

Z good for education, ZOOS

Fantastic resources

This morning I taught a Year 4 class about skeletons. They enjoyed the session so much that the five-minute question session at the end turned into 20 minutes and the teacher still had to cut them off mid-flow. I work in the Conservation Education Department at Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, and while it would be nice to attribute the children's enthusiasm to my teaching skills, I'm not that naïve.

I was fortunate enough to be able to use the fantastic resources available in our 'zoo classroom' to engage children in their learning. As they touched an invertebrate animal (a cockroach) and a vertebrate animal (a snake) the topic began to come alive for Year 4. They were learning lessons that would, I hope, stay with them for a long time: handling tortoise shells (confiscated by Customs)

I believe that it is part of our Christian duty to protect God's creation each in our own way

Naomi Webster started a zoology degree at Bristol University in 2000 and volunteered at Bristol Zoo Gardens once a week. Having discovered a field that combined her passion for animals and conservation with her natural talent for talking, she was unsure how to start her career, but was thrilled to land a last-minute place at Durrell's summer school in 2004, particularly as the short-staffed Conservation Education Department offered her a temporary job. They've been stuck with her ever since!

Having been a church chorister since she was eight, Naomi now finds she has to work many Sundays, so often attends weekday services instead, but sings with her church choir when she can. Naomi has always had a keen interest in writing and drama, and volunteers with a children's drama group. This year she wrote, produced and directed Durrell's first pantomime to raise awareness and funds for the amphibian campaign.

with the spine visible, and comparing the bones in a flamingo leg to those in a human leg.

Deeper understanding

I agree with Freeman Wicklund ('Human education for animal emancipation', *ACT Now* Spring 2008) when he writes that it is a teaching truism to say that students will 'hear and forget, see and remember, do and understand', but I do not agree that 'students learn nothing real or honest about these magnificent animals at zoos' or that zoos are 'denying them everything God designed them to be and to do.'

The children who visit Durrell leave with a deeper understanding of a topic than if they had just been told about it at school. They also leave feeling inspired by the amazing animals that live here and, hopefully, they will want to make sure that these animals don't disappear. This is something that zoos can help with.

Members of the free-ranging pied tamarin family



not for entertainment



Livingstone's fruit bat flying in the bat tunnel

There is no excuse for treating animals badly or forcing them to behave unnaturally to entertain an audience

We also give talks to the public and run workshops during school holidays and at weekends for members (both children and adults) who are interested in wildlife. Having the animals here on Jersey allows them to act as ambassadors for their species, even if their natural home is actually many thousands of miles away. The resources we have available and the experiences we offer make the teaching fun, accessible and memorable.

A good zoo

Many people, myself included, don't like zoos in the Victorian sense of the word – collections of animals on show for no other purpose than entertainment. There is no excuse for treating animals badly or forcing them to behave unnaturally to entertain an audience. There is such a thing as a good zoo and I am fortunate enough to work in one. But the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust is so much more than being a zoo; it is an international wildlife conservation charity set up by Gerald Durrell with a clear purpose: to save species from extinction.

Unsurprisingly, education plays a significant part in Durrell's ongoing conservation work. The animal collection at our headquarters in Jersey plays a number of important conservation roles:

1. Education

Education is a crucial part of the conservation effort. If people don't care about animals or don't know about their plight, they won't be able to save them. The conservation education department teaches sessions for school groups from Jersey and schools visiting the island.

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2. Research

Being able to study animals up close is a wonderful opportunity for visiting students and professional scientists alike. Short of an international field trip, there is no better place for students to learn about studying animal behaviour, and we regularly have A-Level Psychology groups visiting to study primate behaviour. For scientists, it is very useful to be able to take accurate measurements, record dates, watch behaviours and develop husbandry techniques – all of which are much harder to do in

Naomi (right) and Iris the Brazilian rainbow boa meet a member of the public (centre)

Photo: J Ward





Photo: T Wright

Members of Durrell's Madagascar team in the field

an animal's natural habitat (particularly if they are studying an arboreal, nocturnal animal for example).

