

**Education in SSPs, TAGs and CAPs:  
A Template for Beginning an *In situ* Conservation Education Program**

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Zoo and Aquarium *in situ* conservation programs, as well as those administered through AZA SSPs, TAGs and CAPs, are increasingly incorporating education components as part of a multi-faceted approach. One of the most important factors affecting the ease of program development and implementation, as well as the sustainability of the program, is a consistent contact in the field. Having a contact person who can supply information, and who can ensure the program's continuity is invaluable. If you are planning to create an *in situ* education program, especially when working with a team, you may also find the following ideas helpful:

**1. Develop a common understanding of the intended outcome**

There are many valid reasons to create an education program. Is your program intended to:

- Raise awareness
- Provide natural history education as part of a commitment to support a local community's needs
- Influence attitudes
- Encourage a conservation ethic
- Teach skills
- Change behavior

The answers to these questions will determine the approach and the most appropriate audiences to target. For it to be called *conservation* education, a program should identify a conservation action that will occur as a result of participating in the program. All of the outcomes listed are valid, however. It is important that all those involved in the conservation program (as well as potential funders) share a common understanding of the education element's purpose, and the outcomes that may be expected. How will you define success? You will want to develop your evaluation plan at the beginning stages as you are developing your program objectives, rather than at the program's conclusion.

**2. Confirm the local need for the program**

While your U.S. team may have identified compelling reasons for initiating an *in situ* education program, you will need to assess the local need. Does the local contact support doing an education program (i.e., is this a project that we are imposing on a staff, or do they want to participate)? You will want to work with your local contact to determine program needs and the best approaches for reaching local audiences. While it is your passion for wildlife conservation that may be the driving force (and having that passion is really important), the program must be developed to meet the needs of the target audiences.

### **3. Identify the species and/or habitat conservation issues**

What is/are the problem(s) you are trying to address? What is the current population status and why is the survival of this species vulnerable? Examples may include: deforestation; habitat fragmentation; poaching and/or over-hunting and eating the species targeted for protection; non-sustainable fishing practices; killing predators of domestic livestock; dumping toxic chemicals into streams, etc. These pressures may exacerbate environmental factors such as geographic isolation, or natural disasters such as cyclones. Gather as much information as possible from people working in the field who are familiar with the issues. A lot of valuable information is not yet published, and therefore will only be available through personal contact. These field research colleagues may also have images that they would be able to contribute.

### **4. Investigate local knowledge and beliefs**

What is the current attitude of local people toward the species you hope to conserve? Do people commonly see the animal? Do they see this species as a nuisance (for example, elephants raiding crops, fruit bats in orchards, jaguars killing livestock, bats perceived as disease vectors)? What evidence exists to support this? Gather facts about the actual impact of the species on the lives of local people. Are the animals valued as a food source but are non-sustainably harvested? In addition, is there current or historic folklore surrounding these animals? Are they feared or revered? This will be valuable information to incorporate into your program.

### **5. Establish the relevance of species conservation to the lives of local people**

Why is preservation of the targeted species and/or habitat important to local people? For example, what would happen to the environment if this species were eliminated? Are there economic implications? For example, many fruit bats are pollinators or seed dispersers of economically important fruit. Without insectivorous bats, populations of many insect crop pests would be unchecked. Are there health implications? For example, without mosquito-eating bats, the population of malaria-carrying mosquitoes would rise. Determine specific relevance of the targeted species to the lives of local people. If there is a conservation story that involves an animal/plant relationship, you will want to get the scientific as well as the common local name of the plant—many common names are confusing.

### **6. Understand the conservation success stories**

Much of the information we need to communicate is about conservation problems. But it is important to interpret what's working, and to explore reasonable conservation solutions. Research in-country conservation success stories, brought about by the actions of government, NGOs, the actions of local people, or collaborations. What are reasons for local people to take pride in their country's endeavors to preserve wildlife? It is frequently the case that local people may not be aware that their endemic wildlife is unique. Therefore, stories about conservation of these species can be a source of national pride.

## **7. Identify the appropriate audience**

Depending on the issues identified and the intended outcome, you may choose to target one or more audiences. If you will be working with communities, you will want to learn about how people typically learn information. You might engage adults through their children's school, community gathering places, church groups, women's groups, youth groups, or through local newspapers or radio programs. You may choose to target more focused community groups, such as ranchers, farmers, agricultural groups or teacher colleges. You may also work with local schools, which raises a different set of questions addressed below.

