

Reid Park Zoo Volunteers Take on Elephant Animal-Rights Activists

Vivian W. VanPeenen
Curator of Education
Reid Park Zoo
1100 S. Randolph Way
Tucson, AZ 85716
vivian.vanpeenen@tucsonaz.gov

Introduction

The summer 2005 through spring 2006 was one of the most challenging, and ultimately rewarding, times in the history of Reid Park Zoo. Based on AZA recommendations, the Reid Park Zoo was engaged in initial planning to expand the Zoo and build a new 3-acre elephant exhibit. The very public approval process left the City of Tucson Zoo vulnerable to animal-rights activists, who utilized the situation to launch a full-blown campaign to have the Zoo's two female elephants sent to a sanctuary.

The Reid Park Zoo docents, understanding the restrictions Zoo staff members have with regard communicating with the media or Council members, launched their own counter-activist campaign. Over a period of three months, Reid Park Zoo docents, and their families and friends, collected over 18,000 signatures in support of keeping elephants in Tucson and building a new exhibit for them. The volunteers distributed buttons, passed out bumper stickers, and wrote letters to the media. Adding to the tasks restricted for City staff, they attended and spoke at Mayor and Council meetings, presented comment cards, and educated themselves about the issues being presented by the activists.

The volunteer actions dramatically effected the immediate outcome of the elephant situation at Reid Park Zoo. Zoo staff members believe that without the dedication of volunteers supporting the effort, the outcome may have been different. Through the active participation of a dedicated group of volunteers, the community's voice was heard – loud and clear. The Zoo received confirmation from Mayor and Council to move forward with an 8.5 million-dollar expansion and elephant enclosure.

How it Began

Although Mayor and Council voted unanimously in June 2005 to move forward with AZA's recommendations to breed the Zoo's African elephant and expand the exhibit, the funding had not yet been identified. The unknown status of the funding became the catalyst for animal rights activists to attack the Zoo. They utilized the time between the initial decision and the final vote for funding to try to convince Mayor, Council, and the Tucson Community to send the Zoo's two elephants to a sanctuary.

When activists began showing up at Reid Park Zoo late 2005, the Zoo's volunteers were angered by the claims of the vocal outsiders, and wanted to tell guests the "real" story. Keeping volunteers active and engaged is a challenging task, particularly for a small zoo. Organizing and communicating with volunteers regularly can be difficult even during the best of times. Consistency is an on-going issue.

Realizing that getting 100 volunteers to be consistent about anything is a challenge, Zoo staff began regularly updating docents. Staff shared information about the current AZA recommendations for elephants, informed docents about the legal public information requests being made by the activists, and provided feedback regarding many of the claims being made.

Even with the extensive amount of information being provided to volunteers about elephants (or maybe because of the volume of information), a handful of docents began to consider the claims of activists. It was confusing. Is it right to keep elephants at the Zoo? Would they be better off at the Sanctuary? Some docents were just confused about why activists were in front of the Zoo. One docent even signed the activist's petition, thinking it was a signature to build a better exhibit in Tucson. A handful of docents attempted to "educate" the activists by telling

them the “truth.” This usually ended poorly, with a confused and angered docent, whose words were twisted and attacked. Docents were growing frustrated.

Communication, Communication, Communication

Zoo staff members compiled a communication document that looked at the activists’ claims one by one. It discussed the difference between *life span* and *life expectancy*. It provided information about the *maximum* vs. *average* distance that an elephant walks per day, in the wild. It addressed sanctuaries vs. zoos with regard to accreditation, financial support, and animal care. It also addressed the cost of caring for elephants, the Reid Park Zoo’s training philosophy, and contribution of elephant *in-situ* conservation efforts by zoos.

Staff members held short training meetings to review this information in a discussion format. Docents, keepers, and administrative staff members all attended – forming impromptu discussion groups around the issues. Although not mandatory, almost every docent attended. After the training sessions, docents quickly re-aligned themselves and decided to take on the activists.

The activists were very good at what they did. They were vocal, well spoken, consistent, and persistent. Above all, they were passionate. They were attending Mayor and Council meetings and approaching the media. However, the docents’ passion was growing around the situation as well, and they wanted to clearly convey the public’s interest in keeping the elephants in Tucson. They were hearing support for the Zoo from guests every day. Guests were frustrated by the spectacle at the entrance. Docents wanted the other “side” of the story to be heard as well.

