

# THE VALUE OF SHOWS

Steve Martin, Natural Encounters, Inc.

## Introduction

For years there has been a stigma securely attached to the very thought of animal shows. The perception has been that animal shows are for entertaining people, period. Although we know differently, there are still many out there who believe animal shows are little more than “entertainment” at the animals’ expense. Even some who profess to support the educational value of animal shows still find the need to judge their value in terms of attendance and generated revenue, something they would never do with their new bongo exhibit.

This paper will explore the many benefits that animal shows have to offer. The benefits included those for the animals that we use in our programs and the less than obvious benefits to zoological institutions. Most zoological institutions have mission statements, or statements of purpose, that give guidance to their operation and set goals for the facility.

Within these mission statements are words like education, conservation, and recreation. This paper will also discuss how an educational animal show can address each of these important goals. We should start with the animals, after all it is they who are the stars of the show.

## For the Animals

When we put an animal in captivity, no matter how big, beautiful, and naturalistic the environment, we take away some of the most important aspects of that animal’s being. By taking control of almost every facet of that animal’s life we limit the opportunity for the animal to use its senses and adaptations to “earn” a living. Its life is planned by curators, architects, veterinarians, nutritionists, geneticists, and behaviorists all working hard to provide the animal with the ideal existence.

The natural environment is very different. It is filled with uncertainty. Around every corner is an opportunity for a novel experience, an opportunity to make a decision and learn from the consequence of that decision. Each new day brings wild animals many novel experiences, trials of learned behavior and tests of skill and innate abilities.

Life in captivity has the potential to be extremely predictable and therefore pretty boring for some animals. Enrichment was created to address this animal welfare issue.

Tim Desmond and Gail Laule (1998) state “training is teaching; being trained is learning. It is a problem-solving process that can easily be as challenging and rewarding as the most complex enrichment devise.”

In the 1950’s Heini Hediger used operant conditioning techniques to provide animals a means of “working” for a living. This “occupational therapy” as he referred to it, is needed because captive animals have been denied the need and opportunity to engage in the tasks of survival i.e. finding food and avoiding enemies (Laule and Desmond, 1998). Alan Neuringer and others have shown that, if given the choice, animals will choose to work for their food even if the food is offered free choice. (Laule and Desmond, 1998; Mellen and Sevenich, 1999).

Training animals enriches their lives. Daily weighing of birds in our shows allows us to keep in much better contact with their health status. We can also evaluate their physical performance on a daily basis and generally be more in touch with their overall health.

Training animals to perform species appropriate behaviors allows the animals to once again “earn” a living. It gives them the opportunity to have some level of control over their environment, to make choices and experience

the consequence of those choices. Of course, one of our most important responsibilities as trainers is to provide our birds with humane training strategies that in no way compromise the health or welfare of the animal. Nature should be our guide as we provide them with safe and enriched environments that meet their psychological and physiological needs.

## **Education**

Six hundred million people visit zoological institutions each year (Mallinson, 1998). How many millions of them leave without learning anything about the animals they have just viewed? We all know that people don't read graphics like we want them to. It is difficult at best to deliver informational or inspiring messages at an exhibit without the use of interpretation. An animal show may provide the best, and possibly the only, educational message many zoo visitors receive while on their visit to the zoo. Far more than any book, television, or teacher can convey, a close encounter with a live animal demonstrating species-appropriate behavior can leave a lasting impression in the minds of zoo visitors.

It would be healthy for zoo professionals to temporarily put aside their long held traditions of what they feel is "proper" for a zoo and view their facility from the visitors' perspective. After all, it is sometimes these very visitors who are the users, the abusers, and the ones with influence in political arenas. In other words; the people we want to educate and persuade. For some zoological professionals, the word "show" is little more than a four letter word. However, to the zoo visitors the word "show" means action, excitement, entertainment - the very reasons they come to our facilities in the first place. Few people come to our zoos to be educated, they come to be entertained. It is our challenge, then, to provide them with educational experiences that are founded in entertainment. We should understand and use the power of entertainment as a vehicle for an educational message.

Many educational programs at zoos these days are overloaded with natural history facts. Information does not equal education. These dissertations may impart some level of information but do they actually serve as a conservation education experience? Do they inspire conservation action? Interpretive programs should be much more than just reciting natural history facts. Our program strategy should be to engage, inspire, and empower our audiences toward specific conservation goals.

Jennifer Sahn, Editor of *Beyond Ecophobia*, explains: "As adults we know the value of facts and figures, so we wish for children to know details about nature: names of trees and birds and geologic formations. Yet the names won't stick unless there's a bedding of empathy where that knowledge can take root. And in our desire to prepare the next generation of adults to deal with the legacy of our ecological assaults, there is a tendency to inform children of the problems concerning the human-nature relationship while failing to share with them its beautiful possibilities... The best teaching occurs when the emphasis is less on imparting knowledge and more on joining the child on a journey of discovery." (Sahn, 1996).

