

communicating effectively as an exhibit guide

The content presented here is taken from the Moodle course, "Zoo Interpretation for Exhibit Guides." It has been excerpted as a reference for new and veteran Exhibit Guides.

THEMES

Believe it or not, the role of education in the Zoo broadly speaking and the role of an Exhibit Guide more specifically is not really to be a "giver of animal facts." In today's world, facts are readily available to almost everyone through a cell phone. To be sure, not everything people read on the internet is correct, so the Zoo does have to be a resource for correct information! Nonetheless, our collective role is less to be an encyclopedia of information, and more to be a storyteller.

No, you won't be dusting off fairytales and fables to regale visitors. Instead, by talking to visitors and answering their questions, you will be helping to tell the story of the Zoo and the animals--both those here at the Zoo and those we are seeking to protect in the wild. The broad stories that we are telling are the themes of our conversations--the key take-home messages that people come to understand through their visit. Though the Zoo's overall story is complex, it can be broadly encapsulated in these three themes:

THEME 1: Everything from the keepers' daily routine to the design of the habitat is about ensuring the wellbeing of the animals in our care.

THEME 2: Conservation—protecting species—requires more than excellent care for animals who live at the Zoo. It requires collaboration on many fronts:

- With other accredited zoos and aquariums to share best practices and to plan for healthy populations
- With in-range conservation partners by sharing expertise and resources
- With all of our visitors

THEME 3: We are always seeking to learn more--and share what we learn--about the animals.

- in order to better care for those who live here
- to best protect those that live in their native habitat



Regardless of the part of the Zoo we are in or the species we may be talking about, the overarching themes of our conversations with visitors remain the same. Consistency in theming is an important way to solidify and amplify our messaging. A narrative thread of consistent themes across Zoo messaging helps a guest's visit to feel coherent and memorable, rather than chaotic. A visitor who engages with Zoo signage and has great conversations with Exhibit Guides anywhere in the Zoo should get a sense of the Zoo's "story."

As you complete further Exhibit Guide trainings for different areas of the Zoo, you will see these themes again. As you engage with visitors, be mindful of how your conversations tie back to these themes.

Theme vs. Conservation Message

So, wait, what is the difference between a theme and a conservation message?

Great question!

A theme is that big picture idea that we want visitors to carry away with them.

A conservation message, or action step, is a specific request or "ask" that we want people to do.

The conservation action should be consistent with the theme that we have laid out. So for example, Theme 1 alludes to the care the Zoo shows for local wildlife both inside and outside our gates. A conservation action that we request of our visitors that is consistent with this aspect of the theme gives visitors a way they can help local wildlife too. Reminding people not to feed local wildlife because it can ultimately harm them is an action consistent with the theme; asking people to donate to support a giraffe conservation project is not. (Note: Donating to support giraffe conservation is not a bad thing! But in this example, it is not a conservation action consistent with the given theme.)



EMPATHY

Conservation--protecting species and habitats--requires both that people have conservation attitudes and engage in conservation behaviors.

Talking about the animals can support both of these, but is perhaps best suited to promoting conservation attitudes--in particular, the development of empathy.

Empathy is an emotional state that comes from our ability to sense, understand, and care about what someone else is experiencing. In other words:

Having empathy means understanding that others, including nonhumans, have experiences that are as real as your own.

As you might imagine, having empathy for wildlife is an important component of a conservation ethic, a desire to protect animals and their habitats.

Some species have characteristics that more readily elicit empathy in humans--those with large eyes, mammalian faces, human-like behaviors (playing, moving, eating). Other species--those that seem less like humans--tend to elicit less empathy: think snakes, insects, anything without eyelids!

"Other-ness" is one barrier to empathy.

Fear is another.

But both of these can be overcome, even if we just plant a seed.

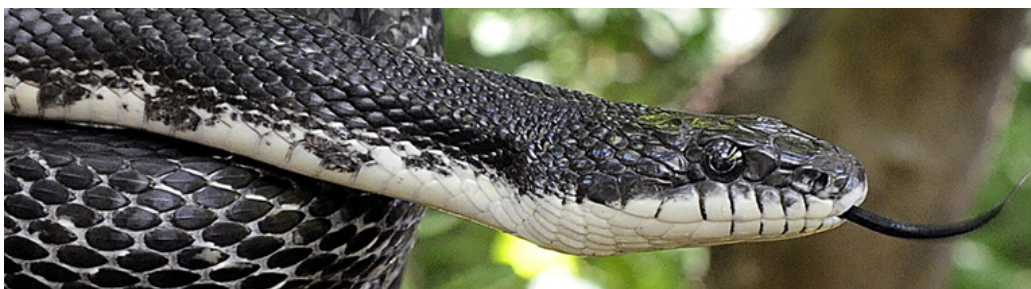
How?

By helping a visitor to take the perspective of the animal and understand how that animal experiences its world.

Sharing with visitors characteristics that "unloved" species legitimately have in common with humans can help them start to push through the barriers of "other-ness" and fear.

For example, many visitors have been stunned when told that a snake they are recoiling from "is just napping right now."

Snakes sleep?! I never even thought of that! That's kind of...I don't know...sort of...cute. Hey, come over see this snake. Did you know snakes sleep?



ANTHROPOMORPHISM

As zoo interpreters, we need to be aware that anthropomorphism is a very common way that people of all ages understand animals. If someone is using anthropomorphism, it means they are attributing human feelings, needs, and wants to non-human animals. And it can be tough to navigate.