As a City Zoo, staff members were very limited with regard to taking action. Staff members could not restrict the actions of the activists. Staff could not directly communicate with Mayor or Council without an invitation to do so. Staff members could not solicit comment from guests regarding the elephant issue unless the result of a public complaint. This left volunteers very frustrated with the Zoo, and didn’t understand why the Zoo was not “doing anything.”

The Volunteers’ Initiative

The Tucson Zoological Society (TZS), the Zoo’s non-profit support organization, initiated a communication with its board and membership to clarify the issues that were becoming quite public. The media began running stories about the controversy and TZS had the flexibility to respond; City staff did not. In the spring 2006, in the midst of the now all-consuming battle with the animal rights activists, the Reid Park Zoo docents took it upon themselves to align themselves with TZS, and take on the anti-zoo activists.

Because the Zoo is a City supported entity, the docents were very careful to make the initiative themselves, but were also careful to maintain communication with the Zoo staff, as well the Tucson Zoological Society staff. The Society financially supported the efforts of the docents and became the official organizers of their efforts, because the Zoo needed to remain as neutral as possible.

A single docent gathered a small group. The small group reached the entire docent population. They began by collecting signatures and statements from Zoo guests. The efforts included offering information to Zoo guests, being available at the front gate and exhibit to answer questions, and passing out information and stickers. The signatures in support of elephants began to mount, and the docents gained confidence.

The Problems

The initial arrival of the docents at the front gate of the Zoo caused quite a stir. The activists became confrontational with docents, stuck cameras in their faces, and shouted at them. Several docents were uncomfortable with the insults and provocation, and decided not to participate. Other docents seemed to take it as a challenge, and spent even more time collecting signatures and communicating with guests.

One docent was video taped by an activist giving incorrect information to a guest. Although the docent clarified the information with Zoo staff, the activists utilized this misstep as a very public example, replaying the video for

Mayor and Council, and claiming that the entire docent group was purposely feeding misinformation to the guests at the instruction of the Zoo.

One additional issue that arose was inevitable burn-out. Docents had an initial burst of activity but slowed rather quickly. A handful of the core group remained active and encouraged the rest. As final dates for decisions approached, the entire group rallied again to collect and compile signatures for presentation. If the efforts were required of an extended period of time, the docents indicated it would have been difficult to maintain the initiative.

The Result

As signatures began to mount, volunteers with both the Society and the docent organization began a letter writing campaign to Mayor and Council, and many decided to write opinion statements for local newspapers. Over several months, the battle played out in the media. The “call to the audience” during City study sessions became filled with zoo volunteers and supporters on one side, and animal rights activists on the other. It was a weekly spectacle.

The culmination occurred on Tuesday, April 11 in Mayor and Council chambers. It was the date for the final vote to approve a funding strategy for the expansion and new elephant exhibit. Zoo volunteers arranged for a final display of support by organizing a penny-campaign with children. They marched small children into the Council chambers with piggy banks filled with allowances, plastic bags of milk money, and even a red wagon filled with change collected from teachers, family and friends. Docents waved red and white signs boasting “I (heart) Tucson Elephants. Keep Them Here!”

Keepers and docents cried tears of pride together as council members individually took a final turn to state their position. Almost every council member (with only one dissenting) took the final opportunity to acknowledge the professionalism and expertise of the staff, and the dedication of the volunteers. One council member, having visited the elephants to get an up-close look at their feet stated, “I, myself, would like that much attention being paid to mine.” City Council voted 6-1 in favor of the proposed funding strategy.

Summary

The fight is not over. The activists stated clearly that they will continue to be a presence until construction is done, and even after the elephants are in their new home. For now, the activists are quiet, with just an occasional Freedom of Information Act request for the Zoo. Perhaps it is the eye of the storm, with the worst to come.

Never has Reid Park Zoo staff been as united with its volunteers. Never has the Zoo been as proud of the individuals who serve its institution. The staff and volunteers worked together, cried together, and cheered together in support of the Zoo, its residents, and its mission.

The Zoo staff learned that the docent organization is capable of much more than originally imagined. They educated themselves about complex issues, participated in an intense public and political battle, and they brought the community together to support the Zoo that they love. There is no more powerful tool that could have won this battle than the dedicated group of volunteers who took on the animal rights activists....and won.