

Zoo Outreach on the Internet

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For many years nature education and interpretation has been a primary goal of the Goldau Wild-Animal Park (Tierpark Goldau). The 80 or so species in the park comprise mostly indigenous animals. Many of them are endangered or even extinct in the wild in Switzerland (i.e. Brown Bears, Wolves and European Bison), while most others are difficult to observe in the wild.

Through providing effective interpretation programs for our visitors (over 350,000 a year) Tierpark Goldau has become one of the most important places for informal environmental education in Switzerland (see also Kamer 1998). Despite more than fifteen thousand pupils visiting our zoo every year, our formal education opportunities were undersubscribed. Tierpark Goldau invests a lot of money and work in its education department and therefore considered new ways of promoting zoo education.

First of all we started to evaluate our existing programs and found that most of the teachers using our facilities were very satisfied with them. Then we began to ask teachers what their expectations of us were and what constraints they felt they were under. The results led us to start new programs. These workshops which take the form of lectures by a professional zoo educator, seem to run well now.

Tierpark Goldau is situated in the countryside. This means another constraint for school groups: high traveling expenses in terms of both money and time:

- Traveling to the site often costs more than the entrance fee or the fees for our workshops. Preparing a trip to Tierpark Goldau is therefore often very time consuming and expensive for the teachers. These were variables we couldn't change. We searched therefore for new ways of reaching more pupils with our teaching materials. As there are only two educators, with all their time taken up with existing work, there was no possibility of establishing an outreach program. So how could we promote experiences involving indigenous animals?
- In the German-speaking countries there are more than 500 zoos and wild animal parks. Some of them are big, others are very small. Of these, about 75 have their own education department. This means that there are still another 425 without any zoo education. Although a lot of them do not fulfill modern standards of husbandry, and hence couldn't really be recommended for education purposes, many others do provide possibilities. By promoting our own materials to a large teaching audience we hope to help teachers all around the German speaking countries to prepare their own school field trips to an animal park nearby. The Internet gives us a powerful tool to communicate (Berkovits 1998). By offering all our teaching aids and materials on the Internet, we will be able to promote outdoor activities and nature experiences in many other places.
- Today the Internet makes it very easy for a large public to access information. But spreading information via the Internet is quite difficult. That's the reason why we

- also used more traditional advertising strategies and sent a leaflet to every school in Switzerland. We try to link the pages as well to many other useful sites.
- The zoo education department in Tierpark Goldau now offers a wide range of materials for zoo education to a large public as well to other zoo educators and to teachers who want to visit Tierpark Goldau itself. Some of the advantages are listed below.
 - There is now a much wider range of teachers and pupils who can make use of our materials and programs.
 - The Internet helps to promote our on-site programs as well.
 - Teachers who want to visit Tierpark Goldau have easy access to all the information necessary to prepare the trip
 - Our Internet offer helped us gain a very good reputation in the field of conservation and environmental education.

Of course there are also some disadvantages. For example, we can't evaluate the use of our materials and we lose the close contact with the teachers. As we gave away our teaching materials away free of charge already, there was no big loss of revenue.

As with any new project, there are still some aspects that need to be refined. However, Tierpark Goldau is determined to achieve its goal of spreading the conservation message more effectively to a wider public, thus the Internet helps us to make major progress in conservation education. . Come and visit us online: www.tierpark.ch (unfortunately in German only)

References:

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