



WAZA

*World Association
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NEWS

WAZA 2023
Animal
Welfare Goal

Re-Establishing
Scimitar-Horned
Oryx in Tunisia

Loro Parque
Animal Embassy,
at the Forefront of
Sustainability

Indigenous Peoples
and Local Communities'
Perspectives
Represented in Exhibits

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WAZA Membership

WAZA Members as of 27 October 2023

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Life	102
Honorary	35

Future WAZA Conference

2024 Taronga Zoo, Sydney, Australia, 3-7 November

Contents



6



18



22



24



31

President's Letter	4	Aquarium Drives Change in Sustainable Seafood	31
CEO's Letter	5	New Center for Species Survival Dives into Freshwater Biodiversity	33
Highlights from WAZA Annual Conference	6	Beetle-Mania in Denmark	35
WAZA 2023 Animal Welfare Goal	8	Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities' Perspectives Represented in Exhibits	37
2024 New Fee Structure	10	Reverse the Red Announces World Species Congress	39
The WAZA 2027 Population Management Goal	12	Kiitos Korkeasaari: EAZA Annual Conference	41
WAZA Launches Reverse the Red Short Guide	16	Positive Impact via Partnership and Community: ZAA's Annual Conference	43
Re-Establishing Scimitar-Horned Oryx in Tunisia	18	Zoo and Aquarium Education	45
Loro Parque Animal Embassy, at the Forefront of Sustainability	20	Update on International Studbooks	46
Giving Beavers a Bright Future in Scotland	22	Behind the ZIMS	47
Amazon Rescue Center - the Dallas World Aquarium	24	WAZA Welcomes New Members	49
Toronto Zoo's Green Journey: Achieving Net-Zero	26		
Kolmården Wildlife Park: A Role Model for Sustainability and Animal Conservation	29		



Zoos and Aquariums are Changing their Exhibits to Represent Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities' Perspectives

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Family photo at Auckland Zoo © Auckland Zoo

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Zoos and aquariums aim to inspire and engage people visiting their institutions to get involved. Through its Social Change for Conservation Strategy, WAZA encourages zoos to develop and deliver clear messaging, engaging content and innovative programming.¹

Global calls for increased and meaningful engagement with Indigenous peoples and local communities, represented through exhibitions and signage in zoos, provoke a rethinking and redefinition of the mandate of conservation education. Dr Judy Mann-Lang's (Executive for Strategic Projects at Two Oceans Aquarium Education Foundation, South Africa and WAZA Council Member) doctoral research highlights that "little work has been done to explore the impact that culture (and in the case of multicultural audiences, cultural diversity) has on visitors' conservation learning experiences in zoos and aquariums". Notably, this call for purposeful action challenges the existing audience engagement structures and strategies for zoos. For example, zoo structures, landscapes and educational information such as signage and images. Dr Alejandro Grajal, the President and CEO of the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, termed it "Reimagining Exhibits", a process that starts with an act of humility. Bartlett et al. (2012) describes this process as 'two-eyed seeing'. Two-eyed seeing is an educational process proposed by elders of the Mi'kmaq First Nation (Canada) that combines two knowledge systems, such as traditional and modern, to improve conservation outcomes.²

How the complex undertaking of catering to multicultural audiences and cultural diversity is undertaken by zoos depends on each zoo's environment and surrounding socio-cultural contexts, the solutions that they find are therefore unique to each zoo. To understand how zoos from different regions of the world have changed and adapted their exhibits and signage to be more inclusive and representative, from February 2023 to June 2023, we interviewed senior conservation scientists and chief executive officers from five zoos.

Zoos are valuable assets for change in conservation culture

In an effort to reimagine their exhibits, zoo staff highlighted that they endeavour to be representative of the local and Indigenous contexts and to serve those communities through their zoo landscape. The team from Woodland Park Zoo stated that zoos have the unique opportunity to change behaviour in people because they represent knowledge through conservation education. By acknowledging their controversial history, zoos can also be catalysts for social change. Zoos Victoria has also embarked on a journey of transformation by confronting the past, changing how colonial history was previously taught. Dr Sally Sherwen, the Director of Wildlife and Conservation Science, explained that to start the critical conversation process and establish a strong foundation to build upon, cultural safety training should be the first priority. An experienced contractor facilitated training and awareness on the impacts of colonisation for executives and initiated important, yet challenging, conversations. Included were discussions on how zoo exhibitions can make visitors from different backgrounds experience what is being represented.

Auckland Zoo is starting to weave together immersive landscape design and Māori design principles to strengthen how it develops all visitor spaces within the zoo that reflect the unique cultural context of modern Aotearoa New Zealand. Encompassing one fifth of the zoo, Te Wao Nui is the Aotearoa New Zealand track which offers both locals and tourists a truly unique experience of Aotearoa animals, plants and culture in a way that has never been done before, and all in one location at Auckland Zoo. Visitors can explore six different regions of Aotearoa, from picturesque alpine areas to dense night forests. Multimodal interpretation celebrates and interweaves Indigenous thought into physical features of the habitats, conservation learning programmes, volunteer engagement, keeper talks, and calls to conservation action.

