

What Do Siberian Tigers and Rocky Mountain Grizzlies Have in Common?

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Lots, if you're trying to present global conservation messages in Calgary! The Calgary Zoo has taken on the many roles of the new zoo, from international and national conservation initiatives to educational leadership.

The Calgary Zoo has a large education department, with 11 full-time staff, and over 20 seasonal and part-time staff. The department has expanded from a staff of 3. The education department now has staff who work in particular areas, such as horticulture programs, value-added programs, revenue-generation programs, Zooschool, docent coordinators, and audiovisual media specialists.

I work in the value-added section, coordinating the summer interpretive season. In 1998, we presented programs in 8 areas around the zoo. Because our collection represents animals and plants from around the world, so does our programming. Program areas this last summer included Siberian tigers, Asian elephants, the African Bushveld, Rocky Mountains, boreal forest, gorillas, harbour seals, and dinosaurs. All seemingly diverse topics.

One of the overall themes for the Calgary Zoo, as a new zoo, is conservation. We really don't collect animals simply to display them anymore. In fact, most of our animals were born in captivity. We try to get the most educational value out of a particular animal's captive life. In our interpretive programs we aim to entice the visitor to learn more about that species, and about the threats to that animal's survival in the wild.

In 1998, over 140,000 people contacted an interpreter, either by attending Nature Tales, our formal interpretive programs, or by speaking with an interpreter on site. Because our site is a recreational draw for summer visitors, our programs need to be both educational and entertaining; while entertaining visitors, we slip them some knowledge.

Where does conservation fit with all this? Conservation is generally not a "fun" topic. It's hard to be light and bubbly while talking about a species on the brink of extinction. If you are too dour and serious, few people will take time to stop and watch your program. And yet, how can you talk

about Siberian tigers, with less than 600 in the world, in a light way? And the more you research, the more saddened you are by the situation.

Traditionally, the zoo has tried to hit people with the conservation message (a required element) at the end of the 20-minute program, so that they've had 19 minutes of fun and interesting facts, maybe sung or acted a bit, and then 1 minute of seriousness. However, the audience is now expecting the "hit" at the end and they tune out or walk off.

Our new approach is to try to weave a conservation message into the whole program. For instance:

- Wanda Whooper is desperate to find a mate, because there are so few male whoopers for her to choose from.
- Tigger finds out he's not the only one, but there's not too many of his kind of critter.
- Why are there harbour seals in Calgary? (They're rescue animals.)
- Exploring some of the theories about dinosaur extinction.
- Why it's so important that our western lowland gorillas are breeding, and that 1 female in particular has had more youngsters than the other 2 females.
- How our Asian elephants came to Calgary—2 were orphaned in the wild.
- Rocky Mountains 2020—a futuristic approach: what the Rockies will be like in 2020, and why grizzlies will only be seen at the zoo in the future.

CONCLUSION

Education is a part of conservation. Most people honestly don't know much about animals and the ecosystems they are found in. Our aim is to help excite some interest, and we are always happy to talk for hours to interested visitors. Television nature shows are often too heavy or too light for most viewers, and you can't ask questions afterwards. We try to provoke visitors, so they have to ask questions like:

- Aren't Siberian tigers white?
- Are the enclosures big enough?
- Are they bored?
- What are the elephant trainers doing?

- What do you feed them? Where does it come from?
- Do you go in with the animals? Are they dangerous?
- Why aren't there more babies at the zoo?
- What happened to the petting zoo?
- Where's the rhinoceros?
- Where do you get your animals?

We welcome these kinds of questions because it means our visitors are thinking about the zoo. Questions like these give us an opportunity to share more information with visitors than we normally do. As a new zoo, we should be confident enough to invite questions, so that we, and our visitors, can grow.