

ENCOUNTERS AT THE ZOO: THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN CONTRIBUTING TO THE WILDLIFE CONSERVATION MISSION

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Today zoos position themselves as conservation centres, having undergone a paradigm shift from their previous incarnations as first menageries and then zoological gardens (Figure 1 - Rabb, 1994). Influencing zoo visitors to effect changes in their behaviour in support of wildlife conservation is central to this conservation role, and with over 700 million visitors worldwide per annum (Moss *et al.*, 2014) zoos have the potential to reach a large audience. This short article briefly outlines how zoos are currently engaging with behaviour change and considers, with reference to a current research project, an alternative framework for addressing this agenda. It also presents preliminary findings from this research, which raise important issues regarding how we understand the experience at the zoo and other wildlife attractions.

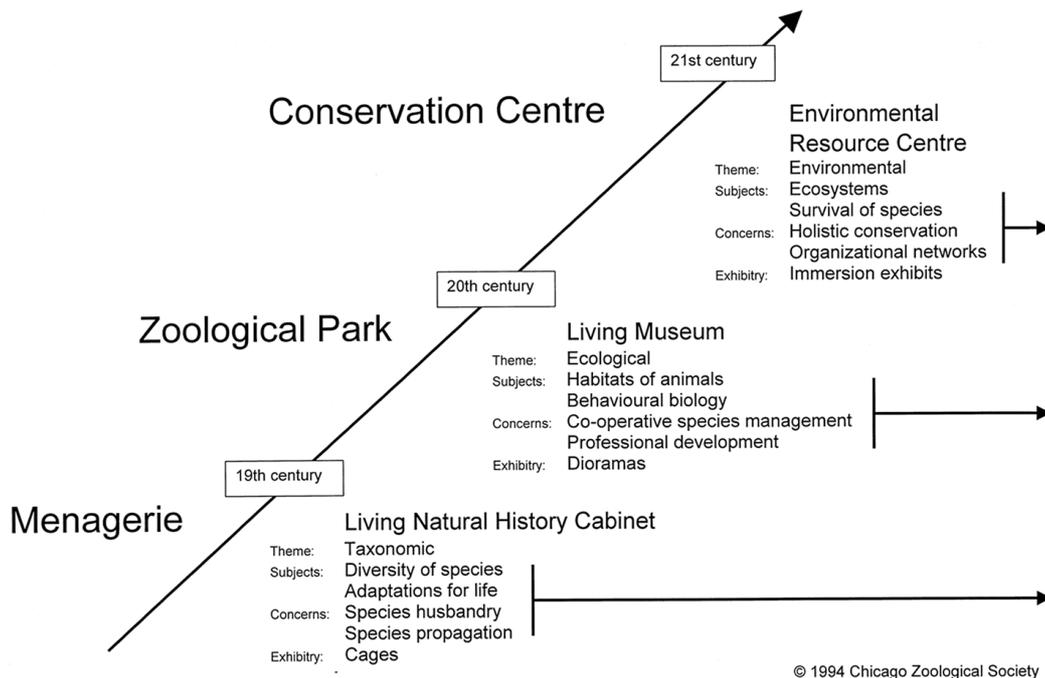


Figure 1: Evolution of zoos and aquariums (source: Rabb, 1994).

INTRODUCTION

CHANGING VISITOR BEHAVIOUR AT THE ZOO

Community-based social marketing (CBSM)

At present CBSM is the predominant framework adopted by zoos to inform their approach to behaviour change. This utilises techniques from psychology and mainstream marketing to promote a specific behaviour to a group of individuals in a particular setting (McKenzie Mohr, 2011). This is exemplified by the 'Don't Palm Us Off' campaign at Zoos Victoria (Pearson *et al.*, 2014), which aims to raise awareness of the impact of the palm oil industry on rainforest ecosystems, encouraging visitors to purchase products only containing sustainable palm oil and to petition government for mandatory labelling of palm oil. Evaluation of this and other zoo-based CBSM campaigns is based on the quantitative measurement of the number of people undertaking a desired behaviour.

