

## Going the Distance with Zoo Education

*Erin Fitzgerald, Bronx Zoo, USA*

Imagine you're a child living just outside Mexico City in Naucalpan. School begins at 8:30am and your teacher explains that at 8:45am your class will visit the Bronx Zoo, located in New York City, without ever setting foot outside the classroom. You will see animals living at the zoo and speak with a zoo educator who will guide you through activities designed to help you learn about the animals you're seeing. Is it possible?

Since September 2001, the Wildlife Conservation Society's Bronx Zoo has been offering interactive educational programs to students across the United States and throughout the world using two-way videoconferencing technology. Developed with major funding from the United States Department of Education, the programs, entitled Distance Learning Expeditions, are 45- to 60-minute presentations accompanied by extensive pre- and post-materials for both students and teachers. Videoconference programs are broadcast live into classrooms via Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN) or Internet Protocol (IP). The Bronx Zoo has delivered 430 programs to more than 11,000 students located in 25 states and three countries over the past two school years.

Distance Learning Expeditions include several live animal "guests," and are based on time-tested, teacher-endorsed curricula developed at the Bronx Zoo. They are designed to involve students through questioning, reasoning and the use of higher order thinking skills. The programs also incorporate the use of live video feeds from video cameras installed in zoo exhibits. With complete pan, tilt and zoom capability, the video cameras provide high quality video of animal behavior.



*'Hands up if you know the answer!' Maine students take part in an 'Awesome Adaptations' conference © Jill Bell*

Currently teachers may choose from six video conferences available for students from Kindergarten through 12th grade. The "Gorillas, Gentle Giants in Crisis" videoconference was offered for the first time to 7-12th grade students in 2003. This program utilizes video cameras strategically placed in the Bronx Zoo's Congo Gorilla Forest exhibit. Students whose closest zoos are sometimes a six-hour or more drive from their home, can now observe live gorillas. Bronx Zoo gorillas like Pattycake and her offspring Nyasha help spark heated discussions among students who participate in role-play activities to develop conservation strategies that not only protect gorillas, but also involve local African people.



*Erin and kindergarten students from Michigan talk about the Bronx Zoo's gorillas, D DeMello © WCS*

Jill Bell, a fifth-grade science and language arts teacher at Cape Elizabeth Middle School in Maine, says that with the aid of WCS's Distance Learning Program, her students, "are accessing a primary source," despite the fact that the school is hundreds of miles from any zoo. Maine Governor Angus King, a strong proponent of technology as a teaching tool, participated in a teleconference with Mrs. Bell's students. "I never realized it was so easy to visit the Bronx [Zoo] from Maine," said King. He predicts that within five years, distance learning will be commonplace in his state.

The 2003-2004 school year marks the third year of the Distance Learning Program through which the Bronx Zoo will continue to deliver positive conservation messages to as many students across the United States and throughout the world as possible. For more information, visit <http://wcs.org/distancelearning> or contact Erin Fitzgerald at [efitzgerald@wcs.org](mailto:efitzgerald@wcs.org) or (718) 220-5131.