

# Post WZAM, MIRP, Ocean Project Research: What Do We Know?

**F**or years, zoos and aquariums have studied audiences to understand whether people learn at their institutions. Recently, though, they have started to ask more specific questions – the answers help our understanding of collective audiences, and should guide our operations. Two such studies were conducted by members of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) in efforts to learn more about what we’re all doing together – a project effort to understand why zoos and aquariums matter.



By Vicki Searles and Peggy Sloan

The Ocean Project sponsored a major opinion survey in collaboration with Monterey Bay Aquarium and the National Aquarium in Baltimore to gauge public interest in and concern for ocean health. They gathered data from more than 22,000 respondents in the United States and Canada. This research measured public awareness, attitudes, and behaviors concerning the ocean, environment, and climate change. Results indicate a general lack of awareness regarding climate impacts to ocean health, and disappointingly low levels of ocean and environmental literacy among the American public. It also, however, helped us understand more effective ways to build ocean, climate and environmental literacy and engage people in positive environmental action.

The second study, conducted by the Institute for Learning Innovation on behalf of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums focused on what visitors value about our institutions and expect to gain from coming. We have learned from this research, which included more than 5,500 visitors from 12 AZA-accredited institutions, how to shape or exceed our various user groups' expectations in order to fulfill our educational missions.

Following are just a few of the findings from each of the studies:

#### AMERICA, THE OCEAN, AND CLIMATE CHANGE: NEW RESEARCH INSIGHTS FOR CONSERVATION, AWARENESS, AND ACTION

- Going beyond simply increasing awareness toward involving people directly in personal action is critically important.
- In a shift from views expressed in the 1999 Ocean Project survey, Americans now believe that their individual actions can have a positive effect on protecting the environment and improving the health of the ocean. They are ready to act but are not sure what to do.
- The public expects and trusts aquariums and zoos to communicate about solutions to environmental and ocean issues, and to advance ocean conservation; however, the public feels that our organizations are not meeting these expectations.
- Communications need to galvanize action by offering specific ideas for solutions. We have a window of opportunity to meet public expectations by providing more conservation action messaging, without fear of harming attendance-driven financial models. The evidence indicates that being more action-oriented will improve our standing rather than erode it, and when we don't address this public need, others – who may not be as conservation-minded – fill the gaps.
- Youth (ages 12-17) know and care more about ocean, climate change and other related issues and are more willing to take action on these issues than adults. They also exert a lot of influence in their families since parents tend to view their children as better informed on environmental issues. Teens and tweens are therefore key audiences to learn more about and target more specifically and intensely not only for conservation outreach and education, but also for mobilizing youth to take meaningful action for the environment.
- Households where English is a second language show greater concern for ocean health. These same households also indicate a stronger desire to take positive action.

#### WHY ZOOS AND AQUARIUMS MATTER: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF A VISIT TO A ZOO OR AQUARIUM

John Fraser and Jessica Sickler's three year study involved internal and external audiences. The intent was that we understand why and how zoos and aquariums are perceived as valuable. All the groups characterized us as educational, but how these stakeholders understand and define other values of zoos and aquariums was not quite what was expected.

- Teachers and administrators value zoos and aquariums as a resource for teaching about animals and habitats and supporting what is taught in the classroom. Few, however, show interest in professional development workshops for teachers.
- Parents are concerned about making their family ties stronger, sharing their moral values, and having a nature experience. A majority agreed that "nature experiences" are a crucial part of childhood and that zoos and aquariums are places to teach respect and appreciation of nature and animals and to strengthen family ties.
- Parents feel that appreciation and respect for animals and nature is a start to developing empathy. Zoos and aquariums may want to highlight the conservation mission as it relates to the values of strong families and caring for others in an effort to connect with most parents' underlying reasons for visiting.
- Volunteers have a life-long love for animals, and may join for their love of animals, but stay for the social networking with like-minded people. The longer someone volunteers, the more likely they are to increase their pro-environmental behaviors and to try to change the behaviors of their friends and family.
- The media covers zoos and aquariums in the lifestyle and events sections of reporting, focusing on our events and exhibits. Sometimes we are in the news section as a backdrop to a story, or for consulting an animal expert for a commentary on events involving wildlife. The conservation mission of zoos and aquariums is often missing. Editors often don't believe zoos or aquariums generate original research.
- Reporters and editors give little credence to the arguments and protests of anti-zoo activists. They expect that reporting these arguments has little effect on the public, since they feel most of the public already believes that we are focused on helping animals and teaching people to be more responsible to the environment
- Religious leaders feel that they share many core values with the zoos and aquariums – respect for living things, stewardship of the earth, inspirational power of nature. Evolution is not as controversial as many might believe because, for many religious leaders, the zoo or aquarium's role is not perceived as teaching about evolution, but about showing the diversity and breadth of life on Earth.
- Political leaders feel that zoos and aquariums are basically good (but expensive) service providers to the community. They have a great deal of trust in us, but some politicians find

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the environmental advocacy aspect of zoos' and aquariums' mission challenging if it conflicts with their own decisions.

- Politicians think the environmental education and support of local families are the most important reasons for having zoos or aquariums.
- Conservation biologists who do research in the field have had good experiences as kids in zoos or aquariums, but have seen some awful zoos around the world. Those who have worked with the curatorial and keeper staff respect their unique body of knowledge, and want to believe that the public education for conservation is working.
- Field biologists are also concerned when zoo animals don't show the same degree of fitness and passion as their wild counterparts and they express fear that the conservation message we give is not being learned by the public.
- One group of adult visitors mostly enjoys the experience of seeing and encountering animals.
- A second large group of visitors looks for more than just seeing animals. Many parents put the experience and enjoyment of their children front-and-center in the day. Some derive enjoyment from both their children's fun and from seeing the animal exhibits and shows. The other group feels more of a connection with a nature and conservation emphasis.

So what will we do with all of this great insight into our audiences' perspectives? We can take John Fraser's suggestion and use it to increase buy-in and support for our conservation work, improve our efforts at targeting education programs, and more importantly, increase the perceived relevance of our programs to those in our community.

Thanks to Bill Mott and John Frasier for allowing me to "borrow" heavily from their work, and to Joe Heimlich, Kathy Wagner, Cynthia Vernon, Jackie Ogden and other dedicated educators for starting us all in the right direction years ago. You are the true champions.

To obtain the complete Ocean Project report go to: [http://theoceanproject.org/resources/America\\_the\\_Ocean\\_and\\_Climate\\_Change.php](http://theoceanproject.org/resources/America_the_Ocean_and_Climate_Change.php)

To obtain the complete Research Key Findings and Results from the Why Zoos and Aquariums Matter National Audience Survey go to: <http://aza.org/visitor-and-public-research/>

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