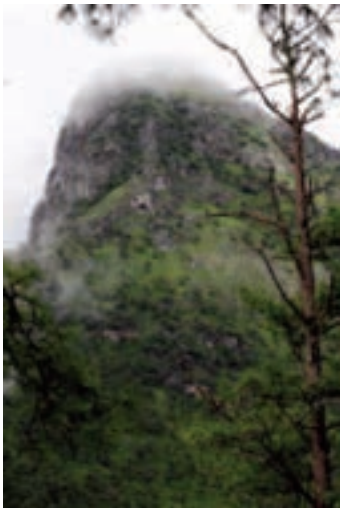




WILD RESEARCH

By Chris Myers, David Jenike, Lynne Born Myers,
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“You got up this morning, but were you awake?”

This particularly Buddhist question came from a white-robed Buddhist nun addressing a group by the lotus pond in her peaceful sanctuary in the heart of Bangkok. With an unusual awareness of their own mental states, Buddhists have a knack for getting you to question yours. This was the kind of question that would

resurface later among the group of educators and conservationists that gathered in Thailand for our Earth Expeditions course. While exploring a sacred mountain, or in the back of a pick-up truck on the way to a rural school, we wondered how we, in our lives and our institutions, encourage mindfulness. How can we facilitate engaged participation in and about life? Realizing that humans can remain remarkably unaware even as they head into environmental and social catastrophes, we ask this question: What does it take for someone to realize they can make a difference, that their voice matters?

Wild Research, a new project funded by the National Science Foundation, brings together a group of AZA institutions around a common mission: to deepen public engagement in science and conservation. Wild Research will create and assess exhibit environments that ask visitors, particularly families, to take a plunge, cast off their traditional roles as spectators, and become active investigators and conservationists. The defining premise of Wild Research is that *the most powerful way to engage families is to invite them into the community of science and conservation*. Directed by Project *Dragonfly* at Miami University and the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden, Wild Research builds on the “real kids, real science” approach pioneered by Project *Dragonfly* through a national magazine for young investigators and the PBS television series *DragonflyTV*. Wild Research asks families to share questions, test ideas, author knowledge, and communicate through publicly valued media.

The Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden will serve as a test bed for evaluating the effectiveness of Wild Research exhibits and programs. Using a whole-zoo approach, a layer of inquiry will be added to the Zoo through elements in the 4,500-square-foot *Discovery Forest*, as well as six Wild Research Stations integrated into popular habitats, such as *Lords of the Arctic* and *Gorilla World*. Equipped with observation tools, recording devices, and themed investigations, these stations will enable direct research by visitors, with real-time access to results onsite or at home on the Web.

THE AZA INQUIRY LANDSCAPE

By using inquiry methods to invite public engagement, Wild Research supports what appears to be a recent national movement toward participatory science at zoos and aquariums. To

assess current practice, we initiated a preliminary study in fall 2005 that included a national survey to all AZA member institutions, selected follow-up phone interviews, and a research review. Eighty-six institutions responded, or 41 percent of AZA member institutions. We found that:

1) Zoos and aquariums care about inquiry: 73 percent of respondents believed that implementing inquiry-based practices is either “extremely important” or “very important” to achieving the educational mission of their institutions; zero percent responded “not very important” or “not important.”

2) Implementing inquiry is uneven, with far more progress in group education programs than in exhibit design. Most zoos do not showcase inquiry at exhibits: 72 percent of respondents report that portrayal of scientists in sign, audio, or video elements of exhibits was rare (defined as occurring in less than five percent of exhibits) or completely absent. Young investigators – a critical target audience – are not portrayed in the media accompanying any exhibit in 82 percent of institutions surveyed. In 91 percent of institutions surveyed, visitors are rarely or never provided opportunities to record observations, though most respondents (71 percent) report that at least some of their exhibits elicit visitor questions or hypotheses about plants or animals on display.

3) More study is needed on how to implement participatory science, particularly in exhibit design. We simply do not know much about the impact of participatory science on visitor experience. We do know, however, that non-participatory exhibits commonly fail to promote substantive learning. In a pioneering study, Dunlap and Kellert noted that many zoo exhibits reinforce visitor passivity. The authors discovered that zoo visitors rarely discussed animal ecology or retained even a few basic facts. “Each subject was asked, ‘What did you learn at this exhibit?’ Discouragingly, the most popular answer at each zoo was ‘Nothing.’” Although other studies provide evidence that zoo visitors can learn and even acquire striking, long-term gains in conservation knowledge from an exhibit, no one suggests understanding of conservation science occurs by solely looking at an animal.

WILD RESEARCH GLOBAL LEADERSHIP WORKSHOPS

Wild Research is designed as an agent of collaborative national change fueled by the common interest of participating AZA institutions and extended through professional development and shared projects.

Beginning in June 2007, Wild Research Leadership Workshops will bring professionals from the Wild Research Consortium (see sidebar) together with conservation scientists and educators for direct research experiences at key conservation sites in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. These graduate-credit workshops leverage the successful Earth Expeditions program (www.EarthExpeditions.org). Participants will spend more than 100 hours at a field conservation site, attend follow-up workshops at the Cincinnati Zoo, and implement cooperative action plans. Wild Research will work with print, radio, Web, television, and kiosk producers to create cross-institution Wild

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Research learning platforms that include the voices of conservation scientists such as Jane Goodall alongside the voices of young investigators. Project partners include the AZA, Conservation International, the Society for Conservation Biology, TPT public television, the Institute for Learning Innovation, as well as a global network of conservation organizations. Wild Research Leadership Workshops create international collaborations, while building the capacity of zoos and aquariums to connect families to global conservation efforts.

GETTING INVOLVED

For more information on Wild Research or Earth Expeditions, please contact Jamie Bercauw Anzano at bercauwj@muohio.edu.

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