Why is that?

Well, there definitely are things we humans have in common with other animals. Drawing legitimate connections between human behaviors, needs, and wants and those of another species can be both scientifically accurate and can help visitors develop empathy for other species.

But anthropomorphism can be uninformed, or "naive." Members of the public can misplace their empathy for a particular animal by assuming it has all the exact same needs as humans do. This is where it can become a problem. In other words, anthropomorphism is a problem when we misattribute human feelings, needs, and wants to non-human animals.

For example, a visitor might express concern that an animal is lonely because it lives by itself--which for a solitary species is exactly how it is most comfortable being housed! Or they might think an animal is bored because it doesn't appear to be doing anything--when resting is exactly what the species would spend the day doing in its native range. Or they may complain that an animal is "sad" because its facial markings make the animal look like it is frowning.

The challenge for a zoo interpreter is to help manage that fine line between uninformed anthropomorphism and expressing empathy. A large part of walking that fine line is by acknowledging the animals as individuals while putting them in their particular social and ecosystem context. This approach is known as "critical anthropomorphism." Unlike "naive" anthropomorphism, critical anthropomorphism uses metaphors and language that are relatable and approachable to our audiences and also backed by scientific findings. If you are interested in a more detailed discussion of critical anthropomorphism, see the March 2024 Connect magazine article, "[Rethinking Anthropomorphism](#)," by Dr. Marta Burnet.

Let's look at an example of critical anthropomorphism in action:

You are interpreting along the Boardwalk in African Journey and a visitor asks, "Do you only have one leopard?" You reply that yes, Sofiya is the only leopard here at the Zoo. The visitor expresses sadness that Sofiya is all alone and says they don't think it is fair for the Zoo to make her live by herself.

How can you address this?

First start by acknowledging the visitor's concern. (For example: "Thank you for your concern about Sofiya.") Remember, most visitors genuinely care and want to feel confident that the Zoo is a good place for animals.

Then you can move on to talk about how leopards are a solitary species, meaning they generally live alone. You can also point out that at the Zoo, keeping animals in their natural social groupings is an important way we care for them. Solitary species (or, "non-social species") would be more stressed living with others, and social species would be more stressed living alone.

Anthropomorphism vs. Anthropocentrism

As mentioned above, using anthropomorphism is not always a bad thing, and can in fact be a good tool for developing empathy for other species. What can be more far more problematic for conservation is anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism is the belief or mindset that humans are more important than all other animals, or more broadly, that humans are the most important entities in the world. An anthropocentric mindset has been used to justify harming individual animals, decimating species, and destroying habitats and ecosystems.

WORDS MATTER

The words we use reflect how we see the world, how we see ourselves, and how we see others. For example, it was once common in the zoo world to say, "We display [species x] at our zoo." Today, it is more common in accredited zoos to hear something like, "We care for [species x] at our zoo."

What does the use of the word display suggest about how the animals were viewed?

Which version suggests a greater respect for the animals? Think about how that shift in word choice from display to care for mirrors the evolution of zoos from menageries to conservation centers.

The example described above is just one of many ways that word choice within the Zoo world has changed and continues to change. The table on the next page shows a few additional examples of terminology that is evolving to reflect ever greater respect for the animals and a more accurate description of modern accredited zoos. We ask that you use the "preferred" terms in your conversations with Zoo visitors.

evolving zoo terminology

PREFERRED TERM(S)	OUTDATED TERMS THEY REPLACE
Care for, House (verbs)	Display; (to) Exhibit
Habitat, Yard	Cage
Animals that live at the Zoo; The animals that we care for	The Collection
At the Zoo; In accredited zoos	In captivity
[Animal] living at the Zoo; [Animal] living in an accredited zoos	Captive [animal]
[Animal] living in its native range	Wild [animal]; Living in the wild

Some of these changes have come about organically as new generations enter the field. Other changes have come about as deliberate choices by the zoo community in an effort to be leaders in promoting a renewed relationship with non-human animals and with the natural world.

AUDIENCES AND THEIR MOTIVATIONS

You may often hear references to "the general public." In reality, there is no one general public. The audiences that engage with the Zoo--by visiting us, through social media, through encountering a Zoo-related news story, or by attending a Zoo program at a local library--have very different beliefs, backgrounds, motivations, and values. Effectively communicating with our audiences means understanding that not everyone will be interested in the same things you or I are interested in.

Researchers who study the field of learning in zoos, aquariums, and museums (yes, that is a thing!) have created a framework for thinking about audience motivations for visiting--or, "visitor identities." Those five identities are described in the image below.

visitor identities

AND MOTIVATIONS

EXPERIENCE SEEKERS

They want to see the "flashiest" animals and most famous or newest exhibits & attractions.

Visitors in this group tend to enjoy

- taking selfies
- participating in "special experiences" like Penguin Encounters

EXPLORERS

They are content to see what's available, and often enjoy learning new things.

Visitors in this group tend to enjoy

- attending chats
- talking to staff and volunteers

FACILITATORS

These visitors are most focused on ensuring others in their group have a good experience.

Visitors in this group tend to enjoy

- taking photos of others in the group
- hands-on activities

RECHARGERS

These visitors want a more peaceful or relaxed atmosphere.

