

Multi-thematic: A Brand New Zoo Concept Monique Staal Amersfoort Zoo

Amersfoort Zoo Decides On A Multi -thematic Presentation: All Tastes Are Catered For.

A short Introduction

The way animals in a zoo are shown has increasingly attracted interest recently. At the present time zoos all over the world are trying to replace the old cages with accommodation that is more true to life and audience family/animal friendly as well. The choices in park layout and exhibition design reflect different concepts; continental or taxonomic. Sometimes complete eco-displays are designed and set up. In this way each zoo has chosen a guiding principle to distinguish itself from others.

Amersfoort Zoo goes multi-thematic

Amersfoort Zoo has a 50-year history and over those years has grown and expanded to its present size of approximately 14 hectares. In Amersfoort Zoo we have given a more precise layout long and hard thought; a layout closer to our audience's perception of the world as it is, Amersfoort Zoo has decided on a unique concept - multi-thematic. This concept means that new and surprising layouts can and are made. Each visitor will find something new and appealing to him or her. And because everybody digests information and learns new things their own way, we have been and are creating a broader basis for education and perception, for that is the focal point in Amersfoort Zoo. As our visitors are not biologist, we are trying, in our own special way, to bring about appreciation of and admiration for (knowledge about) animals. We think our exhibits work because of their chemistry between man and animal, their light-heartedness, humor and fun, The light-hearted information is constantly winking at our visitors, the information. invariably based on respect for the animal. The multi-thematic concept is implemented in the layout of the Zoo, and as time goes by is crystallizing. In Amersfoort Zoo this crystallization can be seen in (large and small) thematic areas.

A few examples:

The "non-flying bird" theme compares flying with non-flying ones and shows how the latter category has adapted itself to land (ostriches) or water (penguins). The "tail" theme elaborates on tail adaptation, and it is here that the tail function in the "stink-fights" of the ring-tailed lemur and the balancing function of the wallaby's tail, for example stand out.

The "black and white" theme demonstrates the relationship between zebra, ring-tailed lemur and Asiatic black bear and dwells on the function of colors in the animal kingdom.

The "savanna" theme is a continental one, with its various species.

The "felines" theme is a taxonomy-based, in which different sorts of felines have their home and can be compared with one another.

By the use of various media forms this subject matter is expressed as follows:

Zoo guide

Our guide is also thematically organized, i.e. each theme dwells on four species, somehow or other interrelated. One of these themes compares the adaptations of animals with such titles as "odd extremities and protrusions": Why these animals have adapted the way they have and what functions these adaptations serve is explained, as are other subjects. The animals covered by this theme are the North African crested porcupine with its sharp quills, the elephant and its trunk, the wallaby with its pouch and the camel's humps.

Glass cases

The various glass cases in the park classify animals in a particular theme. We have a glass case talking about fur called "Will my hair-do do?", one about camouflage, "Playing hide and seek" and one about "crap" and the various properties and explanations of droppings.

The educational pictograms

These pictograms also deal with the theme of the particular area, but are always an integral part of a larger whole; the thematic areas.

By using these various and different themes we are trying to identify ourselves with our critical visitors. Our novel and refreshing approach tries to inform our guests on the theme. It is for this reason that a new thematic area has been added to the other ones; the Ancient City.

The Ancient City-a unique project



The construction of this very special thematic area was started some time ago and in the meantime the first stage has opened up its gates (literally and figuratively) to the public. The story that is narrated in the Ancient City is a novelty. Often the relationship between man and animal is the central point. No civilization has survived without entering into some kind of relationship or other with animals. Even today all civilizations are animal-oriented one way or another: To explain this we must go back in time...

Of course one can exaggerate in this respect; therefore, we have imposed restraints on ourselves. The Ancient City mainly focuses on the pre-Christian cultures of the Middle East. In the Ancient City there are magnificent buildings from Greek, Egyptians, Persian, Sumerian and Assyrian cultures. As a matter of course, animals are much more important than an accurate representation of history. The animals are the protagonists in an historical setting.

There are four kinds of relationships between humans and animals in the Ancient City.

Sacred animals are associated with Egyptian culture in an early stage; .ibises, mandrills and scarab beetles find accommodation in the Ancient City.

