

Avoiding Ecophobia:

redefining conservation messages for kids

by Katie Slivovsky

You work at a zoo because you like animals, right? (I'm guessing you're not in it for the money.) Here's another assumption: I'm guessing you work at a zoo today because of how you played as a child. If you take a moment to reflect on your favorite childhood experiences...what comes to mind? Catching frogs? Building forts? Playing tag in the woods? Hiking? Exploring the local zoo?

Louise Chawla, a psychologist from Kentucky State University, interviewed adults who identified themselves as good environmental citizens and she found that the most common denominator in their childhoods was this: free time spent in wild or semi-wild places. For me, it was the woods behind my house where I caught crayfish and tadpoles as temporary pets, brewed mysterious teas in old soup cans over tiny fires, and basically lazed away Iowa's long, hot summers. Those experiences are among my very best memories. But I had never realized that those precious childhood adventures—more than my academic years studying fish and wildlife biology and environmental education—have made me what I am today: an educator who wants to do right by the environment; personally and professionally.

In your neck of the world, do children today have the same opportunities to explore nature that you did as a child? In many urban places, outdoor nature play is at an all time low. But here's the double whammy: environmental doom and gloom is at an all-time high.

In some parts of the world, kids are bombarded with messages about endangered animals, rain forest destruction and elephant poaching. These warnings appear on everything from TV, magazines, games, and books to the backs of Animal Crackers and cereal boxes. And we're talking about some seriously sad messages. One zoo bookstore had on its shelves an alphabet book about extinct animals telling preschoolers, "L is for Las Vegas frog. People built the city of Las Vegas and paved over all the fresh water springs where this frog used to live. Sadly, we say goodbye to the Las Vegas frog." (*The Extinct Alphabet Book*, Jerry Pallotta, Charlesbridge Publishing, 1993) The very last sentence of the book is, "Let's hope human beings never become extinct." Quite a thought to hear just before bedtime.

At some zoos, programs frequently touch on endangered species and habitat loss. The nine-year-old son of a zoo educator attended summer

zoo camp. When asked how things were going, the child answered, "Dad, Zoo Camp makes me feel kinda panicky." Are we sometimes so passionate about conservation issues that we go overboard on the doom and gloom? Do we sometimes forget how impressionable and vulnerable young children really are? And how do children react when overloaded with bad news?

David Sobel, in his article, "*Beyond Ecophobia: Reclaiming the Heart in Nature Education*" (Orion, 1995), theorizes that we encourage kids to distance themselves or "tune out" when we overwhelm them with bad news. Children survive by distancing themselves from what they find overwhelming. Sobel coined a term, "ecophobia," to describe the fear of nature that kids can develop when asked to deal prematurely with the environmental problems of an adult world.

We don't yet know the emotional toll all this environmental doom and gloom will have on kids. There have always been serious, global problems—and kids have always been aware of them. But only recently have kids been made to feel responsible for solving them. Psychologists tell us the number one stressor in life is feeling responsible for things we can't control.

Stephanie Hollis, a teen volunteer at Brookfield Zoo, put it this way, "Giving children bad news about the environment at an early age robs them of their childhood by giving them adult problems. This causes kids to grow up too fast. They should be enjoying their childhood instead of worrying about issues that belong in the White House."

Changing our ways

Several Brookfield Zoo staff learned about the concepts behind ecophobia while working with David Sobel and others to develop our zoo's newest children's experience, the Hamill Family Play Zoo. We in the education department decided to take a serious look at the environmental messages we were presenting to kids through our programs. We realized that some of our activities were inappropriate. No matter how positively we tried to "spin" the news, we feared young kids could be overwhelmed by what we were saying about rain forest destruction, elephant poaching, and other potentially upsetting issues. We decided to eliminate these topics from programs geared for kids 10 and younger.

As it turned out, we found all we had to do was tweak a few things here and there. For example, we used to offer a school program called “Endangered Treasures of the Tropics.” We simply took off the word “endangered” and focused on all the exciting animals, mini-habitats, products and relationships in the rainforest.