Visitors in this group tend to enjoy

- visiting alone or in pairs
- moving leisurely with no fixed agenda

HOBBYISTS & PROFESSIONALS

These visitors want to see specific animals or exhibits or learn more about how we do things at the Zoo.

Visitors in this group tend to enjoy

- Behind-the-scenes or other exclusive "insider" experiences
- In-depth conversations with staff and volunteers

A classic "Facilitator" is a teacher bringing students on a field trip. Parents also commonly have "Facilitator" as their primary motivation when bringing their families to the Zoo. What about a visitor attending Brew at the Zoo? Probably an Experience Seeker. A college student looking to go into the conservation field? Possibly a Hobbyist/Professional.

The categories are broad and a particular individual might fall into more than one category, or might be in different categories on different visits. But this framework for thinking about visitor motivations can be a helpful tool for managing the otherwise unwieldy range of differences among our visitors.

TOOLS IN YOUR INTERPRETIVE TOOLKIT

We talked earlier about the importance of themes, understanding different visitor motivations for coming to the Zoo, and the relationship between empathy and a conservation ethic.

So how can we actually have conversations with visitors that apply these concepts? How do we actually "interpret the Zoo"?

We've shared a few tricks and tips along the way already. But here are a few more general tools for your interpretive toolkit.

"I Don't Know"

Your role as an Exhibit Guide is not to be an encyclopedia.

You are also not the official PR department!

Sure, we want you to have a strong body of information to support your conversations with visitors. But it is not a dishonor or a "failure" to not know the answer to a visitor question.

Frankly, there are questions from visitors that are unreasonable!

And sometimes you may simply forget a particular fact.

That's ok!

As an Exhibit Guide volunteer, "I don't know" is a very powerful tool for you.

Do not be afraid to use it. It is impossible to know everything about everything at the Zoo. A zoo is one of the most complex organizations you can imagine, and there are a million moving parts. Staff members also have to use "I don't know!" on a regular basis.

Social Math

There is no end of amazing numbers and stats related to animals. Kids in mid- to upper elementary school in particular are fascinated by "fun facts" and by extremes: fastest, tallest, smallest, heaviest.

But facts on their own can be dry and not terribly meaningful. To make numbers and statistics more relatable, we can use social math. Social math essentially involves presenting complex data or statistics through story. (Yes, it all comes back to stories!) We do this by reframing the numbers with a more accessible and familiar context.

Have you ever asked, "Is it bigger than a bread box?" in a guessing game? Or have you used, "Wow, that's the length of 2 football fields!" These are both examples of social math.

What are some examples of social math in the Zoo context?

- An ostrich can run 35 miles per hour or more. That's faster than the top speed (about 23 mph) of the fastest human sprinter! And the human sprinter would tire much more quickly than the ostrich would.
- An African penguin can swim up to 12 miles per hour. That's 3 times faster than the fastest human swimmer!
- A male white rhino can weight up to 6000 lbs. That's more than a large SUV! (or the combined weight of 2 small cars)

What Are They REALLY Asking?

Are the _____ mean?

When do they get fed?

How did you get it here?

Many questions that visitors ask may seem simple, but the questions aren't always exactly as they seem.

Sometimes visitors are trying to be polite and so they try to ask something in a roundabout way. Other times they may not be sure how to express what they really want to know. As an Exhibit Guide, it can be helpful to stop before you respond and ask yourself, "What are they really asking?"

Let's look at just a few of these "What are they really asking" questions as examples.

Is it mean?

A young child is staring at a lion or cheetah and asks, "Is it mean?" What might they really be asking? In many cases, they might be asking "Are we safe?" Instead of just giving a biology response about them being predators with lots of adaptations to catch their prey, consider first how you might address what they're actually asking. For example:

"Lions are great hunters, but do you see that tall mesh? That makes sure the lions stay in their space and that we stay in our space."

When do they get fed?

That's a simple question with a factual answer (of course, it depends on the species...) But typically a visitor is asking not just for a random fact about when the animals eat. Most of the time what they are really asking is, Can I see them get fed? This question is particularly common about the predators like cats and grizzlies. An effective reply answers the factual question but anticipates what the visitor really wants to know:

The leopard typically gets fed in the evening after the Zoo closes. She might get a few special treats throughout the day in her yard, but for a nocturnal animal, having food at night makes sense.

How did it get here??

This is a tough one, because what they are asking is ambiguous. People have asked this question wondering how we transferred a particular animal to the Zoo from another zoo. Others ask a question like this because they are trying to reconcile an outdated understanding of zoos. They may believe that animals are still brought in from other countries as part of highly publicized collecting safaris. So they literally might be asking, "Did you go over to Africa to get that okapi?" In either case, you can really help them understand how modern zoos work! But you first may need to ask a clarifying question:

Are you wondering where this okapi came from? ["Yes..."] Great question! Most animals in modern zoos are born (or hatched) in other zoos! Okapi Askari came here from another zoo where he was born.

MESSAGE WITH CAUTION!

Some visitors--especially children--can become very concerned at the idea that we might be separating young animals from their parents by moving animals from one zoo to another. When talking about how animals move from one zoo to another, it can often help to preempt this question/concern by explaining that once an animal reaches the normal age that it is time from them to move away from their parents, that's when they can move to another zoo.