Limitations of CBSM

Zoo-based research into CBSM programmes indicates that it is proving a useful tool to encourage changes in visitors' behaviours. However, it is a resource-intensive approach, requiring a specific campaign for each conservation message. It can be hard to show causality between a visit to the zoo and changes in visitor behaviour (MacDonald,

2015), and it does not enable capture of other aspects of the visitors' experience, which may have meaning in terms of visitors understanding and appreciation of wildlife.

More widely the psychological approach exemplified by CBSM has come under criticism. Whilst it has provided the dominant paradigm for securing pro-environmental behaviours within neo-liberal governance agendas (Jackson, 2005), its inability to address environmental issues (Huddart Kennedy *et al.*, 2015) has led social scientists to argue for alternative approaches to behaviour change that engage more holistically with the emotional dimension of human decision making (Whitehead *et al.*, 2011). In light of this, a range of frameworks has been developed, including Values and Frames (Crompton, 2010) and Environmental Citizenship (Dobson, 2010).

EMOTIONS AT THE ZOO – RETHINKING APPROACHES TO BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Zoos provide opportunities for embodied, close-up encounters with a range of animals (Figure 2). Beardsworth and Bryman (2001) have characterised this as a particular form of human-animal engagement, where the zoo animals are 'presented' in non-natural settings for the visiting public. Such multi-sensory encounters (Davies, 2000) have the power to elicit a range of emotional responses from visitors. Although limited, zoo-based research within the context of environmental behaviour change is indicative of the potential importance of the emotional dimension of visitor-animal encounters. It has highlighted that the zoo can elicit feelings of empathy, care and concern for both the zoo animal and its conspecifics in the wild (Clayton *et al.*, 2011).



FIGURE 2: Close-up encounters with endangered species at the zoo – red ruffed lemur and rhinoceros (source: author photographs).

In response to this, a PhD research project funded by the Whitley Wildlife Conservation Trust and in partnership with the University of Exeter is currently exploring the emotional dimension of the zoo experience, and the meaning of these emotional encounters on visitors' relationships to wildlife and their associated capacities to adopt pro-environmental behaviours.

RESEARCH STUDY AT PAIGNTON ZOO, DEVON

Aim

To explore the emotional landscape of the zoo experience in contributing to the wildlife conservation mission of the zoo.

Objectives

1. To describe the emotional responses of zoo visitors to the zoo experience;
2. To explore and identify the meaning of these emotional responses on visitors' relationships to wildlife and wider nature conservation;
3. To develop an alternative conceptualisation of behaviour change for application within the zoo community.

Methods

Applying an ethnographic approach, to date underutilised in zoo visitor studies, the fieldwork was undertaken between November 2016 and September 2017 at Paignton Zoo, Devon. A theoretical approach to sampling (Crang and Cook, 2007) was taken to participant engagement in the study. With a qualitative methodological framing,

the study was not trying to be representative of all visitors to Paignton Zoo, so it was not necessary to achieve a statistically robust number of participants. The focus instead was on gaining access to those individuals and/or groups of people who were concerned or involved in some measure in the research questions (ibid), in this case visitors to Paignton Zoo. In total 14 visitor groups participated in the study. These groups comprised 38 individuals in total, made up of 24 adults (17 female; 7 male), 10 children and young people aged 3-15 years (7 female; 3 male) and 4 children under 3 years (1 female; 4 male). The make-up of the groups ranged from individuals and couples, through to family and friendship groups. Some groups were members of Paignton Zoo, visiting regularly throughout the year, whereas others lived further afield, visiting every year or so as part of a family holiday.

Initially, the researcher carried out ‘go-along’ interviews (Kusenbach, 2003) with groups of visitors recruited through adverts on Paignton Zoo’s website, Twitter account and Facebook page. This approach enabled the researcher to accompany each group for part of their zoo visit, and to ask them to describe their emotional responses to the animals they encountered. These zoo interviews were undertaken during winter, spring and summer, providing a wide range of weather and crowd conditions. A week or two after the zoo visit, the researcher interviewed each visitor group at home to reflect on the meaning of their emotional responses in relation to their attitudes towards and actions in support of wildlife.

