

Zoo Education and Interpretation - Opportunities and Challenges

**Meena Raghunathan,
Meena Nareshwar***

Abstract

The World Zoo Conservation Strategy emphasizes that the use of a variety of educational techniques, facilities and considerations, together with knowledge, creativity and inventiveness can make zoos highly interesting, attractive and effective places for environmental conservation and holistic life system education.

Zoological gardens provide an opportunity to open up a whole new world of curiosity and interest, and sensitize visitors regarding the value and need for conservation of wildlife. Zoos were initially started for the entertainment of people. Gradually over the years, they have come to play an important role in conservation. The ultimate goal of zoos is the conservation of animals in the wild and with the UN declaring the coming decade as decade for Sustainable Development zoos definitely can and need to play a major role.

Zoos are visited by large number of people and they are potential sites for educating people about wildlife and biodiversity conservation. Zoo education can make a serious contribution to a sustainable future by providing lifestyle information and examples for our visitors to make informed choices. In India there are more than 150 zoos, and they attract as many as 50 million visitors annually.

The Centre for Environment Education (CEE) has been working since its inception to increase the education value of zoos and other zoo facilities and tap the potentiality that exists in zoos. Interpretation has been one of the thrust areas of the Centre and now in order to fully exploit opportunities at zoos, Zoo Education and Interpretation is a separate programme initiative of the Centre. The thrust of CEE' s Zoo education programme is:

- Setting up Interpretation Centers in Zoos to provide a pre-visit orientation to the visitors as well as to function as an Education Centre of the Zoo.
- Providing interpretive facilities for visitors coming to zoos, like on-site information through signages, wayside exhibits facility signs and Zoo map.

*Centre for Environment Education
Ahmedabad, India
zooeducation@ceeindia.org

- Developing publications and relevant Zoo literature like Zoo brochures, guides, manual, handbook etc. These could serve as good learning material for students and teachers and also provide interesting information for the other visitors.
- Organizing training programmes, which aim at developing skills for education in zoos for zoo staff.

In the area of Zoo Education and Interpretation CEE has designed and developed programmes for the Delhi zoo and the Vandalur , Chennai, Mysore and Coimbatore zoos, all located in South India.

The challenge while doing these programmes has been catering to the diversity and variety of the audiences and the multilingual nature of these programmes.

The World Zoo Conservation Strategy emphasizes that the use of a variety of educational techniques, facilities and considerations, together with knowledge, creativity and inventiveness can make zoos highly interesting, attractive and effective places for environmental, conservation and holistic life system education.

Today zoological gardens/zoos provide an opportunity to open up a whole new world of curiosity and interest in the natural world and sensitize visitors regarding the value and need for conservation of wildlife. Zoos were initially started for the entertainment of people. Gradually over the years, they have come to play an important role in conservation. The ultimate goal of zoos is the conservation of animals in the wild and with the UN declaring the coming decade as Decade for Sustainable Development, zoos definitely can and need to play a major role.

Zoos all over the world serve some 600 million visitors annually, and their potential for making people of all ages aware of the threats to the global ecology is unlimited. The enormous number of people reached by the zoo network, coupled with the global perspective in which each individual zoo presents the elements of nature, results in great potential for global conservation through the network.

Zoos in the 21st century have a very important role to play in the goal of creating a sustainable future. Zoo education can make a serious contribution to a sustainable future by sharing information on biodiversity and conservation-related issues.

The World Zoo Conservation Strategy states that the zoo, in all of its details, is intrinsically educational; and education is an indispensable part of the zoo's attractiveness.

In India there are more than 150 zoos. On the basis of the area, number of animals and variety, exhibited as well as the number of visitors, zoos are classified into large, medium and small. They attract as many as 50 million visitors annually. We have urban, rural, literate and illiterate people who visit zoos. India too has recognised the importance of zoos as a site for education and learning.