If they are asking a logistical question, your answer will need to be different:

Are you wondering how he physically traveled here from the zoo where he was born? I'm not sure specifically how he traveled here. But generally speaking, it can be quite a complex task to move a large animal from one place to another. It all comes down to what is appropriate for the particular species and then what is best for the individual animal. In some cases, animals travel by plane and sometimes by truck. The zoo considers what is the quickest, safest, and least stressful way for a particular animal to travel.



Body Language and Boundaries

In your original role as Zoo Guides, being approachable was a key aspect of serving as a welcoming presence for visitors and allowing them to feel comfortable coming to you with questions. Being approachable is no less important for Exhibit Guides. Much of approachability is about body language.

Posture

An Exhibit Guide with a relaxed posture can feel welcoming and unthreatening to a visitor. This is someone they might enjoy talking to! But a slouching posture sends the signal, "I'm bored, this is boring, and I don't really want to be here." Not exactly the person you would want to approach for a conversation.

Eye contact

Making eye contact is an important way to establish rapport. If you are speaking with a family or small group, make sure you slowly look across the group making brief eye contact with each individual. Don't leave out someone in the group because you think they are not listening or might not understand! At least seeking to make some eye contact with each member of the group and directing conversation toward the whole group demonstrates that each of them is important and welcome.

Be aware that there will be visitors unable to make eye contact with you due to a disability or to a condition such as social anxiety. But just because they cannot or do not wish to make eye contact does not mean they cannot understand you or that they are uninterested in learning.

Hands and Arms

Staff in the Education Department are almost all big hand talkers! We love to use gestures to help tell a story or explain how something works. Whether you are used to talking with your hands or not, one thing you do not want to do is cross your arms while talking to visitors. Standing with your arms crossed is literally a way of blocking others out, and it silently screams, "Don't talk to me!"

Personal space

Different cultures have different notions of appropriate amounts of personal space. A distance between two people having a conversation that might feel cold and impersonal to people in one culture may feel and suffocating to those in another culture. It is best to err on the side of giving "too much" personal space rather than too little--especially in a covid world. Avoid talking right in someone's face. And do not touch any visitors, whether they are children or adults.

Humor

Humor is a good way to connect to people, but should be used carefully. What is funny to one person might be deeply offensive to another or simply tasteless to a third. Rather than cracking jokes, the best approach to using "humor" with Zoo visitors is to keep things light-hearted. Never use humor that is directed toward another person, even if you think they would willingly be in on the "joke." Also avoid mocking or attempts at humor that have any of the animals as the object: "He is the laziness cat I have ever seen" or "Those ostriches--they're not exactly the brightest!" Statements like these can undermine our goal of modeling respect for animals... and they are examples of inappropriate anthropomorphism.

Maintain Boundaries

We know that you will have delightful conversations with many visitors, and it can be tempting to walk along with them to the next animal to continue your conversation. Avoid this temptation! Most visitors very much appreciate having volunteers on grounds to talk to, but please recognize that they do have a plan and an agenda for their visit. We want to respect the reason they came to the Zoo--think back to those visitor motivations!--and most did not intend to pick up an additional group member along the way.

Think of it like showbiz: Leave them wanting more...don't have them wish they never started to talk with you.

Biofacts and Interpretive Aids

Biofacts are materials that came from a once-living thing. Skulls, feathers, and shells are all examples of biofacts. We call models of such items, such as skull replicas, "biofacts" as well.

Interpretive aids are any item that can help visitors better understand some aspect of the the information you are sharing with them.

Biofacts can definitely be useful for drawing visitors in and starting a conversation. The ostrich egg, for example, never fails to impress! Keep in mind, however, potential unintended messages that some biofacts might send. (We'll mention "unintended messages" in a later section as well.) Bones and pelts will almost always spark a visitor to wonder about how the item was acquired--whether they actually ask you about it or not. If those questions are at the forefront of their minds, the visitors are not fully grasping the message you are trying to share.

Some visitors might also find certain biofacts frightening. And remember that items that seem very concrete and straightforward, like bones, can be conceptually quite abstract for children under age 4. They will not associate a bone or skull in your hands with a part of a living animal.

Keep in mind that a number of biofacts came from animals who once lived here at the Zoo, and for that reason alone they are deserving of respect. In addition, biofacts are expensive to prepare and difficult to repair, so please handle any biofact carefully, even if the item seems robust. Although we invite visitors to touch many of the biofacts, you should be the one holding and maintaining control of the item at all times.

Interpretive Tip

As Exhibit Guides, you have the most exciting topic of conversation right in front of you: The animals! Using biofacts is not mandatory and should never take away from the animals themselves.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

As an Exhibit Guide, you will encounter visitors of all ages and developmental levels. It can be helpful to have an understanding of the ways that people at different developmental levels process information. Never forget, however, that every visitor is a unique individual. The ideas given below are a basic starting point, but don't assume that everything is completely true for every visitor at the a given age level.

Children Under Age 6

- At this age, children are very concrete thinkers. Abstract concepts such as large swaths of time and notions such as species are not easily grasped.
- They are very ego-centric: They assume that everyone experiences the world the way that they do and thinks and behaves like they do. They cannot necessarily understand motivations of others--for example, distinguishing between something done intentionally and something done unintentionally.
- They are constantly learning! They are understanding shapes, colors, patterns, and matching.