Early reflections

Whilst the fieldwork for this research has now been completed, a systematic qualitative analysis of the data has yet to be undertaken. However, even at this stage it is possible to highlight some early reflections from working in the field.

EMOTIONAL RESPONSES AT THE ZOO

TABLE 1. Categories of emotional responses to animal during zoo visit.

Category of emotional response to animal during zoo visit
Anger
Awe, wonder and appreciation
Boredom and indifference
Concern, sadness and despair
Conflicting or mixed emotions
Discomfort
Enjoyment, excitement and pleasure
Fear and dislike
Guilt
Intangible (hard to say)
Love, empathy and connection

The zoo visit can elicit a wide range of emotional responses in relation to the animals encountered, which are categorised in Table 1. At this stage it is only possible to provide some short, preliminary descriptions of these emotions. However, these are indicative of the importance of exploring and understanding how visitors experience their encounters with animals at the zoo. As might be expected, visitors derive a great deal of pleasure from seeing many of the animals at the zoo. This enjoyment is often allied to feelings of awe, wonder and appreciation, related to aspects such as the animals’ physical characteristics and behaviours:

“ I always think they’re so beautiful, and like their faces, they’re so symmetrical aren’t they and the stripes and stuff, I dunno it’s like nature’s wonderful isn’t it.”
 (30-year-old female describing encounter with a tiger)

Of particular note is that such appreciation can also extend to feelings of empathy and connection. This is especially prominent in the case of members of Paignton Zoo, who visit at least on a monthly basis. These visitors expressed strong feelings of appreciation and care towards individual zoo animals, which also extended to the animal’s conspecifics in the wild. In this way the wild animal, whilst remaining physically remote, becomes emotionally proximate for these visitors:

“ ... I think because we have a familiarity with them, we have an affinity with them now as we see them so frequently, and even though those animals are nicely protected and safe in the zoo, their species, their kin are endangered in the rest of the world.”
 (35-year-old female)

However, for many visitor groups emotions were often mixed and at some points in conflict. Conflict can arise in relation to fascination or enjoyment being influenced by fear or dislike about particular species:

“Whoa, spiders, keep them away! (laughs). They’re amazing but as long as they’re not on me (laughs).”
(44-year-old male)

In addition, the conflict can relate to the captive state of the animal and also to concerns about the endangered state of particular species:

“Well you just sort of don’t know, I don’t like to think of them being unhappy and uh, you know it makes you question the whole thing about having them in these confined spaces.”
(52-year-old female watching tigers)

“I love it, so like I wander round here and it breaks my heart to see you know that animal might not be here in 20 years, that animal’s not gonna be here in 20 years, you know, it really depresses me.”
(51-year-old male)

DISSONANCE BETWEEN EMOTIONS AND BEHAVIOURS

Many visitors identified the importance of their experiences at the zoo in securing more positive, caring attitudes towards endangered species and the wider natural world. However, in relation to undertaking behaviours in support of wildlife and nature, there can be some dissonance between these attitudes and associated behaviours. This phenomenon has occurred elsewhere in behavioural studies – the term Value-Action Gap (Blake, 1999) is often used to describe the lack of continuity between environmental knowledge, awareness and pro-environmental behaviours. However, it is important to recognise the specific issues that may influence dissonance within the context of the zoo. Visitors reported a range of barriers to undertaking pro-environmental behaviours beyond the boundary of the zoo, including: sense of individual agency; perceptions of environmental problems; awareness of how to help tackle issues; care and concern receding after the zoo visit; and everyday lifestyle and habits. It is hoped that revealing the nature of these barriers can assist the zoo in its future work to engage the help of visitors in securing its wildlife conservation mission.

CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

This research is highlighting the value of capturing and understanding the emotional dimension of the zoo visit. Through detailed qualitative analysis, it is anticipated that an alternative conceptualisation of behaviour change which engages richly with the zoo’s emotional landscape will be developed for discussion with the zoo community.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

This paper was first presented at a Slapton Ley Field Centre research seminar. The Whitley Wildlife Conservation Trust owns both Paignton Zoo and the Slapton Ley National Nature Reserve.