Dr Sarah Thomas, the Head of Conservation Advocacy and Engagement, emphasised how the zoo is committed to a long-term journey of strengthening its relationship with Te Ao Māori (Māori Worldview), and the zoo's habitats are just one piece of the puzzle within a larger organisational system change around Te Ao Māori and delivering better outcomes for Māori.

Similarly, the team at Toronto Zoo aims to address social justice in conservation through the culture of the zoo. Jennifer Franks, the Director of Indigenous Relations, stated that the zoo will "move at the speed of trust" as their ethos is grounded in building relationships and creating a space to best serve the community. The zoo and communities co-design projects and habitats by employing collaborative strategies. These include advisory circles, engaging Indigenous architects to incorporate Indigenous design principles and creating spaces within the zoo landscape. Specifically, they have set aside 41 acres of land within their project Master Plan to provide communities with a space to practice their ceremonies. Likewise, the Woodland Park Zoo is transforming its practices by establishing a team culture which recognises how the zoo should transition. Within 37 exhibits, the Woodland Park team seeks to reset their values and strategic vision by utilising the Theory of Change. For instance, the zoo brought in local voices to design their Tibet and Papua New Guinea exhibits. They conducted 14 design workshops with local people, an approach that the exhibit architects found to be "revolutionary".

"Reimagining Exhibits"

Exhibits are conservation education platforms that have the power to inform the visiting public on biodiversity protection, endangered species conservation, as well as socio-cultural aspects that are interwoven in these issues. The gradual journey to achieving the mission of the zoo whilst incorporating transformative strategies can be challenging. However, the zoos interviewed have begun to sensitise their practices in response to socio-cultural concerns raised by society. The "two-eyed seeing" educational process could provide practical steps to "reimagining exhibits" (Bartlett et al, 2012). The examples from the various zoos above, incorporate some of these collaborative strategies to combine Indigenous and mainstream science and knowledge. The process includes acknowledging co-dependency of knowledge systems, viewing science in an inclusive way, going beyond discussing issues to actioning them, viewing knowledge, actions and values as an object to be addressed, and developing advisory councils of willing, knowledgeable stakeholders from various knowledge backgrounds (Bartlett et al, 2012).

"How do we become a zoo distinct of modern Aotearoa New Zealand?" This is an important and timely question posed by the Auckland Zoo team as they established a roadmap of cultural inclusivity as part of their mission to 'bring people together to build a future for wildlife'. To be as inclusive and representative as possible, Auckland Zoo acknowledges the country's difficult past whilst preparing for the future. The zoo continues to build relationships with Mana Whenua (Māori with ancestral rights and authority of the land, native species and natural resources) of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, and is committed to listening to the voices and needs of the Māori communities that the zoo serves. Te Reo Māori (Māori language) is now seen, heard, spoken and learnt throughout Auckland Zoo and Indigenous thoughts are being assimilated into all parts of the zoo's landscape. Additionally, they have embedded Te Ao Māori (Māori worldview) principles, practices and values of looking after the earth for future generations by weaving this into the organisation's commitment to conservation, education and social outcomes.

¹https://www.waza.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/10.06_WZACES_spreads_20mbFINAL.pdf

²Bartlett, C., Marshall, M., & Marshall, A. (2012). Two-eyed seeing and other lessons learned within a co-learning journey of bringing together indigenous and mainstream knowledges and ways of knowing. *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences*, 2, 331-340

In the same breath, Cali Zoo in Colombia communicates ongoing work with surrounding communities in their exhibits. Similarly, through context-specific engagement, Zoos Victoria have incorporated training activities that inform guidelines representing local communities on the physical property of the zoo.

Conclusion

Zoos will continue to educate the public on conservation related matters through captivating and thought-provoking exhibits, images and signage. The delicate process of fostering Indigenous and local community perspectives is a response to the call for inclusivity and the recognition of existing communities within the landscapes being represented in exhibits. The zoos that were interviewed illustrated that community involvement is a crucial step towards reimagining exhibits. Furthermore, the use of language, creating access to land and/or culturally sensitive elements within the zoo, enriches the educational experience whilst acknowledging the contribution these communities have made to conservation and in shaping the biodiversity of their landscapes." However, due to cultural diversity, these journeys can be unique and not transferable to other zoos and aquariums due to differences in the local context. As WAZA seeks to further their Social Change for Conservation Strategy, the examples highlighted here can serve as a point of departure for other zoos to consider when and how deciding to embark on this journey.

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Bird forestry keeper at Auckland Zoo © Auckland Zoo



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