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Ongoing Classes for Teens

Growing the Next Generation of Conservationists

Children have a fascination with animals and an innate sense of wonder about the world. Perhaps this is why so many educational programs offered at zoos and aquariums are focused on the youngest members of society. The challenge to zoo educators becomes developing programs for an older, more advanced audience as the children grow into teenagers. The goal of conservation education in zoos and aquariums is to provide children with positive experiences and to allow them to make personal connections to the natural world, which will hopefully influence them to act in environmentally-conscious and responsible ways throughout the rest of their lives. By creating programs geared toward teenagers, conservation educators can foster an appreciation in students as they are forming many of the habits they will maintain as they enter adulthood. Therefore, keeping children interested in the natural world as they get older, tailoring programs to their more complex understanding of the world, and creating courses that are demanding, yet accessible and interesting, to an older audience are goals vitally important in creating future conservationists.

As coordinator for two long-term, tuition-based, conservation education programs at the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium, I have the unique opportunity to witness and assess my students' conservation attitudes and commitment over several years. Many of my students begin taking classes with me as children, and they grow with the programs. As they approach and begin adulthood, they continue to participate in programs by electing to take more advanced courses. KidScience participants attend class while they are 11 to 13 years old, and Zoo U. students are between 13 and 18 years old. Both programs are year-round, and all topics and themes build upon previous material. While some students begin classes at different times or stop taking classes as they get older, most of the students who attend Zoo U. courses begin attending classes as 1st year KidScience students and grow through both programs. For example, of the 54 high school students currently taking Zoo U. courses, only 13 did not begin taking classes as a 1st year KidScience student.

Because of the continuous relationship I have with my students, I created a survey to assess if the students grow in their commitment toward conservation, both in attitude and action, as they grow in knowledge and independence. Because Zoo U. students are older and generally have taken classes for a longer time, Zoo U. students should be more committed to conservation than KidScience students. Moreover, Zoo U. students are more likely to have more freedom to make their own decisions regarding transportation, the products they buy, financial support of conservation organizations, and volunteering their time in an environmentally-productive manner.

A survey was administered to students in September 2009, and again in October 2011, at the beginning of the school year, to assess the students' commitment to conservation. The survey measured different aspects of student environmental commitment, such as their understanding of environmental issues, their general worldview, what they would be *willing* to do for conservation, what they *actually* do for the environment, and the students' emotions and attitudes toward conservation. Zoo U. students scored higher on all sections of the survey compared to KidScience students on both surveys.

Both KidScience and Zoo U. kids scored high on the survey overall, which likely can be attributed to the fact that the programs are elective, extracurricular education programs, which require an innate interest in the subject matter. If the students did not have a positive view of environmental concepts, they would likely not apply to the programs in the first place. The fact that Zoo U. participants scored higher on all measures of the survey, however, suggests that the students absorb conservation messages as they take successive classes, which alters their perspectives and actions accordingly.

As a conservation educator who primarily works with teenagers, I am constantly impressed by my students' commitment to conservation. While overall numbers of students may be lower in zoo classes for teen audiences, the participants are no less enthusiastic, and in fact, they may be a more direct asset to the institution. I have been fortunate enough to watch many students grow up from interested and eager children to motivated and mature young adults. I have often been asked how we have been able to create popular and successful programs for teenagers, and while I do not have all of the answers, I suspect the answer lies in the design of the courses. General classes at zoos tend to be one-time events, which focus on general facts about animals. In contrast, KidScience and Zoo U. are long-term commitments between the kids and the Zoo. The kids become well-known and well-respected members of the Zoo community, as they are not passive learners in the programs. Students form relationships with Zoo staff, keepers, zoo animals, and conservation programs. The programs engage the kids directly, and they become an integral part of the Zoo. Students perceive that they are making a difference with their course activities and programs, and projects that they work on during classes are actually used by the keepers to better the lives of the animals. For example, students collect behavioral data on individual animals to create personalized enrichment items. Additionally, keepers often ask KidScience and Zoo U. students to assist in behavioral studies when they do not have the means to collect the data on their own.

Because the courses are billed as programs to prepare kids for college and animal-related careers, they appeal to kids who are extremely serious about the Zoo and willing to commit their time to the programs, rather than kids who just have a casual interest in animals. As such, the kids are willing to participate in conservation projects in and around the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium and in their local communities. We are truly growing the next generation of conservationists, and it is something of which we are extremely proud.