Interpreting for this developmental level:

- Invite them to pretend to *be* the animal--to move like the animal, to think like the animal.
- Make it about THEM: Compare easily observable characteristics of an animal to them. For example: "How many toes do they have? How many toes do you have?"
- Stick to only 2-3 concrete facts at the most. Visitors at this developmental level are not likely to walk away from their Zoo visit thinking in themes, but your goal here is to help them form positive associations with the Zoo and the animals.
- Having objects for them to touch is helpful, but keep in mind that most biofacts and interpretive aids are conceptually abstract for young children and therefore will not carry much meaning for them.
- Avoid taxonomic classifications, such as "reptile," "amphibian," etc. Instead, invite them to describe animals using more concrete characteristics, such as furry/smooth, soft/hard, big/small.

Ages 6-11

- Children in this age group can generally start to grasp more abstract concepts.
- Comparing and contrasting are good skills for this level. As noted earlier, children in this age group also tend to enjoy crazy comparisons, exaggerations, and extremes (like world records).
- They are starting to gain a concept of the world beyond what they directly know from their own lives.
- This group likes to get answers to "Why" questions.

Interpreting for this developmental level:

- Let them demonstrate to you how smart they are! Ask open-ended questions (ones without a Yes/No answer or without a single correct answer.)
- Biofacts and interpretive aids will begin to make sense to those in this age group. But keep in mind that children in this age group are the most likely to ask, "Did you kill it?"

Ages 12-14

- With this age group, more in-depth discussion of conservation issues is developmentally appropriate.
- Abstract concepts are more understandable.
- Peer pressure in this age group is very strong! Don't expect them to "act silly" (e.g., make animal sounds, do animal movements).
- This age group is developing their conservation ethic, and tend to have a strong sense of something as right or wrong. However, they can also tend to see issues as "black or white" rather than have a full sense of complexity or nuance.

Interpreting for this developmental level:

- Avoid basic questions with an obvious answer. Focus more on true open ended questions and "what if..." scenarios.
- Where they might be lacking in understanding of the nuance of some issues, share with them some of the complexity. Invite them to consider the perspective of someone with the opposite view (for example, to imagine themselves as the farmer whose crops were raided by an elephant.)



The Redirect (aka, Bridging & Pivoting)

Today's zoo visitors on the whole tend to be more knowledgeable about animals and environmental issues than zoo-goers decades ago. Much of this may be due to the internet and to animal-focused children's shows (love those Wild Kratts!) and to reality shows like The Zoo. Yet visitor questions still tend to be of this flavor:

- What's its name?
- How old is it?
- What does it eat?

Oh how we wish someone would ask us something like, "How do varied cultural practices contribute to the decline of this species in the wild, and what can I do to help?" But don't despair! We can still do a lot with those "simple" questions. In fact, we should celebrate it when visitors do ask us those things. Let's remember first and foremost that just because you have received that question for the 47th time today, it is the first time this visitor has asked you. To them the question is new and fresh. We definitely want to honor that.

Second, let's consider: why do they want to know a simple, "throwaway" fact? Think of it this way--any visitor can relate to having a name, an age, and eating. Getting answers to these questions is therefore a fundamental way for the visitor to relate to the animal. And that is exactly what we are trying to achieve!

These are also very non-threatening ways for a visitor to open a conversation with an expert (you!). They might be intimidated to even ask a question, and things like name, age, and what they eat are safe topics that they know they can understand.

The good news is that once the conversation has been opened, it doesn't need to end there. Now is your chance to engage them further. Ask them some questions. Invite them to compare to species in the yard or in neighboring yards.

Using "simple" questions from visitors as a jumping off point is a great strategy. This is also a way to redirect, or pivot, a conversation that is veering off into something inappropriate, like a visitor pushing for your opinion on whether or not zoos should exist. Or maybe you just want to help students in a field trip group to focus!

Here are a few examples of respectful redirects:

Group of middle schoolers at African Watering Hole: "Hey, how deep is that water?" "Can I jump in that water?" "Would I crack my skull if I jumped in that water?" "Would I break my leg?" "How deep is that water?"

Your strategy: You don't know how deep the water is, and you don't want to get mired into trying to provide answers about the consequences of jumping into the water, especially since they are probably just looking for attention. So calmly redirect by posing to them open-ended questions of your own.

How deep do YOU think it is? Why do you think we have water there in the first place?



Adult visitor: The animals look so sad. It's terrible. Poor things. They just look so sad.

Your strategy: This visitor might be someone who is not comfortable with zoos. But we don't want to get defensive. Any negative feelings they have ultimately come from a place of caring about the animals, so we can build on that. We do want to set up the situation to be able to share information about the good work of accredited zoos, but first, respectfully and calmly invite them to share their concern with you.

I appreciate that you care about the animals. What are some things that make them seem sad to you? ...

We want the best life for the animals too. Let me show you some features of their Zoo habitat that are designed with their wellbeing in mind...

Elementary school kids screaming when an animal pees or poops: Ew, they are disgusting!

Your strategy: Don't be dismissive by just saying, No, it's natural! Take advantage of their energy but direct it so that they know that pee and poop aren't shameful topics. Exactly how you frame it will depend on the species, but there is always something cool to talk about with animal waste!

Wow, that's actually really cool! Did you know that the rhinos like to always poop in the same spot? That's kind of like us using a bathroom, right?...

Don't Leave Dead Ends

A great way to provide excellent guest service to Zoo visitors is to never leave an interpretive dead end.

