JEFFREY HYSON

The zoo folks say that everything has changed. Not so long ago, they readily admit, zoos were mere menageries, miserable places that displayed sullen creatures in barren cages, all for the simple-minded amusement of gawking visitors. Research, conservation, education—such noble ideals were callously sacrificed upon the altar of entertainment. These were the “bad old days” indeed.

But just look at us now, proclaim the zoo boosters. A wave of stunningly naturalistic exhibits has yielded extraordinary improvements: more contented (and fecund) animals, more professional scientific work, and more environmentally-aware, well-educated zoo-goers. Zoo supporters proudly declare just how much the zoos of their time have evolved.

• From the director of the Milwaukee Zoo: “There is a new era on, in which a great many changes will be made in zoological parks, especially in the way that animal enclosures will be built.”

• From the head of the Denver Zoo: “In the past 20 years, we have progressed more with the development of zoological parks than our predecessors did in 20 centuries.”

• And from Time magazine: “The modern conception of a zoo’s function is quite different from what it was 50 years ago, when the main idea was to display curious creatures. Today the emphasis is on presenting a representative selection of the world’s animals in surroundings that simulate their native environments.”

Inspiring, isn’t it? Truly, we must be in the midst of a zoo revolution. After decades of unimaginative exhibits, unprofessional animal care, and uninformative public programs, the “new zoos” have finally become genuine centers for conservation education.

Oh, but wait. There’s a little detail I forgot to mention: Not a single one of these statements comes from the era of the “new zoos.” These comments were made in 1922, 1939, 1949, and 1964, respectively—before any designer had heard of “landscape immersion,” before any keeper had learned about “behavioral enrichment,” before any docent had been trained in “environmental education.”

So what’s the point of this historical sleight-of-hand? I certainly don’t mean to suggest that zoos haven’t changed significantly over the past generation. Since the early 1970s, American zoos have developed an elaborate accreditation system, implemented wide-reaching captive breeding programs, constructed billions of dollars’ worth of new exhibits, and expanded and professionalized their staffs, especially

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in veterinary medicine and scientific research.

But in the grand scheme of things (and historians love the grand scheme of things), today's zoos really aren't all that different from their predecessors of decades and centuries past, particularly when it comes to their popular image and public impact. As the quotations above suggest, every generation of zoo boosters has claimed to be on the cutting edge. Every generation has seen itself as the zoological vanguard that will finally create a more “natural” zoo, not only to enhance the lives of its captive creatures but also, and perhaps even more significantly, to alter popular attitudes about wildlife and the environment through exhibition, education, and exhortation.

And yet, almost ritualistically, every generation has largely failed to realize these grand ambitions. While the animals may have more space and the curators more postgraduate degrees, the zoo-goers have remained stubbornly uninterested in the finer points of wildlife protection, habitat destruction, and species survival programs. To most visitors, a day at the zoo is not about environmental education; it's about family entertainment.

Why is this so? Why have zoos had so much trouble reinventing themselves as centers for conservation education? There seem to be three interrelated problems at work here, all with deep roots in zoo history.

First, the general public typically hasn’t seen zoos as institutions devoted to conservation. In the public mind, such groups as the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, the National Wildlife Federation, and the World Wildlife Fund (now WWF) are the “real” conservation organizations, working in the field to preserve natural landscapes, rescue endangered species, and generally “save the planet.” To be sure, several major zoos participate actively in both field research and conservation studies. Most notably, the New York Zoological Society (now the Wildlife Conservation Society/ Bronx Zoo) has long supported an impressive range of conservation programs, both at its flagship park in the Bronx and in wild regions across the globe. Yet throughout the Bronx Zoo’s history, many visitors and general observers have seen the society’s conservation endeavors as wholly separate from—and perhaps even antithetical to—the “main” business of showcasing captive animals. Even Fairfield Osborn, an NYZS president in the 1940s and 1950s who became a nationally-known spokesman for wildlife and wilderness preservation, found himself labeled a “militant conservationist” by the press, as if his environmentalist beliefs somehow subverted the expected politics of a zoo manager. As for the majority of other American zoos, past and present, conservation has remained essentially a side project, a mission they might genuinely want to support more extensively but for which they simply cannot afford the time, money, staff, or energy.

A second reason for zoos’ failure to teach visitors about conservation is the cold, hard fact that most visitors don’t come to zoos for education. By and large, visitors don’t go to the zoo to marvel at brilliant re-creations of the African savanna, or to hear about recent advances in captive breeding, or to read about the bushmeat crisis. They want to see exotic animals doing interesting things. Zoos’ very popularity, their very success as venues for family amusement, has made it difficult to envision the zoo as a place to
learn. Even zoos’ long tradition of welcoming school groups has, ironically, only reinforced the impression that “the zoo is for kids” and thus not an academically serious place. The cultural divide between zoos and museums (or other more traditionally educational institutions) has been and remains surprisingly powerful, as seen in public reaction to the more text-heavy, museum-style exhibits recently developed at many zoos. As one visitor to the National Zoo’s Think Tank exhibit complained, “There’s too much information. If people wanted that they’d go to the library. People come to see the animals” (Broda-Bahm 1997, 48). Even Jon Charles Coe, one of the pioneers in landscape-immersion exhibit design, admits this fundamental truth: “Education and conservation are secondary concerns to the family planning their weekend outing” (Coe 1996, 106).

