

Interviewing a Sea Lion

Using video and other social media to advance environmental activism in teens



by **Emilie Hanson**

MOST TEENAGERS ARE incredibly comfortable with using technology like YouTube, Facebook Live, and Snapchat to communicate. This comfort inspired me to focus on social media as a platform for youth empowerment in conservation. I developed a multidisciplinary lesson plan to engage teens actively with conservation in their local communities by making high-quality videos and distributing them via social media.

I work as a conservation educator at the Central Park Zoo in New York City, where I had the privilege of working with the participants of, and helping to develop a curriculum for, a three-week long teen summer camp. As part of the curriculum, I developed a lesson plan for a self-selected group of teens to meet for five hours a week to work on a video project. My group consisted of four teens, but the lesson plan is designed for a much larger class that can be split into smaller groups, each of which makes their own video. I asked my class to learn about an environmental issue affecting them, and to create a two minute-long video explaining the issue and presenting a solution or helpful action that an average person could take.

The curriculum purposely emphasizes a positive action point. Much of today's conservation messaging is negative or apocalyptic, which can lead educators to shy away from tackling it in the classroom. Sticking to a positive message empowered my group of teens to take ownership of their issue, and it encouraged those who viewed the video to turn

their empathy into action. My ultimate goal was that my teens would share their finished video with the wider world via the internet.

By presenting a successful case of a lesson plan that combines video-making and social media to engage teens in conservation activism, I hope to inspire my fellow educators to use and adapt this lesson plan in their own classrooms.

Lesson Plan

The first few sessions introduced the project goals and underlying technologies, and exposed the students to video-making techniques, conservation ideas, and messaging. The next sessions combined filming of the video footage with further lessons on crafting a story, teaching to a particular level, and editing and enhancing footage. The final sessions were entirely devoted to filming and editing. Below is a breakdown of what was covered in each 90-minute session.

Session 1 - Introduction to YouTube, and its greatest hits and biggest flops. Divide into groups or partners if necessary. Brainstorm conservation issues for video and age-range for target audience.

Session 2 - How to make a video, part 1: Lighting, sound, and the camera. Finish brainstorming and choose issue and age range. Begin sculpting message.

Session 3 - How to make a video, part 2: Poise, diction, and "connecting" with the audience. Finish sculpting message. Begin scouting locations and create a storyboard.

Session 4 - How to make a video, part 3: Fixing it in post-production, flash and bang, music. Groups present their storyboards to the class. Critique and discuss ideas. Break into groups, and reevaluate and revamp ideas. Begin filming.

Session 5 - Teaching to a level: adults, teens, and children. Continue filming. Edit the daily footage.

Session 6 - Groups present footage to the class. Critique and discuss. Break into groups, and reevaluate and revamp ideas once more. Continue filming and editing.

Session 7 - Filming and editing.

Session 8 - Last minute filming and editing.

Session 9 - Present final cut to group. Present final cut to parents. Post final cut to social media.

My students were very passionate about the issues of littering, recycling, and pollution. The first thing we did as a group was talk about ways to combine those issues and create a compelling narrative that would appeal to viewers of all ages. At first, we struggled with how to make the video engaging. I was also insistent that the video contain a suggestion of an action viewers could take, should they feel inspired. This, too, was initially difficult for my students. In the end, they were able to overcome both challenges successfully.

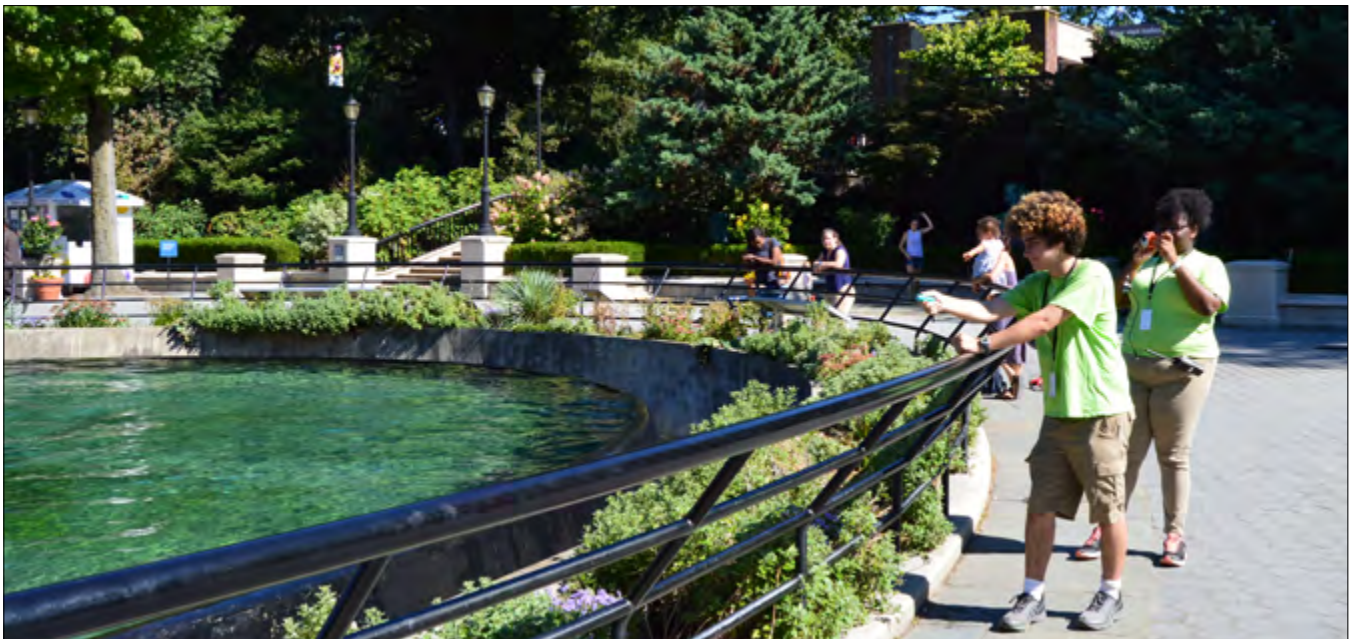
Their compelling narrative was to tell the story of pollution, littering, and recycling from the perspectives of the animals who live at the zoo. The students gave them voices, personalities, and points of view. These animals were then interviewed about their views on pollution, littering, and recycling. Students asked them if they were affected, if their wild relatives were affected, and if they understood the risks of these behaviors. By using objectively cute and funny animals, the students were able to spread information about the issues without being condescending to their audience.

