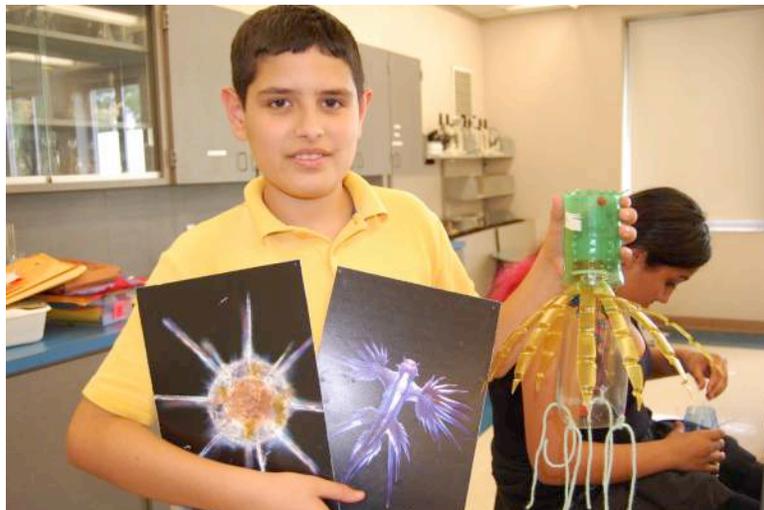


Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo Engaging Community Voices in Conservation

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For years, Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo has been a prominent player in the city's cultural scene as a leader for family-centric programming. Most recently, the Zoo has followed its heart and mission to connect people with the living earth with its Interpretation Planning Initiative. This initiative is an effort to use programs and exhibits to promote the Zoo's conservation goals.

The dynamic Beautiful Beasties exhibit, funded by a grant from the Tampa Bay Estuary Program, is at the center of this initiative. The term "*Beasties*" was coined by Antoine van Leeuwenhoek after observing microscopic life for the first time in 1676. Students cleaned up local beaches and repurposed garbage to create ethereal sculptures of microscopic plankton, some of the most ecologically important life forms. To accomplish its programming goals, the Zoo partnered with Community Stepping Stones (CSS), a nonprofit that designs arts-integrated curricula, and Van Buren Middle School (VBMS). This unique collaboration signals the Zoo's commitment to creative approaches to conservation learning and serving the community. Using art as a



medium to learn about science is at the forefront of innovation in informal learning theory. Most importantly, the program engaged at-risk youth from the nearby economically disadvantaged Sulphur Springs neighborhood.

To track the impact of the initiative, the Zoo partnered with New Knowledge Organization Ltd. (NewKnowledge), a non-profit think tank dedicated to researching how institutions can contribute

to the public good. With funding from the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs, and working closely with project partners CSS and VBMS, the Zoo and NewKnowledge created a comprehensive evaluation plan that included surveys, interviews, observations, and focus groups for the students, their guardians, Zoo staff and docents, staff from the partner organizations, and visitors.

The initiative showed important positive impacts on a wide range of learners and key community organizations. Most importantly, the project represented the Zoo's commitment to community engagement and creative approaches to conservation.

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS & AUDIENCES

To kick off the project, the Zoo convened a meeting with leadership from CSS, VBMS, and NewKnowledge to collaboratively discuss the scope and focus of the program and evaluation. Researchers at NewKnowledge continued the process by engaging Zoo Education Staff in creating the research questions and tools.

Every step of the research was culturally responsive, meaning that the process was critically mindful of the needs of the groups involved. For example, the Zoo and the research team carefully planned the focus group with guardians to engage community members – including many single parents – who may never have had the opportunity to share their voices in a public setting like the Zoo. Likewise, the Zoo and research team recognized that docents were a key group of committed yet critical stakeholders. The research team invited this group to share their insights on this new exhibit and related conservation strategies.