Finally, zoos themselves have consistently undermined their educational-conservationist image with attractions and amenities more suited to theme parks and circuses than to would-be “wildlife centers.” Think of the mixed messages visitors receive when the very same “wild” creatures they saw immersed in naturalistic landscapes are turned into cuddly media celebrities, subjected to naming contests, birthday parties, and cartoonish reproductions. And how “immersed” can any visitor truly be when the gorilla exhibit or the big cat house sits next door to a cafeteria or a souvenir shop? The treatment of giant pandas stands as perhaps the most glaring example of conservationist ideals compromised by commercial agendas. Since the 1930s, when the first pandas appeared in the West, zoos have clamored to display these most popular of all zoo animals, relishing the attendance booms, concessions sales, and worldwide publicity that accompany those bundles of fur. By the 1970s, as the gravity of the wild panda’s plight became obvious, the animal became the poster child for wildlife conservation (literally, in the case of the WWF). Yet this conservationist respect did not prevent zoos from engaging in energetic, even vicious competition during the 1980s to secure short-term “rent-a-panda” loans, arrangements that turned the animals into little more than itinerant entertainers. Even today’s long-term panda loans, with their high price tags and demanding expectations of scientific research, still originate in a particular zoo’s or city’s desire to put itself on the public-relations map. Memphis boosters were admirably blunt in declaring that their recent acquisition of two giant pandas stood alongside the snarling of an NBA franchise as the moments that made Memphis “a world-class city.”

Put all of these complications and challenges together and what do you get? An institution that cannot effectively present itself as a center for conservation education. Analyses of visitor learning at zoos bear out this grim conclusion. A famous study conducted in the mid-1980s by Yale University professor Stephen Kellert found that “the typical zoo visit appears to exert only a slight influence on people’s understanding of animal behavior, biology, or conservation” (Kellert 1996, 87). More recently, the American Zoo and Aquarium Association sponsored a review of the literature on visitor learning and concluded that zoos’ conservation and education messages, while increasingly noticeable, are often subtle, short-term, and poorly understood (Dierking, Burtnyk, Büchner and Falk 2002). Supporters of conservation education suggest that it’s only a matter of
time before they find exactly the right method to awaken the ecological consciousness of previously uninterested visitors. But if the history of zoos demonstrates anything, it is that the public’s desire just to see animals—and to have fun doing so—has consistently trumped any plans for turning zoos into vehicles for saving the planet.

So, what’s a zoo to do? Should zoos abandon the idealistic pursuit of conservation education in order to embrace their inner Disneyland? Or should they turn in the opposite direction—throwing out the camel rides and the naming contests and the plush-toy pandas, and simply giving visitors some stern, straightforward lessons in natural history?

I would argue that zoos could best realize their potential by more openly and self-consciously embracing the very institutional ambiguity that has so bedeviled them for the past century and a half. After all, “entertainment” at a zoo is a different animal than “entertainment” at a theme park or at a movie theater. The zoo’s emotional appeal derives from the wonderfully (sometimes frighteningly) unpredictable interaction of humans and live creatures: that moment of nose-to-nose contact that produces reactions far more exciting and profound than any rollercoaster or blockbuster film. Zoos need to find more ways to make those human-animal encounters happen and to make them, yes, more entertaining.

At the same time, though, “education” at a zoo is not like “education” in a school or even at a museum. Zoos are not burdened with the leaden expectations of “learning something” that museum visitors often carry with them. People expect to have fun at the zoo—but that need not mean they can’t learn something while they’re there. The tricky part is presenting that education in a way that doesn’t merely borrow from academic or museological conventions, but instead takes advantage of the informal, irregular, unconventional patterns of a typical day at the zoo.

Accordingly, considering this complicated, even contradictory blend of education and entertainment, researchers studying zoo visitors will need to drastically rethink the ways they frame such seemingly commonsense concepts as learning, perception, and impact. Zoos are fascinatingly, frustratingly unique institutions, and visitor studies in zoos thus demand unique measures for understanding the zoo-going experience. The traditional studies of input and output, of information presented and information retained, simply don’t work in the odd experiential landscape of the zoo. The articles presented in this issue of Curator: The Museum Journal help to point zoos in the right direction, but more like them are desperately needed.

The real priority, though, must be a wholesale rethinking of zoos’ mission and identity. Zoos need to think more critically and openly about their function, their image, their place within the broader cultures of education and entertainment. They need to think about the zoo-going experience in more sophisticated ways, understanding not just what visitors do and learn at the zoo, but what they think about it before and after their visits. And zoos also need to look more carefully at their histories. The typical narrative told by zoo folks today describes noble but misguided founders, decades of steady improvement, and a recent revolution that has created the best of all possible zoos. History becomes merely a prelude (and an often
embarrassing one at that) to the glories of
the present and the future. But history can
also teach valuable lessons about how past
zoo leaders have grappled with the same
challenges that face their successors
today—challenges about people and ani-
mals, about mission and identity, about
education and entertainment. By all
means, find out where today’s zoo-goers
are going. But don’t forget to find out
where they’ve been, too.

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NOTES

1. The references for the opening quota-
tions are, respectively: Bean 1922, 62;
Hill 1939, 38; Conant 1949, 78; and
News in Zoos 1964, 54.

2. The “bushmeat crisis” refers to the
threat posed by commercial hunting of
wildlife for food, especially in Africa.

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