What is an interpretive dead end? It is a missed opportunity to engage a visitor, particularly in a disappointing situation.

Let's look at a few examples.

A visitor approaches you and asks, I don't see the rhinos. Are they not out today? You reply, "Sorry, they are not out today." And the visitor goes on their way.
Interpretive dead end!

We can transform that interaction from polite but bland to a great interpretive moment:

I'm sorry you missed seeing the rhinos, but the keepers took them inside a few minutes ago to let the ostriches into the yard. They are currently working on introducing the rhinos and ostriches and introductions take time...Take a look at these birds--ostriches are the largest birds on earth!

How about this example:

Visitor: Is there a time I can watch the cheetah get fed?

Exhibit Guide: The carnivores typically do not get their main diet out in their yards.

Dead end!

Instead, give the visitor an idea for an alternative.

Visitor: Is there a time I can watch the cheetah get fed?

Exhibit Guide: The carnivores typically do not get their main diet out in their yards. But the keepers do feed the colony of African penguins at 3:30, and it is fascinating to see how they feed over 100 birds! You might want that check that out at Penguin Coast.



DEALING WITH DIFFICULT TOPICS, PART 1

Exhibit Guides have the amazing privilege of talking about animals with Zoo visitors. But being in this position also means that Exhibit Guides can face some tough questions from the public about difficult topics.

It is not something to worry about--you can handle it!--but we want to share some of the difficult topics that tend to arise and give suggestions for dealing with them. While it may not be true in every case, most of the time visitors aren't trying to ask a "gotcha!" question. The intent behind a difficult question is likely one of genuine concern.

Your strategy for dealing with questions on difficult topics?

1. First, assume good, honest intent behind the questions. (Review the earlier section called "What are they really asking" for more information on figuring out what a particular question actually means.)
2. Then, answer questions factually and without defensiveness.
3. And remember Interpretive Theme 1--difficult questions are often an opportunity to help visitors understand the excellent care that is given to animals in modern accredited zoos!

Sick or Injured Animals

Even with the best possible care, an animal can become sick or injured. Just like people!

There are certainly individuals critical of zoos who will latch on to an instance of a sick animal as fuel for their anti-zoo sentiments. But most visitors inquiring about a sick or injured animal have genuine concern. Zoo members especially are likely to ask about an animal whom they have not seen on several visits or one they read about on the Zoo's social media. Asking for an update about the animal is their way to feel connected to something they care about.

Although you may be aware that an animal has been ill or had an injury, you are unlikely to have additional details. Not having an answer about an animal's current status does not mean you can't engage warmly with the visitor and show that you respect them and their concerns. For example:

Thank you for your concern about _____. I don't have any updates at this time. But _____ is such an amazing [animal/species.] What is your favorite thing about _____?

Important note!

Keep in mind that the Volunteer Office staff cannot keep Exhibit Guides updated daily on every animal at the Zoo. It does not mean that the animals are not getting excellent care. In fact, keeping their focus on a sick or injured animal has to be the priority for the veterinary and animal care staff--not providing constant updates. Please trust that if the Volunteer Office has been given information to share they will share it.

Animals that Have Passed Away

When animals pass away at the Zoo, it is heartbreaking. Zoo professionals know it is all part of the deal of being in this field, but it hurts nonetheless. And we know that it can hurt for volunteers, Zoo members, and our broader community, too. The animals at the Zoo are given amazing care, and the veterinary and care teams undertake heroic measures not just to preserve life but to give excellent quality of life. Eventually, though, each of the animals will pass--many having lived longer, healthier lives than they ever could have experienced in their native range.

When an animal considered to be "highly charismatic" dies, the Zoo typically issues a press release. For lesser-known or smaller animals, a press release will likely not be released. This does not mean that the Zoo cares about those animals less! It is simply a matter of being practical. In most cases, the Volunteer Office will inform volunteers about the passing of the "more charismatic" individuals once they are given the go-ahead by the Animal Department to do so. You are asked to adhere to all requests for confidentiality when such information is shared with you.

So how do we handle the subject of an animal death at the Zoo with visitors?

Generally speaking, you should not bring it up with visitors unless someone asks you directly about it. If you are asked, keep in mind the same points shared above about sick animals:

- Assume best intent--don't immediately assume someone is trying to accuse the Zoo of not taking proper care of the animals.
- Asking about an animal passing that they learned about on social media is often a visitor's way of being connected to the animal and of processing their own sadness. This is particularly true for members, who can become very attached to individual animals.
- You are unlikely to have many details. Don't be afraid to tell the visitor that you do not know the details.

Here is an example:

Visitor: Oh, we saw on the news that _____passed away. What happened?

You: Yes, it is always a difficult time when an animal passes away at the Zoo. As a volunteer, I myself don't have many details, but it is definitely a sad loss.

Many visitors are incredibly kind when an animal passes away, and they will offer condolences to staff and volunteers. If that happens, you can just thank them! But sometimes, visitors can ask somewhat blunt questions without necessarily intending to be insensitive. Just be prepared for that.

Here is one example: "So what do they do with a zoo animal when it dies?"

The answer:

An animal that passes away at the Zoo is given a necropsy (like an autopsy) so that we can learn and understand as much as possible about a given condition or disease. After the necropsy, the remains are typically cremated.

(Side note: In some cases, bones or other parts may be preserved for reference purposes for vets or as educational biofacts.)

