



Several education panels and interactive elements give visitors the opportunity of self-directed learning.
©Chester Zoo, Matthias Papies, 2006



Physical contact between visitors and elephants is prevented by inaccessible buffer areas. ©Chester Zoo, Matthias Papies, 2006

understand the nature of these conflicts. Project partner is the local NGO Ecosystems-India. The project also operates at a village level. In cooperation with selected communities the human-elephant conflicts are tried to be reduced by implementing various mitigation methods such as trip-wires, watchtowers, chilli smoke, etc. Chester Zoo funds and supports IUCN SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

activities and provides specialist technical support to other elephant facilities in South Asia. Every year grants are also given to student elephant projects through the Richard Hughes Scholarship.

LOCAL RESOURCES: All involved companies are situated in the UK, except Pangea Rocks. Most of the building material, e.g. sands and stones, are sourced from local areas.

It's Time for a Professional Approach to Exhibit Label Design!

Monica Post

From the famous ZOO LEX

People don't read signs.... how many times have you heard your education director say that? How often have you said or observed that? The truth is, to some extent you're right. People very often do not read the signs in our zoos and aquariums. But have you ever considered, why they aren't reading the signs? Are we all assuming that people in general are lazy, illiterate, not interested in learning? We recognize that few people are reading our signs, but we fail to consider the reason. We put all the blame on the visitor. It's time to wake up and recognize that it's not our visitors, and you can't blame an inanimate object like the sign..... the real responsibility rests on the sign designer.

So who is designing our signs, labels, graphics, interpretive elements or whatever you want to call them? For most of us it's still done in house, by the educator, curator, graphic designer or exhibit designer. Some of us instead are recognizing the need to look outside to a professional sign company and so we go to someone local who also does signs for fast food restaurants and convenience stores.....

Hmmm, is it any wonder why people aren't reading the signs? Let's look at this more closely... could you pick anyone off the street, give them a manual and expect them to be a great aquarium or zoo educator? How about a great curator or exhibit designer? These aren't jobs that can be learned from a manual, it takes a certain personality, background, education and intuitive nature for the occupation. How about a graphic artist? Think about it, should the person that does the Breakfast

with the Animals poster be expected to do a successful educational sign layout? Just like the other occupations-interpretive sign and label design requires experience, an understanding of visitor behavior and a knowledge of educational design. The person designing your signs, labels, graphics, interpretive elements.... whatever you want to call them, must have an understanding of how people scan signs, what they're looking for, what attracts their attention, what information they are seeking, what vocabulary words they prefer and what discourages visitors from reading.

We know visitors are coming to our institutions to learn. When asked, visitors tell us that education is one of the top three reasons they come to aquariums or zoos, but if they are not getting the educational experience they are looking for from the signs, then they must be getting it a different way. Possibly from audio elements and interpreters. These are lovely alternatives to signs- but are they available to every visitor in every space that needs some form of educational messaging? If so, you can feel comfortable doing away with the signs altogether. But you know that is not realistic, and quite frankly, although your visitors aren't reading the signs- they certainly will notice when they're missing.

Signs, even bad ones that visitors don't read, provide a level of visitor comfort. It's unsettling to see an exhibit without some form of identification or information. Visitors use signs in a variety of ways. The very best signs teach us things we didn't know or remind us of things we may have forgotten. We create these signs, not in the expectation that our visitors will leave the exhibit as brilliant, experts on this animal, but rather in the hope that an understanding of something new, or interesting will instead spark an enthusiasm about the animal, wildlife in general, or conservation. Some visitors use signs to validate their own knowledge. "That's a bongo....isn't it?" Others use signs to elevate their credibility with those around them. "That's a bongo" (then points to the sign for proof). Signs are critical components of exhibits. Without them our visitors feel a level of discomfort. As educational institutions we acknowledge this,

and almost always put up labels of some sort for our visitors. But it still kills us to put a lot of money into the budget for a bunch of labels that we know our visitors won't read.

It's time to recognize that if we are going to put a lot of money into signs, labels, graphics and interpretive elements, we need to make sure that they are worth the money we put into them. There is no such thing as an inexpensive sign. Don't be fooled, even the computer signs created in house cost a lot of money. How much does your education director's salary break down to hourly? How many hours did he/she put into writing, doing the layout, laminating and mounting the signs? They aren't that cheap, and things haven't changed that much. When I started as a zoo educator 23 years ago we were making engraved signs in house. Things haven't changed that much- except that the engraved signs were more durable.

Getting our money's worth means going to a professional designer that knows our business. Not someone who makes convenience store signs, but someone who understands why our visitors are reading the signs, what they want to get from the signs and what vocabulary they use. Someone who knows design, educational messages and the aquarium and zoo industry. Someone who recognizes the need for understanding our visitors before a sign is written and embraces evaluation as a critical contributor to creating a successful sign.

It's time we stop blaming our visitors for not reading. It's time we stop putting our precious money into bad signs, labels, graphics and interpretive elements. It's time we accept responsibility and approach our investment in signs as we would any other business enterprise and go to a professional that knows how to do it right.

Monica Post is the Director of MPR Museum Consulting, an exhibit evaluation and design company that provides educational evaluation, design and redesign for future exhibits in zoos, science and nature centers, museums and other types of informal educational spaces.

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