

Interpretation Issues Involved In Exhibiting Animals In A Drive- Through Safari Park.

Wendy J.Houseman, Education Officer

Woburn Safari Park was officially opened in 1970 but the history of animals on the Woburn Abbey Estate goes back much further. A private menagerie of exotic animals at Woburn was first recorded in 1811, during the time of the 6th Duke of Bedford. The family's interest in the collection continued and the 11th Duke of Bedford was President of the Zoological Society of London, from 1899 to 1939. Woburn Abbey is perhaps most famous for its extensive deer park. The books kept by the 11th Duke's wife record forty five species of deer and eighteen species of antelope and gazelle roaming in the 3,000 acre deer park at that time. Included in this list is the Milu or Pere David deer, which was saved from extinction at Woburn. In 1985 and 1986 the present Marquess of Tavistock returned a breeding group of fifty animals to Beijing, where they are once again successfully breeding in their native land. Today, there are ten species of deer resident at Woburn and the family are highly involved in the conservation work at Woburn Safari Park.

The interpretation of a safari park, rather than a zoo, can be a difficult process. Our visitors are constantly on the move as they drive through the reserves and they do not have the opportunity to stop for long periods of time, leave their vehicle and read detailed information about the animals. It has been important for us to consider interpretation of the reserves not only whilst visitors are driving through them but also before they enter and after they have left the reserves to explore our large Leisure Area on foot.

We have had to consider what we want visitors to learn about the animals and perhaps more importantly, what visitors themselves actually want to know and can absorb on a visit to the park. We see no point in providing signs that go to great lengths to explain the genetic make up of the Rhesus macaque when all the visitor .. wants to know, and is likely to absorb about the animal, are points such as: "What is it?", "Where does it come from?" and "What does it eat?" Sue Dale Tunnicliffe has carried out extensive research into this field (e.g. Tunnicliffe 1995) .Obviously our visitors come from diverse backgrounds and for the animal enthusiast or researcher we provide specialist talks and written documentation to satisfy their need for more detailed knowledge. .

Market research is clearly an important issue. with reference to interpretation. Through exit surveys we know that our visitors want to be educated but they also want entertaining. A large proportion of our visitors choose Woburn Safari Park, rather than a traditional zoo, because of the mixture of. education and leisure facilities. They enjoy the way information is presented in a fun, entertaining way during our popular animal talks and demonstrations (which take place in our "walk round" Leisure Area.)

Current signage in our animal reserves is very simple, consisting of an outline of the animal with its common and Latin name and for many visitors this information is adequate. Obviously they bring with them to the park prior knowledge of exotic animals from sources such as television, books and foreign holidays. One major problem is where

to actually erect the signs in practice, you rarely get a zebra standing right next to the zebra sign! Animals causing damage to signs can also be a problem, as can the placement of signs so as not to detract from the natural environment. For visitors who would like to know more about our animals we offer further forms of interpretation.

The most simple is our guidebook. The guidebook is currently on sale for people to buy in certain local, high street retailers, which means that it can be read before a visit to the park. Teachers are also given opportunities to buy the book before hand and this proves popular, as they can read up and improve their own knowledge and help to increase the quality of the experience for their class on the day of the school trip. The guidebook gives information and colored photographs about the majority of our reserve animals and families will often buy a copy. Some choose to use it in all interactive way, with parents and children reading out facts to each other as they go around. Others keep the book and choose to look at it after their visit, back at home. .As Kelly (1999) discovered from her research into cathedral visitors, learning facts and figures is not a first concern for visitors. They will buy a book from the shop and read that sort of thing later they don't walk around with it, because they end up looking at the book and may miss something. Similarly with school children, as an ex primary teacher I would rather the children enjoyed the first hand experience of observing exotic animals rather than filling in copious worksheets and missing the monkey climbing right up to their window! An ongoing problem with guidebooks is making them as current as possible. Our animal stock often changes and we now have to consider separate inserts to update our visitors on new animals, rather than regularly reprinting the main guidebook a costly exercise.

At Woburn ,we are constantly trying to make learning an interactive, rather than passive, experience for our visitors. Hence one of our more recent forms of interpretation is our Safari Audiotour. This is a specially written tour of the reserves, narrated by Linda Bellingham and Christopher Biggens, which takes the visitor on a guided tour of the animals. The script has been carefully structured to combine interesting facts about the animals with a humorous delivery. The tape is easy to use and visitors are told exactly where to stop and pause before moving on. Brightly colored Audiotour signs are dotted around the reserves:

To cater for different levels, Side A contains the basic tour, geared towards a family with young children and Side B contains more in-depth information, including an interview with our vet and various keepers. Also included with the tape is a "treasure trail" booklet for children to complete as they move around the animals. Feedback from visitors has been very positive and they feel that the tape really brings the reserves alive. They enjoy hearing the different voices and personalities of the keepers and seeing if they can guess which one is on patrol as they drive around!

Early teething problems with the tape included people clogging up the entrance whilst they loaded and listened to the tape introduction and similar to the guidebook, the tape is hard to update as we change animals. However, we decided to use a tape rather than an acoustic audio tour as we did not want queues of traffic caused by people handing back their handsets. We were also worried about handsets going missing.

A third and more recent way. of increasing ~ the quality of visitor interpretation around the reserves is by offering special VIP visits for small parties. During a VIP tour visitors can go off road and get closer to the animals and enclosures. The guide is a trained animal keeper who can really bring the reserves to life, giving anecdotes about the different animals or more background information, depending what the visitor wants. This is a quality experience and alas, something we cannot offer to every visitor. Current staffing implications make it impossible to provide a guided ranger on every coach trip.

Once visitors have left the reserves our program of animal shows and demonstrations in the Leisure Area, such as the popular Elephant Encounter, helps to interpret what the visitors have observed driving around. Shows feature an educational commentary with facts and figures about the animals presented in a fun way. Volunteers are often called upon from the audience in order to make the shows more interactive - it is much more effective to actually feel what an elephant is like rather than reading facts about the .thickness of its skin.

In addition to the shows, information about the reserve animals is consolidated for children in our large indoor, adventure playground. The "Adventure Ark" features several colorful information panels about our many reserve animals, promoting our philosophy of "learning through play." This philosophy is carried through into our Jungles gift shop, which supplies a range of books, CD ROMS and educational toys.

Finally, interpretation of the reserves is also achieved by having a team of enthusiastic and knowledgeable keepers working in the Leisure Area, who are on hand to answer any questions about our animals that people may have. As visitors cannot access keepers to talk to whilst driving around the reserves, they enjoy the opportunity to interact with them in the Leisure Area. ...

So, what of interpretation in the future with regards to exhibiting animals in our drive through reserves? We need to continue looking at ways in which we can develop interpretation not only whilst visitors are driving through but also before they enter and after they have left the reserves. We also need to address areas such as interpretation for foreign visitors and interpretation for people with special needs. One important . factor will be how we develop the My World Education Centre, our new educational facility opening in March 2000. Interpretation of My World will conjure up a whole new range of interpretation issues!

Wobum Safari Park is open daily from March to October and weekends only during the Winter. For more information call 01525 290407 or e-mail WobSafari@aol.co.uk. . .

References

Kelly, L. (1999) *The interpretation of Cathedrals. What the visitors really say.* INTERPRETATION 4 (2) 26 - 27 .