The Zoo launched the Beautiful Beasties exhibit in its Manatee and Aquatics Center facility on May 30, 2015. During the lively reception and follow-up discussions, a NewKnowledge researcher gained an insider's view of students, their families, teachers, and mentors' dramatic impressions of the exhibit. Education staff continued to engage visitors in conversations about the exhibit to understand its impacts. Overall, the evaluation included the voices of 8 youth, 8 guardians, 50 visitors, 8 Zoo staff, and 7 staff from partner organizations. This study clearly involved a substantial effort to gather data to synthesize a collective understanding of program impacts.

Many people come to the zoo and they will see that students tried to connect and help make the zoo a great place to visit.



FACILITATING COMMUNITY VOICES

The youth were strongly impacted during the process of creating the Beasties and as the project culminated at the exhibit launch. Most felt that their awareness of their local environment had expanded to critically consider how people's actions damage the ecosystem. Teachers took immense pride in their students' growing interest in the local ecology and learning about conservation. Science learning had never been more enjoyable as with the hands-on, arts-focused approach. Students became champions for the environment too. They began to act as agents for community change among their classmates, families, and friends, enthusiastically encouraging plastic recycling.

Seeing the displays of their artwork and personal statements about reducing plastic use instilled a sense of pride and accomplishment, so much so that they felt "*famous*." Guardians, teachers, and CSS mentors were visibly touched by the excitement and joy of the youth, for whom this was an experience unlike anything they had expected. It was a profoundly empowering experience as described by nearly all students and their families.

The project had also deeply impacted the organizational goals of CSS and VBMS, both committed to the betterment of youth experiences in the Sulphur Springs area. The partnership with the Zoo has opened doors to future opportunities to advance their mission. The partners are especially excited about jointly seeking funding for programs that expand on the work they have accomplished with the Beasties project.

The majority of visitors were inspired and engaged in learning about ways to reduce their environmental impacts. They marveled at the strong voices emerging from local youth, applauding their conviction.



We felt famous... like we made something of ourselves.

The Zoo's position as a thoughtful, community-focused local organization was abundantly clear from the study's results. Internally too, nearly all staff and docents recognized that the exhibit exemplified the Zoo's attention to its community members' distinct needs. Many felt that the Beasties exhibit has elevated its profile as an organization that values community voices and interests.

BUILDING THE ZOO'S CONSERVATION CAPACITY

The initial stages of evaluation represent a meaningful effort to build the Zoo's capacity to be a leader in conservation. The findings suggest that a cohesive interpretation strategy is more than the sum of messages or the signs in any given exhibit. By themselves, the signs presenting youth's own perspectives about reducing plastic use were an important feature of the exhibit. However, the most memorable message absorbed by the community overall was that the Beasties exhibit was youth-powered and reflected the voices of community members who are typically overlooked as environmental advocates.

Design and placement of exhibits are other key aspects that can facilitate the most potent impact of any exhibit. Both visitors and staff felt there was room for more intentional and strategic

consideration of these design features in the future. The exhibit's proximity to the Zoo's Manatee Hospital, on the other hand, indicates that Zoo staff carefully planned to tell a coherent story about how plastics can harm Florida's wildlife. That communicating creatively through thoughtful design had conveyed the implicit message was a powerful finding in the research.

The staff, especially those who worked with the Education department at the Zoo, described the tremendous ways in which their professional capacity had increased through the project. Successfully planning and installing the Beautiful Beasties at the Zoo was a huge accomplishment for these staff, inspiring them to pursue similar opportunities in the future. Staff's active role in gathering visitors' perspectives will continue to be a valuable asset as the Zoo advances its conservation mission.



NewKnowledge anticipates further growth in staff capacity as a core part of the research effort as they continue to observe impacts of conservation efforts, critically reflect on them, and apply them to continuously improve their programs.

This is a pivotal moment for Tampa's Lowry Park Zoo, as it is poised to strategically strengthen its capacity as a conservation leader in the local community. As a community focus becomes more deeply and thoughtfully tied to its core values, the Zoo will embody what it means to continue to grow as a culturally responsive, democratic institution, committed to learning for all.

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