You may also get the follow-up question: "Do you feed out animals that die to other animals?" (People may have heard about a practice like this that is carried out occasionally in zoos in other parts of the world.) The answer is No.

We hope these are conversations that will be rare for you as Exhibit Guides. But we wanted to give you some idea of what to expect and how to address it.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT TOPICS, PART 2

Here are a few more challenging topics that you might find yourself facing, with suggestions and examples for ways to answer visitor questions.

Breeding and Reproduction

These can be difficult topics for different reasons, depending on the audience. "What are they doing?" is always an fun one when little kids are asking about animals mating right in front of your eyes! You may also get more in-depth questions from visitors related to how breeding is handled at the Zoo. Remember first and foremost: assume good intentions. Many questions of this type stem from misunderstanding about how modern zoos work. The best approach to take when answering these questions is to make the visitor feel smart and appreciated for asking the question.

Here are a few examples we have heard over the years with sample responses:

"What are they doing?????" [from a child when animals are mating]

Ok, for this one, the age of the child matters. Please do not make something up to avoid answering their question. Answer it truthfully for what is appropriate for the age level. And follow the lead of the parent/guardian. In some cases, the parent will whisk the child away once they see what the child is asking about. Some will laugh and say, "I'll tell you when you're older." Some will say, "That is how they make babies..." Look to them first to see how they will address it. To be honest, sometimes the adults in the group aren't sure what they are looking at either! If a child asks the question, and their adult seems clueless, you can light-heartedly say to the adult, "Well, here at the Zoo we do encourage animals to carry out their *ahem* natural behaviors..." Usually with that, they get the hint.

Interpretive Tip: Breeding versus Mating

Don't be tempted to use these terms "breeding" and "mating" interchangeably. They are not the same thing. Breeding means they are actually having offspring. If I tell you, "These two animals are not a breeding pair," all I am saying is that they are not producing offspring--because of birth control, infertility, advanced age, etc. But it could still be true that these two animals engage in mating behavior frequently!

Interpretive Tip: Be careful of "making babies"

It can feel simple and "safe" to tell kids or even adults that two mating animals are "making babies." But first, see the interpretive tip above. And second, think about the expectation it sets up in visitors' minds. They may take you at your word and expect to see babies on their next visit! Definitely not the take-home message we are aiming for.

What do you do with "surplus" animals?

That's a great question--thank you for asking that. In an accredited zoo like this one, we aim to give each animal the best possible quality of life. That means that we want to make sure that in the accredited zoo community as a whole that we don't have more animals born that we can care for properly for their whole lives. So breeding is carefully planned so that our zoo populations remain genetically healthy and at an appropriate size.

Do you think it's cruel not to let all of the animals breed?

Great question! Our goal is the best quality of life for the animals, and what that means varies from species to species and from individual to individual. While reproducing can be one way for an animal's life to be enriched, it is not the only way. In the native range of these species, not every individual will reproduce, so it is a completely normal aspect of life for many animals not to have offspring.

Do you think it's cruel to send animals to other zoos?

Animals are typically sent to other zoos for the purposes of breeding or to ensure the animal is in an appropriate setting for its life stage or social needs. So the welfare of an individual animal is always of top importance. In many cases, animals are moved between zoos to mimic how they would naturally disperse from their parents when they reach a certain age. It can be similar to a human teenager going off to college or a young adult getting married and starting their own family.

Interpretive Tip

Avoid falling into a trap with "Do you think..." questions. When you are in uniform, you are representing the Zoo, and even if you say, "This is just my opinion...", someone can interpret your statement out of context. "Do you think..." questions should be answered with factual information, not with opinions. And remember "The Redirect": turn the conversation in a direction you want to go in!

"Strange" Animal Behaviors

It is very common for visitors to misinterpret the behavior of animals at the Zoo. That is one reason that Exhibit Guides are so important! Many misunderstandings are due to anthropomorphism--it doesn't seem right to the visitors for a human to do a particular thing, so it must not be ok for this animal. And sometimes it is the persistence of older cultural models about zoos as places of animal suffering that cause a visitor to assume a particular behavior means an animal is in distress. To be sure, zoos were not always the best places for animals, and there are entities today calling themselves "zoos" that operate in unacceptable ways. When questions arise about whether an animal is "stressed" or "unhappy," keep in mind those cultural models that many visitors still hold.

One of the behaviors that causes concern for visitors is "pacing," particularly in carnivores like large cats. Rapid pacing can be a sign of stress in an animal like a cat, but it is not always the case. To understand the behaviors of individual animals, animal caregivers consider the natural behaviors of the species in the native habitat as well as the motivations of the individuals. What looks like "pacing" of the yard by lion Hassan is a completely normal behavior for an adult male lion patrolling his territory. He is doing exactly what his DNA tells him to do! Similarly, the cheetah will walk the fence line of his yard, mirroring the territorial behavior of male cheetahs in the native range. At certain times of day, an animal might appear agitated, "pacing" rapidly in one small spot of the yard. But the key questions their caregivers ask are, "Why this time of day?" and "Why in this spot?" Often the answer becomes clear quite easily. Cats and other large predators are highly intelligent and figure out patterns quickly. They know where and when keepers are likely to appear with special enrichment (treats) and they are often very excited for what they anticipate is coming up. Typically this rapid "pacing" is in a spot where the animal normally transfers inside a building (often toward food!) or is close to a space where they work with a keeper to do a training session. They are excited for what is coming!

