

Member View

Green Tales

Together We Can

Inspiring Our Guests with Our Green Practices

By Douglas Meyer

So many of our facilities are doing so much to improve our environmental practices that it can be difficult for us to remember, let alone find the time, to tell others about our efforts. Yet new research by The Ocean Project suggests that when it comes to our collective interest in developing a “green culture” that reaches beyond our staff to our guests, the stories about what we are doing as institutions can be as inspirational as the stories we tell about our animals.

“We know from our 16 years of public opinion research that visitors not only expect zoos and aquariums to provide them with information about conservation issues, but also that when they are on site they are inspired to act for conservation and truly trust and appreciate suggestions as to the ways they can join their local aquarium and zoo in going green,” explains Bill Mott, director of The Ocean Project. “We always understood that the emotional connection to live animals was a big part of that inspiration; yet, what we’ve learned most recently is that guests also can be inspired by what the zoo or aquarium is doing to help solve the problem, especially when these efforts are positioned in a ‘together-we-can’ way that implies taking solutions to scale.”

The idea was put to the test by the North Carolina Aquariums, where they recently completed an experimental program to see if visitors would be interested in renewable energy, specifically obtaining Renewable Energy Certificates, as a way to help address climate change and ocean acidification. “We were confident that our interpreters could connect the issue to the animals and inspire our visitors, and they succeeded in doing so, but we were surprised to see that when we referenced our own commitment to taking action on the issue, which we did at one of our sites



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with the presence of some working wind turbines, that also worked really well, even without the added benefit of interpretation,” said Windy Arey-Kent, education curator at the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores, who led the project.

Looking ahead, The Ocean Project recently received support from the Johnson Ohana Charitable Foundation, the charity founded by the singer Jack Johnson and his wife, Kim, to explore applying this approach around World Oceans Day, with a specific aim of engaging visitors in efforts to address the problem of plastic debris in

our oceans. And they plan to continue their Innovative Solutions Grants+ Program, which funded the effort by the North Carolina Aquariums and, thanks to support from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Office of Education, just announced a new round of grants to accredited institutions that are interested in trying new approaches to visitor engagement. More information about these efforts and how your institution can participate, along with a recently published summary of the organization’s research, can be found at www.TheOceanProject.org.