Scope of Education and Interpretation in Zoos

Zoos are like large classrooms where a number of activities, specifically for children, teachers and school groups can be conducted. Zoos displaying live animals can capture the attention and affection of the public for wildlife and nature like no other institution. Living animals clearly have an enormous power of attraction and are the great and unique feature of zoos and form the very basis of zoo education.

People visiting zoos are interested in learning about the animals, their habitat, behaviour and conservation status. Zoos are therefore appropriate places to impart to the visitor information about animals, their habitats, biology and threats to their existence. An array of biological and other themes can be explained through zoo education. These include themes such as animal adaptations, behaviour, reproduction, and nutrition, and also complex subjects such as evolution and ecology.

Zoo programmes can explain how easily the subtle balances in natural habitats and ecosystems are disturbed by human interference and the connections between human consumption and life style and the survival of species and biological systems.

Zoos provide a range of opportunities to educate a great variety of people and groups of all ages and levels. Many people of diverse groups visit zoos including different age and educational levels and different social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Providing education, communication and information relevant to all these groups is a challenge.

Several educational and interpretive facilities could be provided in zoos to enhance, sensitize, educate and enrich the visitors' experience. In zoos, such programmes help visitors understand the uniqueness of each animal and its relationship to its surrounding.

Interpretation is defined as an educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media rather than communicating factual information.

Increasingly Interpretation is also emerging as a vital tool that helps to impress on visitors the critical link between environment and sustainable development. Today, sustainable development issues need to be addressed.

There are various tools and techniques that can be used for education and communication at a zoo. Interpretation is one of them. Interpretation programmes aim at converting the visit of increasing number of people to zoos, national parks and heritage sites into an educational opportunity, enhancing and enriching the visitors' experience by providing information through a variety of media:

- * Signages
- * Exhibits
- * 2D and 3D models
- * Interpretation Centre
- * Nature Trails
- * Publications etc.

Other educational tools and techniques include specially designed programmes for school and college groups, which help them understand curriculum-related concepts, celebration of events such as Wildlife Week, World Forestry Day, Animal Welfare Fortnight, etc., and outreach programmes, school visits, training programmes, celebration of animal births, new animal enclosures, special conservation programmes with other zoos, workshops, seminars, etc .

Thrust of CEE's Zoo Education and Interpretation Programmes

The Government of India initiated the National Zoo Policy in 1998. This policy aims at giving people direction and thrust to the management of zoos. The policy gives due importance to education and outreach activities in zoos.

The National Zoo Policy has a special section on Education and Outreach Activity which states that, "Each zoo should have a well drawn-up plan for educating the visitors as well as others in the community."

"Attractive and effective signage methods and interactive displays to explain activities of various species to visitors, published education material and audio-visual devices for driving home the conservation message. A formal education programme should also be pursued for strengthening the education message."

CEE has been working since its inception in 1984, to increase the environmental education value of zoos and other zoo facilities. Interpretation has been one of the thrust areas of the Centre and it is trying to fully exploit opportunities at zoos.

The programmes CEE designs aim to enhance the natural experience by providing on-site information through signages, exhibits, orientation and visitor centres and create a strong impact that go a long way in increasing public commitment to the cause of conservation.

The thrust of CEE's Zoo education programme is:

- Providing interpretive facilities for visitors coming to zoos, such as on-site information through signages, wayside exhibits, facility signs and a Zoo map. Interpretation Centres to provide pre-visit orientation is another component.
- Developing publications and relevant Zoo literature such as Zoo brochures, guides, manual, handbook, etc. These could serve as good learning material for students and teachers and also provide interesting information for the other visitors.
- Organizing training programmes, which aim at developing skills for education in zoos.
These could be for teachers and zoo staff.

CEE has developed a variety of zoos including Interpretation programmes for the National Zoological Park, Delhi, Arignar Anna Zoological Park, Chennai and the Coimbatore Zoo, Tamil Nadu. Media developed for these included signages, wayside exhibits, large- sized maps, 3-D models and a variety of publications.

