

Special Events for Positive Change: conservation asks at WORLD OCEANS DAY

The Ocean Project

by Alyssa Krakower - The Ocean Project Digital Communications & World Oceans Day Coordinator
with help from the quoted zoo and aquarium staff

Intro

A "conservation ask" or "action recommendation" is something that a person can do in their everyday life to contribute to environmental protection or conservation. Motivating visitors to take personal action is increasingly a core goal at zoos and aquariums.

The opportunity is there: visitor desire to take action to support conservation is activated by close contact with wildlife in an exciting zoo or aquarium setting. Research by The Ocean Project shows that zoo and aquarium guests want recommendations for how they personally can take environmentally-friendly action to protect animals.

Though special events like World Oceans Day provide a perfect occasion to connect with visitors to help make a difference, some zoos and aquariums struggle with the lack of existing frameworks to develop asks, and lack of staff or funding to create and evaluate programs.

However, many institutions are doing amazing work by being bold and taking advantage of existing resources, as well as special events such as World Oceans Day, to experiment with 'asks.' This poster takes a look at how some of our zoo and aquarium partners are approaching creating 'asks' and talking about action.

Utah's Hogle Zoo

Utah's Hogle Zoo encouraged guests to both recycle their trash and stop it at the source. The Zoo kept it local by collaborating with a community recycler, Rocky Mountain Recycling, to collect and recycle plastic bags, and joined forces with a local grocer, Fresh Market, to donate a free reusable bag to guests who brought 10 or more plastic bags to recycle.

According to Hogle Zoo's Events Coordinator, Cagney Smullin, "It was very popular and we had hundreds of plastic bags turned in. We put out messaging and tried to educate guests that it's best not to use plastic bags." Hogle Zoo was smart about addressing this problem because stopping a harmful behavior (using plastic bags) isn't enough; it's important to replace it with a positive behavior (using a reusable bag). This program informed visitors about the negative effects plastics have on wildlife while making them part of the solution.



ICES



California Academy of Sciences' Institute on Conservation Education & Sustainability (ICES) program, led by Lindzy Bivings, has taken an exploratory and collaborative approach to experimenting with developing and deploying conservation asks. Educators at the facility worked together to develop conservation education goals, and entered a rapid prototyping process where they quickly evaluated and altered on-the-ground tactics in response to interactions with guests. Here are some tips shared by Lindzy Bivings on making 'asks:'

Do separate formative assessments to get a sense of visitors' current knowledge and engagement.

This will help identify what the visitors already know about an issue, and what they perceive as barriers and benefits to an action.

Focus special events and asks on specific populations.

Lindzy says: "For example, if we're working with residents from San Francisco, we very rarely talk about plastic bag issues, because we have a plastic bag ban in the city."

Allow visitors to participate in developing the ask, and making the commitment that's right for their level of engagement/ability. When visitors partially persuade themselves, they are more likely to follow through.

One-on-one or small group asks work best.

A one-size-fits-all approach often doesn't work, so have a few ways for people to quickly take action few asks up your sleeves so you can customize the solution as much as possible.

Use cardboard and duct tape.

Don't be a perfectionist at first. There's nothing more disappointing than spending hours upon hours on something only to discover that it doesn't work. Exhibit developers know this, and so should educators.



Seattle Aquarium

Seattle Aquarium's 2012 and 2013 celebrations had a strong conservation orientation – the institution definitely doesn't shy away from civic engagement. In 2012 they focused on messaging about ocean acidification, marine debris, and MPAs. For 2013 they narrowed the focus more by encouraging action on ocean acidification and marine debris.

Each station at their World Oceans Day event presented three actions visitors could take to protect the ocean: on an individual, community, and civic level. They supported these recommendations by giving examples of what the aquarium was doing as well, and making sure docents were sending consistent messages. Their tips for making successful asks:

Encourage the sharing of stories

Certain activities can also give visitors a chance to talk to other guests about what they themselves are doing, spreading the knowledge and normalizing ocean protection as a part of responsible citizenship.

Use animal ambassadors

Visitors care about the animals and want to help. With this in mind, the aquarium incorporated conservation action into their harbor seal presentation.



Emphasize local impact

A local narrative helps visitors see why the actions – whether individual, community or civic actions – are relevant to them personally, and encourages local pride. It also is much easier for visitors to understand, accept and appreciate than impact on "the ocean."

Focus on fewer issues

This provides a consistent narrative and doesn't leave guests overwhelmed. The Seattle Aquarium, for its part, plans to continue to use effective story telling and strategic metaphors to emphasize one or two of the most prominent issues for their local marine environment.



Ocean Promises

In 2013 we launched an Ocean Promises program asking individuals and event attendees to make a photo promise to help the ocean. We were thrilled that so many of our zoo and aquarium partners had great success encouraging visitors to pledge.

Here are a few best practices that our partners have followed in order to make this such a successful activity:



Tip 1: Create the space for a conversation

Identify a time and space when you'll be able to talk with guests about what promise is right for their family.

A great option that several of our partner institutions chose was to make the Ocean Promise a crafty activity for kids. The kids are occupied with something fun, while staff has a chance to chat with the parents. Having a conversation makes it more likely that the change will actually fit into the family's lifestyle, and they will feel like they chose it for themselves personally.

Tip 2: Make it fun and easy for guests to capture their promises

Cagney Smullin, Events Supervisor at Utah's Hogle Zoo, found parents are more eager to take a photo pledge or do an activity with their kids than on their own.

Another good example was New England Aquarium, the aquarium provided sea creature costumes for children and adults to wear when posing with their ocean pledge or statement about why they love the ocean. Not only is this a fun way to blow off steam, it's also a family photo to remember the trip, and the promise to the ocean!