In 1999, Brookfield Zoo formed an “Ecophobia Team” to serve as a resource for zoo staff and other educators. We came up with the following list of suggestions to guide us as we develop new programs and evaluate existing programs:

Age-appropriate topic suggestions for educational programs

key

- ✓ Appropriate Topics
- ✗ Inappropriate Topics

Birth to 3

- ✓ Animals are cool
- ✓ Sensory experiences
- ✓ Animals that are close to home
- ✓ Families
- ✗ Ecosystems (*too abstract*)
- ✗ Life cycles (*birth, death, etc.*)
- ✗ Endangered species
- ✗ Environmental problems/issues

4 to 7

- ✓ Animal homes
- ✓ Farm/domestic animals
- ✓ Predators/prey
- ✓ Compare/contrast animals to self
- ✓ Animal groups
- ✓ Life cycles
- ✓ Good environmental manners (*recycling, reusing, turning off lights, etc.*)
- ✗ Ecosystems
- ✗ Endangered species
- ✗ Environmental problems/issues
- ✗ Consequences of not using good environmental manners (*habitat loss, pollution, endangered species, etc.*)

8 to 11

- ★ All of the above ✓
- ✓ Good environmental manners
- ✓ Ecosystems
- ✓ Physical adaptations
- ✓ Animal habitats and needs

- ✓ Site-specific investigations
- ✓ Cycles
- ✓ Introduce direct, simple (not overwhelming) consequences of not using good environmental manners, such as “If we don’t recycle, we will need more landfill space.”
- ✗ Dire consequences of not using good environmental manners

12 and up

- ★ All of the above ✓ (*older kids like to learn fun stuff about animals, too!*)
- ✓ Behavioral adaptations
- ✓ Consequences of not using good environmental manners
- ✓ Ecosystem investigation with concrete experiences
- ✓ Endangered species
- ★ Most topics are appropriate if presented in a sensitive manner
- ★ Focus on those issues that students have some hope of influencing (*whether or not the U.S. should drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*)
- ★ Consider avoiding topics children can do nothing about (*affecting the bushmeat crisis in Africa*)

But what if kids ask about endangered animals?

I worked with an early childhood specialist and other zoo educators to come up with these responses. First, find out what the child has heard and let her tell you the details. Then ask the child how she feels about what she has heard, and empathize with her feelings. Then respond in a way that is appropriate to the child’s age and stage of development. Here are some suggestions:

7 and under:

Answer questions briefly and honestly: “Yes, tigers are endangered and that’s not good. People are working to protect them but it’s a tough situation.”

Lift the burden from the child without making him/her feel powerless: “I know you are concerned about animals. There are grown-ups working hard on this problem. Maybe when you grow up, you can help out too.” Reassure him/her that not all animals are endangered. Point out that giraffes, deer,

Sobel, D.,
"Beyond Ecophobia:
Reclaiming the Heart in
Nature Education,"
Orion, Autumn 1995.

ostriches, and kangaroos are doing fine in the wild. You can also note the animals that live nearby: "Some animals have problems finding homes, but many don't. Robins, squirrels, raccoons and opossums live right around here and they're doing great!"

8 to 11 year olds:

Acknowledge the child's feelings: "Where did you hear about elephant poaching? How did you feel when you heard about the problem? I know it's a sad story but people are trying to help."

Redirect to something more local and concrete: "I know it's hard to think of what to do to help elephants. What can we do to help animals around here? That's important too--and it's probably going to be easier for us!" Suggest an action they can take to help the environment.

11 to 14 and up:

Kids in this age group are ready for action! Discuss ways to get involved locally such as adopting an animal at a nearby zoo or aquarium or volunteering at an animal shelter. Suggest calling local volunteer networks or conservation groups.

Suggest initiating or helping with recycling programs at school or in the community. Put kids in touch with their government representatives.

Discuss getting involved with national and international conservation groups. Be a model. Share thoughts about conservation actions you have taken or would like to take.

At one time, my passion was to talk to as many people as I could about environmental issues. I used little fuzzy puppets to teach young children about rain forest destruction and I wasn't particularly concerned how well they slept at night. After all, "conservation can't wait," right? Only when I began to read Sobel and Chawla, and learn more about early childhood development and the importance of nature play, did I realize I might be doing more harm than good. Today, my passion is to encourage educators and parents to *back off the bad news with kids 10 and under*. I was allowed the opportunity to love the earth before I was asked to save it. I hope we can give today's kids the same chance.

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