The major challenge for CEE while doing these programmes has been to cater to the diversity and variety of the audiences visiting the zoos and the multilingual nature of these visitors.

Zoos also have a large percentage of groups who cannot read and write. To cater to these groups, CEE attempts to design and develop animal enclosure signages which are visually attractive and communicative, as well as interactive exhibits which do not necessarily need people to read.

Some Interpretation Programmes

The Delhi Zoo houses two man-made lakes, which attract a large number of migratory birds and draw many visitors. Many students also carry out various research projects on these migratory birds. Taking this as a potential opportunity to enrich and educate the visitors, CEE has developed bird signages for the zoo, which interpret the variety of the migratory birds, their dependence on the water bodies and other unique characteristics. The signages were developed both in English and Hindi, the local language.

The Arignar Anna Zoological Park, one of the largest zoos of South-east Asia also has diverse target audiences visiting the zoo, though students form a major group. As a result of the feedback gathered from zoo visitors, the zoo authorities felt that there was a need to develop a handbook on animals of the zoo, which would give detailed and interesting facts and figures about the animals housed in the zoo, information about the zoo, its history, role of the zoo and zoo ethics that visitors need to follow while in the zoo. To cater to this need CEE has developed a Handbook on the Animals of the Zoo which is used by various visitor groups.

Signages and exhibits developed for the Coimbatore Zoo were done in an interesting and exciting manner, wherein a question and answer format was adopted. The interpretive facilities developed for the zoo were designed and developed keeping in mind, commonly asked questions by the visitors to the zoo. Zoo Ethics signage and a set of signs called “ I Wonder “ were developed. These signs tried to answer many queries raised by the zoo visitors.

Some Training Programmes

CEE in collaboration with the Madras Crocodile Bank Trust organized a three-day training programme entitled “Environment Education and Interpretation through Nature Discovery Centre” for the Crocodile Bank Staff, local teachers, NGOs and other interested individuals.

CEE also coordinated a three-day module on Zoo Education and Interpretation for middle-level zoo personnel, veterinarians and zoo education officers. The module was developed in collaboration with the Wildlife Institute of India. The module focused on importance of Zoo Education, Interpretation and Conservation Education. Emphasis was given to different approaches in zoo education and the participants went through several exercises and hands-on experiences.

A training programme was organized by CEE in collaboration with the Mysore Zoo. The training programme was organized for zoo volunteers, teachers, NGOs and few media personnel.

The participants were exposed to various approaches in Environmental Education (EE), use of media in zoos and opportunities for using EE in Basics of Interpretation of zoos. A SWOT (strength, weakness, opportunities, and threats) analysis was carried out and an exercise on linking zoo and school curriculum was also done. Then all the participants drew out an individual Annual Action Plan of activities.

Supporting Zoo Education

CEE has also brought out a manual for teachers entitled “Wild at the Zoo - An Information and Activity Manual on Educational Opportunities in a Zoo”.

This manual contains many activities that can be conducted by school teachers in the zoo during their visits. These activities are linked to the school curriculum and thus aid in enhancing concepts learnt in the school system. This manual has also been adapted and translated into a few local languages.

CEE’s Zoo Education programmes support zoo managements, teachers, NGOs and others who use zoos as educational facilities.

Zoo Education is therefore more than just information, awareness, sensitizing and creating appreciation towards wildlife and biodiversity and inspiration - it is a call to action.

Exchange of educational knowledge, information, and expertise between zoos in all parts of the world will enhance the effectiveness of the global zoo network for conservation network.

References

Dhun and Hema Karkaria(1992) Beyond Signage-Interpreting India's Heritage, Centre for Environment Education

Tilden, Freeman(1957) Interpreting Our Heritage, University of North Caroline Press, Chapell Hill North Carolina

John A.Veverka, Interpretive Master Planning, Acorn Naturalists, 1998