## **8. Determine school needs**

If your target audience is students, the initial questions are not unlike the ones you would ask for a program serving your own local community. Which environmental subjects are teachers required to teach? How will your topic fit into their curriculum? Given that information, which grade levels are the most appropriate? Will the program be taught in the schools, or be taught at the local zoo for school children? You may find that the participatory and experiential education style that we are familiar with in the U.S. is very different from the way children are used to learning in other countries—they may be more familiar with worksheets. This does not mean that you cannot introduce new techniques; however, you will need to be sensitive to these differences. If you are introducing a new methodology, it's worth exploring whether teacher training is needed. You will want to determine who can facilitate your contact with the Ministry of Education (or equivalent) to determine this information. It would be very helpful if that person(s) would also be available to review/approve/endorse your project.

## **9. Identify the appropriate media and language**

You will also need to determine the most appropriate media to work with your targeted audience(s.) For example, you may want to create a poster, props, a program script for a community program, audiovisual materials, a workbook on local plants for restoration projects, a script for a radio show, or a theatrical presentation. For a school, you might also choose to create a curriculum and kit of teaching props and materials, and a teacher training workshop. There may be special situations to consider when choosing activities or media. For example, paper supplies may be limited, so distributing a written survey might be considered frivolous. Humid tropical climates result in mildewed props, so that materials will need to be durable and/or properly packed in moisture-resistant containers. Determine the language you will need to work in, and how you will arrange for translation. While children may learn English in a selected grade, they may actually be more comfortable speaking in their first language. Language dialects may be different; for example, Canadian French may be somewhat different from Malagasy French. Therefore, you will want to have a bilingual person native to the area review your translation.

## **10. Learn about the local customs and culture**

While we may approach working in another country with sensitivity to cultural issues, we may also view the situation from the perspective of our own culture. The most well-meaning of intentions can result in a problem if we don't understand the local culture. Programs may take longer to implement than expected, since it may take some time to establish a relationship with local people. This is one reason that having an experienced local contact is so important. A local person will be able to help you to avoid cultural errors, such as not understanding local customs and societal dynamics, appropriate dress for women, or gestures that may be interpreted quite differently in another country. You can also draw on the experiences of other colleagues who have worked in this area. Learn all you can, and then learn from your own experience. Sensitivity to local cultural issues can help determine the success of a program.

## **11. Determine a realistic budget**

In order to develop a realistic program budget and time line, you will first need to determine whether the program is planned as a one-time event (such as a training workshop) or will be ongoing (such as working with a local community). The program may be a pilot project that will be evaluated to assess its potential for continuation or expansion. It is helpful to develop a strategy for ongoing support of the program if it is needed, and program funders often ask this question. If you are an educator developing a program for an SSP, TAG or CAP, an initial question to clarify is whose responsibility it is to identify funding sources and prepare grant proposals; ideally, it is a shared responsibility with other team members. When preparing a budget, be sure to include in-kind contributions, and to budget for containers, postage and shipping costs. If program materials have a limited life (especially due to climatic conditions), factor in costs for replacement elements as needed. Funders may also ask whether the program can be implemented if you were to receive partial funding, so you will want to consider whether the program can be phased, or if there are discrete elements that can be funded separately. It is important to ask the questions suggested above as you plan your program, so that you can budget and plan accordingly. For example, you may need to budget for translation costs. It's a good idea to budget an additional amount for contingencies, too.

## **12. Determine a realistic time line**

What you can get done and when you can get it done depends on a host of factors, including working in another culture. You will need to consider time for materials to be reviewed, translation, graphic design, pilot testing, evaluation and reassessment, as well as dissemination of results and reporting back to funders and other stakeholders. Many logistical considerations affect the time line, such as when schools are in session; local holidays; allowance for bad weather interfering with travel or activities; delays in shipment; times when local communities are harvesting; and many others. Plan a realistic time line that is not too tight and provides for some flexibility.

## A quick checklist of questions to clarify:

- ❑ Who will be our contact(s) for the project? Does this person(s) have access to email? If you do not speak the local language, does this person speak English?
- ❑ Who are other researchers working in this area, and what is their contact information?
- ❑ What are available sources of information on local animal and plant species, plant/animal interdependencies, animal/human interconnectedness, culture and customs, environmental issues and conservation success stories? Are any relevant children's books available?
- ❑ Where can you obtain images/illustrations that you can use for your program? Are they slides or digital images? Are there copyright issues in using them for educational purposes?
- ❑ Who will be responsible for actually conducting the education program?
- ❑ If others will be presenting the education program you have developed, what training is needed?
- ❑ Who will transport the education materials to the site?
- ❑ Who can take images of the program in progress?

I hope these ideas are helpful to you in developing your *in situ* education program. If you have other suggestions from your experience that you would be willing to add to this template, I would welcome your comments! Please contact me with questions or suggestions:

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## Resource

Conservation Project Manual, Flora and Fauna International