But the research that goes on in Jersey is used in conjunction with research that is carried out in the wild. While it is true that there is some information that is very hard to gather in the wild, equally there are some things that we would never learn without studying the animals there, and Durrell has field staff working in situ in Galapagos, India, Madagascar, Mauritius, Montserrat, St Lucia and even on Jersey itself.

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3. Breeding programmes

Breeding programmes have several purposes. One is the potential for reintroduction of endangered species back into the wild. Although reintroduction is not always feasible or appropriate, captive breeding is still important because it helps to maintain a genetically healthy breeding population in captivity as a safety net population, in case the worst should happen in the wild.

For amphibians (frogs, toads, newts, salamanders and caecilians), this last role has become crucial. The wild is no longer safe for them, even where there is some habitat remaining. A deadly disease called the chytrid fungus is sweeping across the world, devastating amphibian populations. The only hope for many of these species is for us to maintain and study genetically healthy captive populations in bio-secure breeding containers, until we understand the disease and determine that it is safe to put them back into the wild. We can also

train and educate local people in the amphibian's country of origin to set up their own projects.

Knowledge and understanding

To successfully conserve these animals, we have to understand each species in our care and keep them appropriately. Gerald Durrell himself always insisted that enclosures should be designed first and foremost for the animals inhabiting them, secondly for the keepers looking after the animals and only thirdly for the visiting public; and yet the visiting public end up the winners because they have the opportunity to see these amazing animals up close.

Fortunately the gauntlet that Gerald Durrell threw down has been taken up by zoos across the country and, thankfully, enclosures are now designed very differently from the archetypal iron bars of the Victorian era.

Happy and healthy

By studying animals' wild habitats and understanding their needs, we can create enclosures that allow them space to indulge in their natural behaviours while also keeping them safe and protected. At Durrell children can see free-ranging monkeys enjoying all the pleasures of natural woodland. In the spring you might spot silvery marmosets with faces covered in pollen from where they've raided the camellia flowers which adjoin the woodland.

At the Madagascar Teal Aviary, children can learn about how this purpose-built aviary allowed us to become the first organisation in the world to breed Madagascar teal in captivity. But we are not content to rest on our laurels and, as new technology becomes available, we strive to improve the enclosures to keep our animals happy and healthy.



Photo: A Lee

Jewels of the Forest — a walk-through aviary for birds from SE Asia

It is too vast a generalisation to lump all zoos together and condemn them all

LBJs

The animal collection in Jersey is a reflection of our conservation work overseas and the threatened species we are trying to save. Gerald Durrell was always very keen on preserving what he called the 'little brown jobs' (LBJs) which might not be as beautiful or awe inspiring as a tiger or an elephant, but are still inspirational in their own way and an important part of an ecosystem. The brown ducks and endemic fish we are working with in Madagascar do not have the charisma to star in a documentary at IMAX or feature in emotive, attention-grabbing photographs, but they still need conservation help.

Bringing people face to face with these animals creates moments when they can fully engage with them. Seeing the animals going about their daily lives (not just the edited highlights of a documentary), hearing them, smelling them, looking them in the eye and realising how dreadful it would be if

they were gone – this is one of the most important lessons we can teach.

Protecting God's creation

It is too vast a generalisation to lump all zoos together and condemn them all. Yes, in a perfect world, the animals would all be safe and free in their natural environment, but we live in a far from perfect world. I believe that it is part of our Christian duty to protect God's creation each in our own way and good zoos, with well-designed enclosures, knowledgeable staff and clear conservation goals, have an important role to play. The 'God-incidences' that landed me at Durrell tell me that I am exactly where I am supposed to be; using my God-given talents to share my passion for His creation with others and hopefully encouraging them to support the conservation of the remarkable wildlife with which we share the planet.

■ Naomi Webster

More information

To learn more about the work of the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, or to find out how to organise a school visit, please go to: www.durrell.org

For further information on the amphibian crisis and the '2008 Year of the Frog' international campaign please visit: www.amphibianark.org/yearofthefrog.htm

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