public that needed to be navigated to achieve success. Whether dealing with difference in philosophy and finances around admission fees or the difference in institutional timelines for program planning and decision-making, mutually agreeable solutions had to be reached.

Another important attribute for success of the process related strongly to the zoo's ability to generate buy-in from staff. The concept of poetry in zoos was foreign to most staff on the project, and only partners working directly on the project were able to go to the Symposium, where much of the rationale and vision were established. Consequently, these individuals had the task of then generating support for the initiative across the other zoo staff. Looking across the sites, this seemed to work most effectively when staff created inclusive and collaborative systems that involved staff members from across the institution into the project and its decision-making. These participatory strategies seemed to have greatest effectiveness at generating true buy-in and commitment to the project in ways that were not achieved by simply presenting about the project or by a poetry selection process that was completed by the poet in isolation of the zoo staff.



An important part of the collaborative process had to do with the systems and relationships that developed between the poet-in-residence, the zoo, and (to a lesser degree) the libraries. A true factor of success seemed to be the strong fit between the poet and their partner city combined with the poets' intentional efforts to learn about, understand, and be responsive to the culture, needs, and audiences of that community. It appeared that at the heart of any success in this project was having a poet partner who demonstrated this level of dedication and understanding to customize their approach for a specific community, which was done with great success. The challenge that emerged in several cases, as these relationships were developed, centered around some lack of clarity around specific roles and authority in final selection of poetry for exhibits. While all partners successfully addressed this challenge, it was a point that several mentioned as a tension and an area that could be clarified for the future.

Finally, some partners and leadership highlighted that the project's design created an imbalance between zoo and library, with the majority of the focus being on the zoo, poet, and exhibit creation, and libraries feeling more like a supporter and enhancement to the project, but not at its core. The question arises whether future iterations of this type of project might shift the relationship and thus clarify the role and expectations of the library in the partnership, as was done unexpectedly in Brookfield. As one membership of the Leadership Team described:

"The core of the work has to happen between the poet and the zoo. They [the library] can't be equal partners in that intense work. I was happy to see the extent to which they [the libraries] could be collaborative supporters and I can't image a way of setting it up that would allow that to happen. That is the back bone of the project. I don't actually see a different way, except of course to change that underlying structure, and in fact, at Brookfield they did that." [leadership member]

In all the success of the project and these collaborations seemed to rest with the initial development of shared vision of the project's goals, purpose, and opportunities. This strong foundation, established in the initial Symposium and reinforced throughout the project, provided a common purpose that grounded each project, even in times of difficulty. These cases showed that true emphasis on collaboration and participatory processes between poets, zoos, and libraries created stronger networks and satisfaction with the exhibition products created. Most of the partners, particularly those who engaged in participatory processes and wide-reaching zoo-library collaborations, expressed strong commitment to ongoing community partnerships, collaborations, and extensions of the vision and goals of the *Language of Conservation* project. The lessons learned from this experience will likely support stronger partnerships in the future.