Roger Yerke and Alyson Burns conducted a survey of the audiences at Metro Washington Park Zoo. The survey was designed to measure the educational effectiveness of the bird show at the zoo. Specifically, they measured visitors attitudes toward the importance of personal action in protecting wildlife and the importance of personal use of resources on the survival of birds. The results showed "We feel secure in our positive response to anyone who questions the educational value of our shows. The results of this study indicate our bird shows are educationally effective. They are achieving their objectives of being entertaining and holding audience attention so that meaningful communication of environmental informational messages can be delivered. We are not only producing cognitive but also affective changes in the audiences that see the show."

In another study of the effectiveness of wildlife education programs Mark Morgan and James Gramann conducted research on the attitudes and knowledge toward snakes of fifth grade students (Morgan & Gramann). They found that providing information about snakes using a 15 minute interpretive slide and tape program failed to promote positive attitudes. They also found that mere exposure to a snake in an exhibit, or terrarium, also did not increase

attitude about snakes. They found that attitudes improved significantly in students who observed modeling, or another person handling a snake, or better yet by direct contact. One other interesting finding is that to get the most out of direct contact, or modeling, it appeared necessary to supplement the experience with factual information.

This study strongly supports the role animal shows play in influencing the attitudes of the audiences. It demonstrates that a trainer on stage interacting with a bird can have a great influence on people's attitude about birds. It also shows that direct contact, or I believe even close encounters, with animals, can also have a significant effect on a person's attitude. Confucius said "tell me and I'll forget, show me and I may remember, involve me and I will understand."

Another study, this time by Kenneth Sherwood, Jr. of Mystic Marinelife Aquarium, demonstrated that contact with live or preserved animals made a positive difference in the long-term cognitive retention and affective learning of students.

There are many other studies to support what we all have instinctively know for a long time: that live animal shows can be important educational experiences for our visitors.

### **Conservation**

A few years ago I was at a zoo speaking with the Director of a zoo and his senior staff about bringing our bird show to the zoo the following summer. He asked me how many people might the show bring to the zoo. From my past experience, how much will my show increase attendance at the zoo? I thought for a minute then asked him if he asked the same question when he built his Okapi exhibit. He answered he had not because he built the Okapi exhibit in the name of conservation. I told him I could do more for Okapi conservation with my bird show than he could do with his Okapi exhibit. He challenged me to back-up my bold statement.

When people walk by the Okapi exhibit they don't read the graphics like we want them to. They move along the rail and if they are lucky enough to see the animal hidden in the lush vegetation they think to themselves that's an odd deer and they move on without learning anything about this amazing animal.

I then suggested to the director that the progeny from his Okapi will be sent to other zoos for other breeding projects to produce more Okapi for more zoos and more breeding projects. But, is anyone ever going to release Okapi back into the wild? Probably not. So, what does breeding Okapi have to do with conservation?

I told him that I have a captive audience for 25 minutes. Through the birds in my show, I can teach people about Okapi. I can inspire people to visit the Okapi exhibit and even contribute to their conservation by buying an Okapi T-shirt, the proceeds from which would go directly to Okapi conservation in the wild. My experience with the Javan Rhino project a couple years earlier gave me the courage to speak so boldly.

To support the Javan Rhino conservation program in Indonesia, we sold T-shirts at our show at the State Fair of Texas. At the time, there were only about 40 or 50 Javan Rhinos left in existence, all in the wild. Ron Tilson of the Minnesota Zoo devised a plan to save the rhinos, not by captive breeding, like so many species before, but by developing an in-situ conservation program that protected them in the wild. In only 24 days we had raised more than \$20,000 for the rhinos. That money was used to build a boat and purchase radios for the wardens to use in protection of the rhinos. I believe this is what conservation is all about. We have now raised over \$180,000, all of it has gone to in-situ conservation efforts.

Many people are now beginning to reexamine the definition of the word "conservation." Michael Hutchins, AZA Director of Conservation and Science speaks of a move away from the Noah's Ark Paradigm where zoological institutions focus on breeding rare animals for future release into the wild. He speaks of the need for conservation strategies to be more focused on *in situ* conservation programs where emphasis is put on habitat preservation and

protecting species in the wild. This interpretation of the word “conservation” puts new emphasis on the role of animal shows and their power to make contributions to conservation. I look forward to the day animal shows are considered by AZA professionals as an important part of their conservation efforts.

In his Master’s Thesis, Jeff Swanagan investigated the factors influencing zoo visitors’ conservation attitudes and behavior (J. Swanagan). He compared the experience people had at the elephant show at the Atlanta Zoo with the experience they had at the elephant exhibit. People were surveyed at the exit gate then allowed to sign petitions and fill out solicitation cards. His research showed clearly that people who have an active experience with the elephant show are more likely to support elephant conservation than those visitors who have only a passive experience of viewing the animal in their exhibit and reading graphics.