Wild animals roaming around the city include lions and cheetahs and monitor lizards-the precursor of dragons in later fairy tales.

Diurnal animals such as rock hyraxes, golden jackals and some vultures, animals that seem to seek out the company of man themselves.

The visitor can also see domesticated pets such as donkeys, sheep breeds, poultry and camels as well.

All animals in the Ancient City have their own stories to tell.

Education in the Ancient City

By means of landscape immersion we are constantly trying to create the effect discussed earlier-eye to eye with the animals, unhindered by wide moat or high fences. Our educational program also wants to get rid of the unwritten rule that visitors must be told about. the habitat of the animal, what it eats, how long its gestation is and how many young it brings into the world. We think that each animal has its own story to tell them, the pattern being variable.

This educational policy is of course also implemented in the Ancient City. In the City we go into relationships people have entered into with some animals and why with this particular animal.

The following media are used in telling these stories to visitors.

Educational pictograms

The educational pictograms have been aimed at the level of 8-12 year olds. The language that is used guarantees that the content is easily accessible for them and can be

understood by everybody (both parent and child), both as to subject and perception. The educational pictograms harmonize with this thematic area. Besides, no print letters are used, but "written letters", typography not being invented at the time. Colorful pictures are interactive elements have been used on the educational pictograms; this makes the pictograms all the more appealing. This appeal is a stimulus for further reading and makes the message easier to digest.

Plaques

For the interested visitor eager to know more about the cultures and buildings, plaques have been put up. These, however, differ strongly from the pictograms. There are no pictures and they look a bit dull, which has been done on purpose for we want the animals to be the center of interest. These brass plaques give information about the building, the companion culture and its place in history.



Replicas with audio-visual presentation

The replicas broadly visualizes the theme for our visitors. This replica of the Ancient City takes shape by means of an audio-visual presentation. The pictures of the animal species on the screen can be seen simultaneously with an illumination in the replica, together with the animal's habitat. The story is easily accessible for everybody and tells what can be seen and what sort of relationship there used to be with the animals. A good source of information for both adult and child and a real treat for the little ones.

Information booklet

A booklet about the building of this project and its stories is underway.. The unique qualities of this city are shown in a number of different ways. The information can easily be digested through the familiar pictures and the "did you know this?" items. The interested or stimulated reader will find more information and explanation in the elaborated texts.

Teaching packages

A teaching package especially for schools is being developed. The information is presented in a number of different ways, so that each group within the school will follow a lesson at their own level.

Stories from the Ancient City

After the discussion about the format, it is time for some examples of the stories we are telling in the Ancient City.

There used to be a refuse dump just outside the city; precisely as we know them today. The organic refuse was left there and the jackals and vultures roaming the city took the edge off their appetites there. By devouring the carcasses and other refuse, they prevented many illnesses and infections. They may, therefore, be compared with our current refuse collection. By dialing, children can follow the story, i.e. in which stage and by which animals the refuse was removed.



To complete the story and to bring about an interaction among the animal species, carcasses are introduced into the animals' accommodation on a regular basis. A little further on, in the Greek temple, a book will be found. By leafing through the book the children can make their own fancy animal from Greek mythological animals. They can do this because the pictures in the book have been divided into halves, so that the pages with lower and upper body can be turned independently.

The cheetah story tells that cheetahs used to be for the hunt, just as we use hounds for that purpose today. By turning three different blocks around, the children are told why these animals were so useful. The first block tells - in four parts - that the cheetahs have a very flexible spine; which is why they are so extremely nimble and fast. The second block deals with the cheetah's grip during the sprint, with a picture of a football boot. The third block shows how the cheetah uses these adaptations during the hunt.



The great flexibility of the camel made it into an ideal beast of burden for desert peoples. The camel's head has adaptations to withstand heat and sand storms; this is explained to the children. They can also creep through a shahad saddle and feel its weight.

Open to the public

The first stage of the Ancient City was opened in spring 1999 and has been visited by thousands of enthusiastic people. The construction of the second stage is to begin shortly; it will be finished in the spring 2000. The Ancient City covers about one and a half hectares and accommodates well over 26 animal species. After the opening ceremonies we will continue our development and are already planning the next, challenging thematic area.