So let's look at a couple of examples:

Why is that animal pacing? He must be so stressed!

"Thank you for your concern about [animal's name]. What you are seeing is actually his appropriate behavior for a territorial carnivore. In their native range, a [species] spends much of its day patrolling its territory against intruders. Here at the Zoo, this yard is his territory, and he is doing the same thing. You can imagine that he wants to make sure we stay out of his territory!"

Is that animal upset? Why is he running in circles?

"Thank you for your concern about [animal's name.] This is typical for him when he is excited about getting something special from his keepers. The spot he is in is normally where the keepers work with him on training sessions, which is an activity he enjoys."

Important note:

Please do not make up information about the animals just to answer a question. As you start learning about the different areas of the Zoo, you will have information like what is given in the examples above. If you truly do not have any idea about a behavior that an animal is doing, you should still thank the visitor for their concern and say, "I don't know what that specific behavior means. But I do know that the keepers are constantly observing the animals and they will intervene if they have concerns."

UNINTENDED MESSAGES

Everything we say and do could be considered interpretation--that is, we are always conveying some sort of message about ourselves, about the animals, and about the Zoo. It is important, then, that we be deliberate about the messages that we are conveying so that we deliver what we intend.

This probably makes a lot of sense to to you already. For example, if you visited a zoo or another institution that was full of trash and rude employees, would you want to visit again? Would you want to donate to that institution? Would you consider it trustworthy? Probably not.

Or imagine being a Zoo visitor who sees a staff member cuddling an animal like a baby. What might this sight convey? Chances are, the unintended message that comes across is, "It is so wonderful to cuddle an exotic animal! What a great pet!"

Oh no! An unintended message has been sent, and actions speak louder than words.

Sometimes we can anticipate when an unintended message might be conveyed. When possible, we try to change how we do things to eliminate the issue. But sometimes it is just part of being at a zoo.

Here are some common unintended messages that can arise with ideas for how to reassure and redirect as needed.

You have a replica of a cheetah skull to show visitors. An 8-year old child asks you what you have.

Suggested approach: Answer the questions they are likely to have--Where did you get that? Did you kill it?--before they ask them.

"This is a model of a cheetah skull. That means it was made to look just like the real thing!..."

You have a skull from a lion that once lived at the Zoo. A visitor asks you what you have.

Suggested approach: Answer the question truthfully, but don't elaborate unless they have further questions.

"This is a lion skull. Would you like to see the teeth more closely?..."

While you present the lion skull, the visitor asks, Where did you get it?

Suggested approach: With a question like this, what they are likely trying to ask politely is, Did you kill it? Answer the question matter-of-factly with an answer that gets to the core of their concern. Many want to know if an animal was harmed just to get a skull.

"This skull was from an animal that passed away here at the Zoo a long time ago. Even though that animal is no longer with us, they can still help people learn about them."

You show visitors at the African Watering Hole an ostrich egg. One of them asks you if it is real.

Suggested approach: This is generally a straightforward question to answer for adults. But for children, this can set up concern in their minds that there is a baby in the egg or that there was a baby in it. In fact, we often get the question, What happened to the baby?!

"Yes this is a real ostrich egg. But it never had a chick in it. So we just cleaned out the material inside so we could show the egg to you!"

You are talking about leopard Sofiya and note that Amur leopards are a critically endangered species. The visitor replies, "That's terrible--they are rare and endangered, so you took her and put her in a Zoo!"

Suggested approach: One challenge that can arise when we tell the story of an endangered or critically endangered species is that we risk giving the impression that we are proud to have one at the Zoo because they are so rare. Visitors can hear that as, "Isn't it cool that we managed to find and get one?" This kind of negative reaction likely stems from old models where zoos did in fact compete to have the biggest collections or the most exotic and rare species. Of course, that is not the case in accredited 21st-century zoos like this one. To head off this kind of misunderstanding it is always best to give the context first.

Sofiya is here at the Zoo as part of a special collaborative effort by the worldwide zoo community to breed this critically endangered subspecies of leopard to ensure that they persist. Sofiya herself was born in a zoo as part of this collaboration.



USING APPROVED RESOURCES

The internet can be a tempting place to look up information about your favorite species. While we love to encourage lifelong learning in our staff, volunteers, and visitors alike, we ask that Exhibit Guides use only Zoo-approved resources to support their conversations with Zoo audiences.

"Zoo-approved resources" include the following:

- Content from Zoo Moodle courses
- Species Profile and Interpretive Guide documents prepared by the Zoo
- recent Zoogram articles
- In Otter Words
- The Maryland Zoo's website and official Maryland Zoo social media outlets
- Videos, article links, or other resources explicitly shared with you by the Zoo's Education or Volunteer Departments

The following are not approved resources:

- Individual conversations you had with a keeper or other staff member (They might not be authorized to speak on the record about certain topics.)
- Articles from magazines or the internet that you found yourself
- Content shared by other volunteers on the Volunteer Facebook page
- Stories about the Zoo in newspapers, online, on TV, or on the radio unless it was shared with volunteers through official Zoo channels (e.g., by Volunteer Office staff)
- Social media sites other than the Maryland Zoo's official social media

If you have a questions about a particular resource, email the Volunteer Office.

*This document was produced by the Maryland Zoo's Interpretation Team for the purpose of volunteer training.
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