

The Role of Zoo Playgrounds: Beyond Playtime & into Conservation Awareness

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Zoos provide conservation for animals and education opportunities for their communities. Children enjoy connecting with animals, but may not respond well to zoo exhibit signage (Charmayoff et al. 2001). Evidence suggests the installation of appropriate play spaces can bridge this gap and help foster a sense of environmental awareness in children (Adams and Kanter 2011; Worch and Haney 2011). The most effective way to educate children about the natural world is to merely let them explore outside (Parsons 2011). Natural playgrounds in a zoo setting provide children with the opportunity to exercise their bodies, and their minds, as well as encourage a life learning to love nature, which leads to environmentally concerned adults (Charmayoff et al. 2001; Sobel 2008).

Consider Woodland Park Zoo (WPZ) in Seattle, Washington. In an attempt to further their mission of providing “engaging experiences”, WPZ has several play areas for families to explore. These

spaces are found throughout the zoo and include two playgrounds: the Bamboo Forest Reserve (BFR), and the Habitat Discovery Loop (HDL). The BFR opened in May 2013, and is near the Asian small-clawed otter exhibit, and a tropical aviary. The HDL is an older feature, and is located near the Family Farm and Bug World, under cover of trees.

In the HDL, families find themselves transported to the size of small animals. The playground has features such as a giant orb spider web for climbing, mountain beaver tunnels, and child-size turtle shells. Here, children can engage in pretend play where they anthropomorphize animals, which creates a sense of caring for species that can last long into adulthood (Sobel 2008). Under the canopy of the forested play area, children challenge their bodies and stimulate their senses. They are encouraged to play at their own pace and make their own decisions; important elements to unstructured free play (Charmayoff et al.

2001; Worch and Haney 2011). This area is also home to urban wildlife: barred owls, song birds, and squirrels are frequent visitors. These wild creatures stimulate the innate sense of curiosity children hold about nature (Kola-Olusanya 2005; Miller et al. 2009). Children are encouraged to explore and discover: no space is off-limits, including the stream bed and the natural climbing tree, allowing for potential scientific discovery (Adams and Kanter 2011).

Free play outside can provide a release of energy and allow for emotional regulation (Starling 2011; Veitch et al. 2007). The BFR playground was designed with active play in mind. The playground was built to imitate natural bamboo poles, with climbing ropes attached along a wooden bridge, leading to a zip line. Children climb poles, and traverse ropes, utilizing a full range of movement and developing functional gross motor skills (Miller et al. 2009; Starling 2011). There are log benches and soft wood chips underfoot, which provides a welcoming atmosphere for families. After a visit to the BFR, visitors are refreshed and energized, ready to observe zoo animals (Erickson and Ernst 2011).

Zoo patrons often visit with the dual goals of exposing their children to learning opportunities and providing family recreation time (Yocco et al. 2010). The play spaces at WPZ incorporate features designed in line with research findings supporting free play as a means to achieving the zoo's mission, while also creating a venue for family recreation and fun. Offering unstructured play outdoors in settings such as the HDL and the BFR supports cognitive and early brain development, science learning in the form of problem solving and critical thinking skills, and provides a whole host of health benefits (Starling, 2011). Just being outdoors can inspire a conservation ethic (Street 2010), which can ultimately lead to becoming "defenders of nature" (Moore and Cosco 2000). In addition, merely being located near captive wildlife provides children with fodder for imaginative play, and gives them the tools to build empathy for nature in a meaningful way (Miller et al. 2009). The evidence in favor of play spaces as complements to traditional zoo exhibits continues to grow. As zoos expand and renovate their infrastructure, Woodland Park Zoo and others like it can serve as models for educational play space design.

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