

To: Board of Management

From: Manager, Learning & Engagement

Subject: **2020 LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMS REPORT**

Date: 2021-01-29

SUMMARY:

This report focuses on the primary activities and achievements of the Learning & Engagement Branch at the Toronto Zoo for the year 2020. Learning & Engagement oversees a wide variety of different programs throughout the year that support key components of the Strategic Plan and further educational goals. These include school program offerings and teacher resources, as well as a roster of public programs for a variety of audiences/ages and, in a typical year, summer camps. In 2020, our programs were heavily impacted by the COVID pandemic, yet through creativity and a dedicated effort, we were able to deliver new programs that were consistent with the needs and interests of our guests, while also adhering to COVID guidelines. Leading up to the pandemic restrictions, the Learning & Engagement Branch was anticipating another record breaking year and while we were unable to deliver programs as planned, we were able to pivot and develop new programs and experiences that have received many accolades. Through our revised programs and experiences (combined onsite and virtual) we were able to reach an estimated 39,202 participants and generate \$196,063 in revenue.

Also, included is a summary of curatorial outreach programs which are administered by the Wildlife & Science Division.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is recommended that this report be received for information.

COMMENTS:

Key accomplishments in 2020:

Onsite Programming Largely Unable to Proceed in 2020 Due to Pandemic Restrictions

With the continual growing success in participation and revenue in recent years, the Learning & Engagement Branch was looking forward to another successful year in 2020. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, many of the planned programs and activities had to be cancelled due to both safety concerns and legislated requirements. As a result, we were unable to welcome guests to many of our programs including, Zoo Camp (children's day camp), Serengeti Bush Camp (overnight program for youth groups and families), Zoo

School (grade 11 biology credit course), Pyjama Party Overnights (overnight programs for youth groups in the fall and winter), School Programs (onsite field trips for students of all ages), Parent & Tot programs, and a variety of themed day programs for children, families, and adults. Despite this, the Learning & Engagement Branch was able to conceptualize and build knowledge and skills in order to develop new programs and experiences that allowed us to continue to engage our various audiences and provide memorable learning experiences within the health and safety considerations imposed by the pandemic.

A Variety of New Virtual Programs Offered to Engage School Groups, Families, Community Groups and Businesses

With the restrictions to guests being onsite during lockdown, and in an effort to continue to engage those who are unable to otherwise visit our site when open, the Learning & Engagement Branch developed a series of virtual programs to continue to share the important messages about conservation and to connect audiences to wildlife. A variety of fee-based programs were developed on different themes and topics and are offered in the following formats: extensive 40-minute virtual tours of a Zoo region, visiting a variety of species, or a 15-minute Meet & Greet, which is focused on one to two species, providing more in-depth content on those selected animals. Within these programs there is opportunity for back-and-forth discussion with the Zoo educator, making it a very personalized experience. We also deliver special pre-filmed content with a personalized message in front of an animal, which are called Zoo Shout Outz. Shout Outz have been popular for birthdays and other special occasions, where one of the Zoo team members delivers the special message as written by your family or friend, while visiting an animal of your choice.

In addition to the fee-based programs, the Learning & Engagement Branch has also delivered a number of free programs, both to school groups and to families, in an effort to remain connected to large audiences and help to keep children engaged in conservation education. Many of these programs were delivered in partnership with the organization Exploring by the Seat of Your Pants (EBTSOYP), through which we connected with school audiences around the world. We also developed special themed presentations surrounding significant events, including a two-day “Virtual Campout” over the May long weekend where we encouraged families to build forts and tents at home, make some s’mores, and tune-in to join Zoo educators, along with Jeff Yurek, Minister of Environment, Conservation and Parks for Ontario on the first night and Mayor John Tory on the second evening, while we visited examples of Canadian animals found in your own backyard on the first night and compared to animals found in the African Savanna on the second night. These virtual programs were well attended with approximately 10,000 households streaming each night live, with many posting pictures to social media of their families participating from home. The Learning & Engagement Branch developed and delivered similar programs including one celebrating Canada Day with Toronto Mayor John Tory participating live and another celebrating the Toronto Zoo’s birthday in August.

In total for 2020, through the variety of new virtual educational opportunities offered by the Zoo, we were able to reach and connect with an estimated 36,986 devices, representing an equal number of, or significantly more, individuals on each device, and generating \$19,254 in revenue for the Zoo. In addition, through these virtual offerings

we've been able to extend our reach to some distant audiences who may not otherwise be able to connect with our stories or visit us in person.

New Overnight Zoo Experience “Wild Tails Family Camping” Successfully Launched

New in 2020, the Toronto Zoo launched our first bring-your-own-tent camping experience. Wild Tails Family Camping experience opened on August 6 and was in operation until September 20. Each night, Thursday through Sunday, family or friend groups were able to reserve one of 18 campsites to make some lasting memories. This self-guided camping adventure included an evening of Zoo exploration, after-hours and early-morning access to our African Savanna and Canadian Domain regions, dinner, and an exclusive campsite where they could sleep under the stars at the Zoo!

Over the 28 nights of camping we had a total of 456 campsites booked, which was at 90.5% of the capacity. These bookings represented 1,579 campers and generated over \$123,595 in revenue. As a part of their overnight, guests could also add on the opportunity to experience Terra Lumina, which 419 of our guests participated in, generating an additional \$9,556 in revenue. They could also rent a bat detector to use while exploring at dusk.