Because over half of the video was voiceover that was recorded after filming in the zoo, they took time each day to

work on adding their voiceovers. This was an added bonus for the two students I had who did not wish to be on camera, but wanted to contribute to the video. One complication that I did not foresee was the use of animals in the zoo as co-stars in the video. Animals are often uncooperative when it comes to being interviewed, and there was a lot of frustration over getting the right shot to match the words that were being recorded for the voiceover. As a result, I did not have my students create storyboards, and they only loosely wrote a script.

The positive action point that the students were supposed to include at the end of the video was also an area for frustration. Because they did not narrow their message to one topic, they were unable to define one action for all three issues. While all three issues have straightforward actions associated with them, it was challenging to get all of the information into one video. Their solution was ingenious: Each animal would show concern about one issue. The penguins were very concerned about pollution and the effects of global warming. In their interview, they pleaded with people to use a municipal bike-sharing program instead of a fossil fuel-powered vehicle. The harbor seals were extremely concerned about littering, as storm water often carries litter and garbage straight into the ocean where they live. They wanted everyone to know about the importance of throwing trash into a garbage can. For the black-and-white ruffed lemurs, just throwing away trash into the proper waste receptacle wasn't enough — people needed to become aware that a lot of natural resources are found in the rainforest, and without recycling those resources elsewhere, the rainforest will be cut down to supply them. They wanted everyone to recycle as much as possible.

I was extremely proud of my students for their creativity and passion. My biggest disappointment with this project was that these videos could not be shared on public media under the WCS social media brand. Make sure to coordinate with your administration so that your videos meet all of the requirements to be shared under your institution's brand.





Like all open-ended lessons, this project changed from its inception. There were parts of the lesson plan that did not work for my group, which forced me to make changes. There were session topics that spread across several sessions, because the group needed more time to work. It was this flexibility that allowed me to make this program successful, and allowed my students to be excited, engaged and proud of their final project. The students found this program to be not only fun and exciting, but also interesting and empowering. They were able to become activists and leaders in a way that they felt comfortable with, and they enjoyed the process. This project benefited the students by giving them the opportunity to research issues important to them and to discover ways to present that information using engaging technology. Teenagers who are interested in education and conservation can use the technology of video-making and social media to reach a wide and diverse audience.

Tips for teachers

1. This project can be expanded or contracted depending on the size of your group and the amount of time you want to spend on the project. To contract it, you may want to use Snapchat to create environmental snaps, or short videos giving an action that does not need a lengthy explanation. This could be a weekly or monthly recurring project. To expand it, try adding time to the video. My students ended up making a 7-minute video, but the longer you make the video, the longer it will take for them to meet the time quota. Be careful not to let the video drag on though; the longer the video, the more engaging it needs to be to the audience.
2. This project can be multidisciplinary. Because I wrote this for a summer camp, I did not need to think about including school board-directed standards and benchmarks. This project can easily include aspects of writing, critical thinking, research, creative problem solving, mathematics, and community engagement.
3. This project can include anyone; not just people who want to be on camera. Only 30% of time is spent actually filming the video. There also needs to be a scriptwriter, a film editor, a camera person, someone to create graphs and charts, someone to do hair and makeup, someone to scout locations for filming, and someone to direct the scenes.
4. You don't have to be a professional filmmaker to teach teens how to make films. If the students are able to take ownership of the project, they will find a way to make the technology work for them.
5. Think big! The content of the videos is up to the teacher and students, and there is nothing set in stone in the lesson — the only thing limiting it is imagination!

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