

## Animal Magic – Zoos as a Learning Outside the Classroom resource

Stephen McKeown of Chester Zoo writes about how zoos are a vital resource for children to learn about the environment and the planet.

It's been estimated that, worldwide, 600 million people visit zoos each year and in the UK last year over one million young people visited zoos in education groups<sup>1</sup>. People who haven't visited zoos in recent years might be pleasantly surprised by the renewed focus on conservation and education. In order to qualify for an operating licence, zoos have to satisfy a range of strict criteria including the provision of an education service and regular inspections ensure that everything is up to the required standard.

There is little doubt that a well-run zoo is a highly stimulating learning environment offering many opportunities for both structured and more informal learning experiences. Sceptics point to the excellent wildlife documentaries on TV as a perfectly acceptable substitute, forgetting that seeing animals in real life provides a multi-sensory experience unavailable even with the most sophisticated HD TVs. Even at a very basic level, seeing an animal face to face helps young children establish a sense of scale. Manchester Museum's education service used to bring out a stuffed stoat in its white winter coat and ask children what they thought it was. The most common answer was a polar bear, which seems bizarre until you realise that the only place most of them would have seen a polar bear would be on TV against an icy background with no trees, people or other reference points to give a clue to its size.

Zoos work closely with teachers to establish how best to deliver our education programmes. Most of the subject material is closely linked to the curriculum and not just in science. Many zoos offer sessions in art and design, literacy, drama, language studies and so on. One of the most popular and perhaps least expected successes has been with Business Studies and Leisure and Tourism for GCSE and A2. Pioneered by Chester Zoo in the late 1990s, this has become a huge growth area, perhaps because looking at the typical charity zoo model is very different from visiting your local biscuit factory. In fact Chester Zoo features as a case study in a major educational publisher's latest Business Studies course material package. A conservationist's most important task, if we are to save the Earth, is to educate said Sir Peter Scott, founder Chairman of the WWF. Certainly the most important task of any zoo educator is to deliver conservation messages and try to make people feel differently about their relationship with the natural world. Children are clearly a key audience for zoo educators partly because a child who takes on board the importance of looking after the planet will, hopefully, carry on behaving responsibly towards it in the future. Young people are very good at nagging their parents to recycle for example and if zoos can provide a stimulus for this sort of change then we are achieving our mission.

<sup>1</sup> Source: [BIAZA](#) (*British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums*)

### Links

- Stephen McKeown is Head of Discovery and Learning at [Chester Zoo](#)
- President, International Zoo Educators' Association: [IZEA](#)
- Co-chair World Association of Zoos and Aquariums Education Committee: [WAZA](#)