



Social Shifts in Animal Interpretation

The History of Humans and Captive Wildlife

In the past, captive animal management gave the impression that the animals under human care were to be utilized and manipulated to serve our own purposes.

Enclosures were just big enough to house the animal, made of metal or concrete, and sometimes did not even allow space for them to turn around. Water and bedding availability could be limited by the owner of the animal. Our understanding of



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animals as sentient beings had not yet been explored and there were no regulations in place to ensure compassionate care.

The Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, Washington, has an activity for fourth-graders to discuss the history of zoos. The timeline shows a progression that exemplifies that roller coaster of social change associated with our fascination with animals, from rulers in early civilizations who had personal animal collections and events with fighting animals (but also full-scale care with onsite veterinarians) to the 19th century when what is considered “modern zoos” were established. The 20th century demonstrated the public’s increasing need for education, conservation, and eventually the

Naturalist Mandy Martin and volunteer Margaret Hensel discuss snake encounters.

realization that the animals on display had needs beyond that of human necessity. While many animal interpreters work or volunteer for parks or rehabilitation facilities, they have faced many of the same challenges. The societal shift of how people view animals, their enclosures, and those who care for them has taken a turn towards awe, respect, and conservation concerns.

The View of Modern Society

In today’s world, captive animals are still in demand as a tourist attraction; however, the way a visitor views those

animals has changed. Humans are no longer satisfied to see an animal “caged” for our enjoyment. Society is shifting towards seeing animals in a natural setting (or as close to natural as possible). Even as the news media touts that people are becoming less empathetic, that concept does not seem to apply to animals. We want to develop relationships with the animals we meet and know them on a personal level. Social media is enhancing this concept and allows daily insight to animal behavior that can explode into unwavering support for the entity caring for the animal in the spotlight. Nothing demonstrates this more than the example of a premature baby hippo born in Cincinnati that continues to be an international sensation more than a year after her birth.

Public perception of compassion and care for animals must be demonstrated, otherwise the caretakers appear callous and unconcerned. The public seems to crave a personal experience and to live vicariously through the organization’s staff as they care for animal ambassadors. Interpreters can use

this shift to our advantage by catering to the current world view in order to establish a connection with audiences and gain support for environmental conservation.

Creating Effective Animal Experiences

There are usually two types of animal experiences that a visitor can enjoy at a facility. The first is a self-guided display experience and the second is a live animal ambassador program. In the evolution of audience behaviors it seems that anthropomorphism and sentimentality are needed to make a meaningful connection during either experience. The term *anthropomorphism* is not a comfortable word for most naturalists and educators who were most likely trained as scientists. Science, while vastly important, is a discipline that removes itself from bias. Unlike true scientists, interpreters rely on bias to provoke an emotional response from our audience. In *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Freeman Tilden refers to interpreters as revealers who go beyond the body of information to project the soul of things. This

reference may not have been directly related to animal interpretation but it certainly resonates as a guideline for the task.

Display animals provide a constant platform for visitors to learn and engage with your organization’s goals. In 2017, Darke County Parks in Ohio completed construction on a new raptor enclosure to house three birds of prey. Our goal was to provide a structure to show how much we respect the animals and their natural history. Secondly, we wanted to provide the public access for viewing that could be modified if the animal were stressed or ill. Additionally, the education display would be self-guided for community members who did not come to formal programs.

While most bird mews at public parks are simplistic in nature, providing the basic necessity of shelter, this structure symbolizes more. The whole building is fully wired with multiple outlets to accommodate fans or heating elements while inside the enclosures you will find all-natural materials for perches and nest boxes along with enrichment items like old Christmas trees and rope balls. The windows on the enclosure can be opened for public viewing, or closed for the privacy of the bird. The hope is that when a visitor approaches the enclosure they can clearly see that all aspects of care for the animal have been taken into account.

To me, there is no better tool to enchant an audience than a live animal. The first of Freeman Tilden’s six principles mentions that whatever is being described or displayed must relate to the visitor on a personal level. Very simply, real animals provide an opportunity to show just how much we have in common with the world around us. These creatures eat, drink, and have families and homes that are nearly always influenced by humans. Animal interactions also provide a rare combination of auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning styles.

When presenting an animal, it is important to know what your organization expects you to project to the audience. Does your animal have

The newly constructed raptor enclosure can hold three birds and exceeds the minimum standard of care.





Volunteer Jerry Lamb introduces Pip, the eastern screech owl to a park visitor.

a name? Can the animal be touched by you or by the public? What is the end goal for your program—perhaps to gain support for habitat loss or to encourage recycling? Storytelling is a useful tool to engage the people and tends to spark memories for further conversations. How did the animal come to you? Is the animal disabled in any way? Is your animal legal to keep as a pet in your community? Finally, provide information that exhibits your animal's personality. Does the animal display a behavior each time you feed it? Do you notice it doing something every single day that is amusing or cute? For some, this may be the hardest point to cover but the shift in public perception we are experiencing almost demands it. Another way to cover this base is to use social media to document day-to-day behaviors and activities.

The Name Game

The terribly uncomfortable discussion regarding anthropomorphism is necessary if you have live animals for display or education. Personal views aside, there must be a standard so that everyone on the team has a clear view of how to respond to audience questions. Jane Goodall was turned away by major scientific publications several times due to the fact that she had names for the chimps she was studying. Did naming these animals make her work less significant? How would her research have been different if she did not have the emotional response of naming an animal? The sizable contributions that Dr. Goodall has made to the scientific community and the footprint she has left is undeniable.

In 2011, Sune Borkfelt explored naming in *What's in a Name?* She stated that naming an animal may

signify power or control over the animal and that it could become humanized in the eyes of the audience. It may also draw the audience closer to the animal which has both negative and positive connotations. Animals that have naturally shorter life spans could cause speculation from community members. Finally, it may imply that the animal in question is a pet or companion animal, therefore prompting the audience to collect wild animals to bring home.

Knowing that interpretation relies on universal connections, a name could be a way to connect the audience with your topic. Naming can evoke an empathetic response that could bring people to follow the call to action that is being presented. Finally, anthropomorphism does not necessarily mean that the audience is not learning about the animal presented. In the 2016 book *Beyond Words: What Animals Think and Feel*, Carl Safina writes, "Parental care, satisfaction, friendship, compassion, and grief didn't just suddenly appear with the emergence of modern humans." These attributes are not specific to humans; therefore using them could hold the key to increasing audience participation and increasing support for environment issues.

The truth is that interpretation works by being rooted in certain standards; however, it must evolve to compensate for changes in the human psyche. A connection with the audience must be made on a level that makes sense for both parties. As the animal sits in front of the audience, with a heartbeat ever-so similar to ours, it becomes nearly impossible to be apathetic to its story and place in the ecosystem, thereby breaking the barrier between caring and not caring.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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