Animal shows have the power to change people’s attitudes about conservation and inspire them to help animals in the wild. Teaching people to recycle, cut down on the use of natural resources, avoid polluting, or supporting conservation programs are ways that many bird shows already promote conservation. However, there is so much more we can do. The bird show at the Columbus Zoo operates the “one can saves toucans” program where visitors are encouraged to recycle aluminum cans with the proceeds going toward the conservation of natural habitat. Raising money to save habitat is an important conservation strategy in which all bird shows can participate. All it takes is some creativity and, of course, the support of the facility.

A few years ago, I enlisted the services of a new accountant. When I walked into her office for the first time she exclaimed “you’re my son’s hero.” She then proceeded to tell me about her son, Reed, and how he first saw our show at the Minnesota Zoo when he was four. He was so impressed by the show that he went home and put on a glove and pretended to be me with a hawk on my hand. His interest in wildlife grew as he and his family visited often with their zoo membership. Reed is now 12 and is a devoted conservationist. He can’t wait for the day he can attend the zoo school and knows that when he grows up he will work in a profession that saves animals and natural habitat. He is now so committed to conservation that he donates his allowance to the nature conservancy for the purchase of rainforest. Reed’s story is told time and again at zoos all over the world. What power of influence we have on young impressionable people.

### **Recreation**

I don’t know of any study regarding the attractive value of live animal shows. I am not sure anyone has ever seen the need to study whether or not animal shows attract visitors. It seems fairly apparent that they do. I suspect that if educational animal shows did not attract enough visitors to make the venture financially rewarding most facilities would not have them. In 1976 there was one mixed species free-flight bird show in this country. Today there are close to 100. Our membership in IAATE has grown from a handful of people in 1993 to over 250 today. How many people see bird shows in this country? I don’t know, but the two shows from our facility alone are seen by over 2,000,000 people per year. Bird shows are very successful and growing in numbers around the world.

A quick glance at the people in the seats will tell you that people enjoy the bird show experience. The repeat visitors and increased attendance are testimonial of the entertainment value of the show. People come to a zoo to be entertained. A live animal show does this very well.

### **Conclusion**

Educational animal shows have the ability to pursue almost every aspect of most zoological institutions’ mission statements. They are easily the most educational experience the average zoo visitor will encounter on their trip to the facility. Studies have shown that the experiences we provide have the ability to impart knowledge and adjust attitudes in ways that have a significant positive impact on the natural world. We all know that animal shows attract visitors, but this should be considered the bonus of having an educational animal show at a facility, not the purpose.

As producers of educational animal shows we have an enormous opportunity. We have the opportunity to influence millions of people, and make significant contributions to conservation. My hope is that the administrators of zoological parks will find the financial resources to keep pace with our opportunities.

With our opportunities comes responsibility. It is imperative that we be responsible in every aspect of our profession. From the management and training of our birds to the presentation of our shows. We must never forget that our animals have only us to rely on for their every need. We must also never forget that we have the power to turn a casual interest into a burning passion. It is from the experiences we provide that some conservationists are born and a little bit of nature is saved.

## References:

Hutchins, M. 1999. Why zoos and aquariums should increase their contributions to *in situ* conservation. In press, AZA conference proceedings, 1999.

Laule, G.; Desmond, T. 1998. Positive reinforcement training as an enrichment strategy. In: D.J. Shepherdson, J. D. Mellen, & M. Hutchins (eds.), 1998. *Second nature: Environmental enrichment for captive animals*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC.

Mallinson, J. 1999. Key Note Address, conference proceedings, AARAZPA annual conference, 1998, Sydney, Australia

Mellen, J.; Sevenich, M; 1999. Philosophy of Animal Enrichment: Past, Present and Future. Paper presented at the Pan African Association of Zoological Parks, Aquariums and Botanical Gardens, Cape Town, South Africa, May 1999.

Morgan, J.M. and Gramann, J.H. 1989. Predicting effectiveness of wildlife education programs: A study of student's attitudes and knowledge towards snakes. *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, 17,501-509.

Sherwood, K.P. Jr, Rallis, S.F., & Stone, J. (1989). Effects of live animals versus preserved specimens on student learning. *Zoo Biology*, 8, 99-104.

Swanagan, J. 1993. An assessment of factors influencing zoo visitors' conservation attitudes and behavior, Masters Thesis, Georgia Institute of Technology.

Yerke, R. & Burns, A. (1991). Measuring the impact of animal shows on visitor attitudes. AAZPA Annual Conference Proceedings, San Diego, California, pp. 532-539. Wheeling, WV.