

Employees as Conservation Ambassadors

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Frontline zoo employees represent a wealth and diversity of skills and experience that can benefit the growing number of conservation field projects. The value of incorporating these employees ranges from increased interest in their own organization's mission to direct contribution to projects. Perhaps most importantly, it offers the opportunity to groom employees as conservation ambassadors. When this idea was presented to our organization, nobody questioned why we would attempt this effort, but rather, how.

The Zoological Society of San Diego (ZSSD) participates in field conservation projects around the world, currently conducting approximately 47 in situ projects in 23 countries. Historically, conservation teams were comprised of researchers and curators, and occasionally, veterinarians were included. During the past few years, our Education Department has become a key player on these teams, serving to coordinate educational outreach elements in our conservation projects.

These elements incorporate components that involve the local communities at the project site, as well as providing a conservation message for our own community, our membership and our employees. Since frontline employees represent our first point of contact with more than five million guests per year, it is paramount that they be groomed as conservation ambassadors. And the best way to teach employees about conservation is by involving them in field projects. Finding a way to take staff out of their regular jobs for short periods to accomplish this endeavour became my challenge, while we also needed to find a way to make our end results equitable, accountable and undeniably effective.

How It Is Done...

We first utilise our in-house communication vehicles (employee newsletters and bulletin boards, for example) to communicate what conservation projects are in operation and how to apply to participate. Next, the application process documents required skills and additional talents that might be useful. Selected applicants are asked to complete a written interview, as well as a brief essay on why they wanted to participate and what they could add to the project.

From that pool of candidates, a group of employees is selected for final interviews, while supervisors are contacted to check on job performance and availability of each candidate. In person interviews are conducted by a panel of representatives from the Education and Conservation Departments, and new team members chosen, based on their abilities and 'team fit'.

(Replacement labour funds are made available to any department allowing its employees to participate. Such funds are written in at the start of the budgetary process, as a required component of any grant proposals involving the use of frontline employees.)



San Diego Zoo Employees who participated in Monarch Butterfly Project came from Horticulture, Merchandising, Research and Conservation departments as well as the animal departments

The scope of the projects requires a range of obligations, but not every employee can make the same commitment. Some are able to spend more time helping with the preparation and the follow-up reports, while others can only attend pre- and post-trip meetings, in addition to the actual time spent in the field.

Teams number between one and eight employees, with every project coordinated by an acting supervisor, or team leader, during the project administration. The duties and responsibilities of each employee while 'on project' are developed by this team leader and communicated well in advance of implementation.

Those selected undergo training sessions on the project topic, travel protocol and team dynamics. Role clarification is undoubtedly the most important component in the training and the one that needs much attention as new team members learn to work effectively together. Depending on the scope of a project, three or four team meetings are held prior to its implementation, with an equal number of debriefings after completion.

In addition to travel reports, each employee is required to make a formal presentation to his or her department. On completion, members of the team are selected to write articles for in house publications, some delivering presentations to outside organizations as well.

What do we gain by including frontline employees in conservation field projects? We are able to enhance employees' understanding of our organization's mission and goals, increase their desire to support conservation and utilise them as vehicles for disseminating information to other employees. The end result is an ever-growing cadre of conservation ambassadors that are effectively spreading 'the message' throughout our organisation and into our community. In addition to the accomplishments of the team at the project site, an effective educational



Workshop for Interpretive guiding techniques at Monarch Butterfly reserve in Mexico

campaign for our internal and local audiences is implemented.

After 18 months of trial and error, the results of the effort to include frontline employees in field projects have proven worthwhile. We are currently gaining momentum and employees are seeking more opportunities. Our organisation is now preparing to

implement a new pilot programme that expands the current scope by pairing employees with field researchers in 12 countries over the next two years.

Model Conservation Education Project: Monarch Butterfly Conservation in Mexico

Project Summary:

Since it was featured in the August, 1976, issue of National Geographic magazine, much media attention has been focused on the monarch butterfly over-wintering sites near Angangueo, Michoacan, Mexico. It is undoubtedly one of the most amazing wildlife encounters available to the common tourist: tens of millions of monarch butterflies roosting in acre upon acre of pine trees. There are approximately 300,000 annual visitors to this area, all during the five-month season.

At the invitation of a Mexican Non-Governmental Organisation, Bosque Modelo, the ZSSD is helping to offer sufficient guest services at the reserves, and has offered ideas for interpretation, trail design, merchandise venues and other visitor facilities.

One particular issue for which our support has been requested is the over-use of wood from the Oyamel pine trees by local people. In a sustainable resource project, the craft of pine needle weaving has been encouraged in women's groups, promoting the use of fallen needles as a source of income while encouraging the protection of the trees.

Composition of Project Team:

Representatives from the following departments were selected over a two-year period: Birds, Building and Grounds, Conservation, Education, Mammals, Merchandising and Operations.

Team Accomplishments:

- * upgrade of current graphic interpretation panels at reserve sites
- * installation of merchandising displays for sustainable use products
- * numerous interpretation workshops for reserve guides
- * workshop for artisan groups on sustainable resource development
- * design and development of interpretation materials for guides