

Learning at the Zoo: Message Communication Through Docent-Visitor Interactions

Preethi R.S. Mony, Ph.D., preethi_mony@yahoo.com

As an important venue for adult learning, zoos use exhibits, signage, personnel, etc. to communicate mission-related conservation messages. Current research reveals that visitors know what messages the zoo wants them to get from the visit, but there is little research on where the visitors get these messages (Heimlich, Bronnenkant, Barlage & Falk, 2005).

Zoo visitors recognize the importance of signage but prefer to learn through interactions with a live person (Wolf & Tymitz, 1979). Most interactions occur with docents, as docents often outnumber full-time education staff. Research shows that the presence of a docent positively influences visitor stay time at exhibits and overall satisfaction with the visit (Anderson et al., 2003; Harris, 1995). However, there is limited research on the impact on the overall learning experience at the zoo. The goal of this study is to determine the impact of docent interactions on visitors' receptivity toward institutional messages

Methods:

The study was carried out in three phases at a large zoo in the Midwest that has a well established docent program. Phase I consisted of interviews with docents and visitors. In phase II, docent-visitor interactions were observed to determine extent of actual message communication. Some observations were followed by interviews with both participants in the interaction. This triangulation of data helped to validate findings and provide more insights into observed data. Finally an exit survey was used in phase III to confirm and quantify the results.

Findings:

Findings from the study show that visitors do receive the intended conservation messages during their visit. These conservation messages were not new to the visitors, but were reinforced during their visit. Docents were only partly aware of the zoo's overall conservation messages. They placed a greater emphasis on simply answering visitors' questions about the animals than on communicating messages.

The observation of docent-visitor interactions showed that though docents were communicating a lot of factual information about the animals being viewed, they rarely discussed messages. However, docents were more likely to use information to communicate messages when they initiated the conversation with visitors. Only a third of intercepted visitors had interacted with docents during their visit. These visitors rated docents as an important source of conservation messages, second only to signage.

Discussion:

The findings of this study support previous research that docents play an important role in influencing the visitor experience. Despite this, signage is still the primary reported source for conservation messages. This is primarily because interaction with docents is limited, and when interactions do occur, the information exchange generally relates to simple facts rather than overarching messages. Thus docent training should emphasize message communication skills.

References:

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