

An Internship at the Bronx Zoo

Payal Bhojwani *

I started the *Go Wild Workshops* because I felt there was a need for Zoo education in India and wildlife education in schools. I had a vision that one day I would open a centre for kids and families to come and learn about wildlife and meet people who are doing their utmost to conserve the living world.

The only person I knew of in India who was doing work in Zoo Education was Sally Walker. It took three years of emailing before I finally got a chance to leave my job and travel 3000km to meet her, and since then there has been no looking back. The world of wildlife education that Sally opened for me left me breathless – and I knew that this was just the tip of the iceberg. I could hardly wait to see just how big the iceberg got.

It began with the 'Teachers for Tigers' workshops hosted by Zoo Outreach Organisation in collaboration with the Wildlife Conservation Society. These workshops were designed to train teachers about tigers, and more importantly, train them in teaching tools and techniques.

There were three key elements that made a great impression on me at the workshop – the first was the systematic organization of the workshops done by Sally Walker and her staff from Zoo Outreach Organisation. The second was the clarity of teaching and the smooth interaction between the two resource persons from the Wildlife Conservation Society Tom Naiman (Director Curriculum Development and International Education programmes) and Nalini Mohan (International Teacher Trainer) and finally the curriculum itself - the Habitat Ecology Learning Program (HELP) and Teachers for Tigers manuals that have been developed by WCS. They were extensive and in-depth and yet simple and adaptable for almost any audience.

Sally and Tom then recommended me for the *C.V Starr fellowship programme* to be trained at the Bronx Zoo in zoo education as well as other types of education. In the weeks that I was in New York (28th May – 14th June 2003), I was given a wide overview of the management, development and dynamics of running a unique education system. The iceberg was getting larger.

When I first entered the Bronx Zoo I was amazed at its size, nothing – not the brochure, nor the website, nor what anyone had told me - prepared me for the magnitude of the place. The architectural beauty of the old buildings dating back to the early 1900's, beautifully restored, amidst lush greenery, was breath taking. And right opposite the Sea Lion exhibit was the education department where my training would begin.

The Education Department

This department is housed in one of the old buildings that was previously used as a museum; I felt it was aptly named 'Heads and Horns'. My initial days were spent in meeting everyone and anyone related to the field of education starting with the board meeting on the first day with Annette

Berkovitz, Senior Vice President, Education.

The Bronx Zoo's education department is broadly divided into three categories, the international, national and local programmes. All the educational programmes, and the exhibits promote the use of inquiry, observation and investigation to guide people through an exploration of animals and the world around them. Curricula like Pablo Python looks at Animals; HELP (Habitat and Ecology Learning Programme), Voyage from the Sun, Teachers for Tigers and the most recent Elly Jelly serve as a broad base for the daily workshops, classes, distance learning and guided trips around the Zoo.



**The touch table outside the reptile house at the Bronx Zoo, manned by the Friends of the Zoo Volunteers.
Photo by Payal Bhojwani.**

Each programme took years to develop, with inputs from scientists, educators and field biologists. And that is what makes it unique. Rather than trying to recreate an education system, the curricula work in tandem with schoolbooks and the school system.

It's not just the curriculum but also the method of teaching that further enhances the learning process. The buzzword I soon learnt was "inquiry-based learning" and it wasn't long before I realised the potential and power of such an educational technique.

A simple example is that of the touch table outside the reptile house at the Bronx Zoo. Manned by the Friends of the Zoo Volunteers, the articles on display were things like snakeskin, turtle and snake skulls, crocodile tooth and even different stages of a tadpole. Kids would gather around and touch and feel and ask millions of questions. Even parents and teachers stopped to show their kids the items. A simple technique like this, easily adaptable in any zoo, forms a firm correlation between what is at the table and what they are to see in the reptile house. It also gives

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children an opportunity to better understand animal anatomy or behaviour. It was charming to watch the volunteers interact with the kids. Many would go out of their way to explain what or why an animal was the way it was. The children amidst exclamations of disgust and wonder would finger the snake egg getting completely engrossed in the topic at hand.



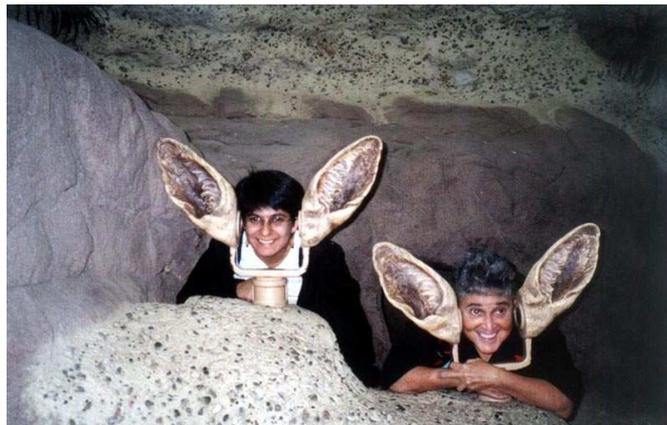
Visitors marvel at the healthy animals in their beautiful natural enclosures.

The Tour

I saw the Bronx Zoo in bits and parts – its so big and there is so much to take in that even though I saw some places twice I could go back each time and find something new and awe-inspiring. Take for example the bear enclosures. The path around the bear enclosures wound around with patches of clear view where one could easily see the bears – in some places the green thicket gave a sense of walking through a wooded area and then one would spot the bears again. The next time I visited the bear exhibit I noticed the terrain within the bear enclosure. The landscaping was designed to cater to the rocky yet wooded areas like that of bears found in the wild. The keepers had also hidden some food in logs and among the rocks giving the bears an opportunity to explore with an incentive. This was not just enrichment for the bears but also for the visitors who could see a bear foraging and active. The volunteers who showed me around the Zoo explained the working of a volunteer group.



Mystery boxes. Photo by Payal Bhojwani.



Learning how fennec foxes hear.

The two most magnificent exhibits and yet very different from each other were Congo World and Tiger Mountain. The Congo World had a separate entry fee with the Gorillas as the main attraction. A lot of artefacts and models gave information to the visitor. From the Okapi enclosure one walked into a fallen down log, the whole atmosphere and temperature changed as one entered. Inside were various animals found in the Congo Basin. It had pictures of conservation efforts due to poaching and deforestation. And after all the animals had been seen and marvelled at, there was a computer that asked where you wanted your money to go. This was inventive way to give the visitor a direct link to conservation.

Tiger Mountain opened this year had free entry and a lot more computer-based information systems. The tigers were behind a glass wall that provided the visitor with an unhindered view of the creature. There were touch screens about tigers and conservation efforts, and screens with videos playing about tigers in different parts of the world. There was also a life-size poachers truck called "Evil Inc". Loudspeakers that roared when you put coins in them and even a camera trap that took pictures as people walked past and intersected the beam. This was a great hit with the kids. As one was leaving tiger mountain there was an option to fill in an email address to keep getting updates about tigers and WCS research. This was interesting as it could provide a continuous feedback between the visitors and the Zoo.

Coming home

Since coming back to India I have conducted two workshops using some of the techniques and curricula I acquired at the Bronx Zoo. We took the children to the National Zoo and, with the education department and material from Zoo Outreach Organisation, used the Zoo to initiate the basics of Geography and Science. At the Pelican Pond they filled in behaviour data sheets that generated a multitude of questions. Creating my own mystery boxes and touch tables on Indian animals, the kids for the first time touched a claw of a crab and felt the skin of a snake .

It all worked. The attitudinal change in the kids was perceptible. I could duplicate what I had learnt at the Bronx Zoo here in India with support of Z.O.O.