When asked in our survey what was the guest's highlight or favourite memory while camping overnight at Wild Tails, some of the comments were as follows:

“It felt like we had the zoo to ourselves! It was so nice, especially during covid times, to be a family out at a public place and not have to worry about crowds. Their animals were more active in the evening as well. And the kids loved hearing the animals through the night.”

“Having private moments (no one else around) with the lions talking to each other and at one point a hyena was pretty special.”

“Loved that staff came around with an animal to meet. (Sweet snake.) Loved being able to walk through the zoo, before and after public hours = avoid public during covid times and any time is a hugely appealing factor. Loved hearing the animals (from the tent) at night and early morning! Having staff available at the campsite through the evening and in the morning was really good.”

“Our favorite memory was the opportunity to explore after the zoo was closed. It was a very peaceful time and it felt calm...It was such an amazing experience to hear the lions even if we were not up close because it was quiet. We just stood there listening in the quiet evening. Such a beautiful evening to spend my wedding anniversary at the zoo overnight!”

Challenging Year for School Program Bookings

While the Toronto Zoo is traditionally a popular destination for school field trips, 2020 was a challenging year. From the beginning of January, educators within the public school boards were in a job action situation that included rotating strikes and a restriction against participating in field trips. In response, the Learning & Engagement Branch pivoted by

developing and delivering highly successful one-day children's programs to help support those who were out of school, and later in response to the COVID pandemic, a series of very successful virtual programs connecting with approximately 11,804 students.

Promotion of School Programming Opportunities

In order to maximize the exposure of the many educational opportunities available for students, the Learning & Engagement Branch continually makes updates and modifications to the design and content of the School Programs Brochure (Appendix 1) to ensure it is user friendly and provides key information at a glance for teachers. This brochure is typically printed and distributed every September and January to schools in the Toronto, Durham, York, Peel, and Kawartha/Pine Ridge school boards, as well as upon request; however, in 2020 due to the COVID pandemic and field trips being on hold, brochures were only distributed part of the year with further communication to educators through electronic means. Brochures were also sent to all of the private schools in the Greater Toronto Area, including schools that are members of the Conference of Independent Schools.

In order to ensure we continue to connect with teachers we also produce an e-newsletter, which is circulated to nearly 5,000 educators and highlights the current initiatives of the Zoo as well as educational opportunities for teachers and their students. A sample newsletter has been attached (Appendix 2).

Conservation and Wildlife Educational Outreach

In addition to the programs delivered through the Learning & Engagement Branch, the Wildlife & Science Division at the Toronto Zoo also coordinates a number of grant funded programs each year that reach additional audiences.

The Adopt-A-Pond Wetland Conservation team (AAP) transitioned to a largely virtual world in 2020, as COVID-19 restrictions changed the ways that outreach and educational events were able to take place. These efforts included 17 Facebook LIVE episodes, three live broadcasts in partnership with Exploring by the Seat of Your Pants (two on YouTube, one via Facebook LIVE), and one Instagram Question and Answer session on the Toronto Zoo Instagram platform. These live online events, combined with Facebook posts on the Adopt-A-Pond Facebook platform, resulted in about 50,000 people being reached, some well outside of our typical geographic audience reach, and over 8,000 engagements/interactions.

Further to these virtual ventures, AAP continued to facilitate the Turtle Tally and FrogWatch community science programs in 2020. Volunteers submitted 553 frog and toad observations and 1,363 turtle observations from within Ontario, for a total of 1,913 observations submitted between April 13th and November 9th, 2020, and over 44,000 observations since the inception of these Turtle Tally (2003) and FrogWatch (1999), each of which aid in informing biologists of where these species currently occur in the wild, and provide insights into the threats that they may be facing. FrogWatch Ontario is part of the national initiative, FrogWatch Canada, administered by Environment Canada; AAP is the provincial coordinator of the project. FrogWatch Ontario is a partnership between Toronto Zoo's AAP, Environment Canada's NatureWatch program, and the Ontario Government's Natural Heritage Information Centre (NHIC). Ontario Turtle Tally was established by

Adopt-A-Pond to monitor the health of turtle populations. Information that is collected in this database is submitted to the Natural Heritage Information Centre at the end of each season. The 14th Annual (and 1st virtual) Turtle Tally and FrogWatch Volunteer Appreciation Day was held in November 2020, with over 80 households tuning in live, and more watching the recording at a later time.

Last, but not least, AAP distributed 1,527 printed materials by mail to members of the public. These include: 62 books, 817 brochures, 491 laminated identification guides, and 90 posters, all of which contain excellent information, photos, and graphics of Ontario's reptile and amphibian species, their larvae, and eggs, as well as directions for stewardship actions that can be undertaken by members of the public. One of these stewardship actions that AAP directly facilitates is the distribution of turtle and snake crossing signs, which are posted roadside where mortality of these animals is high, to create awareness among drivers. In 2020, AAP distributed 34 of these crossing signs, which will be up for their first full spring-summer-fall seasons in 2021.

Our First Nations program, Turtle Island Conservation (TIC), has also been developing and delivering conservation education programming in partnership with over eight First Nations communities in Ontario. TIC partners with First Nation communities to preserve community knowledge and significant natural and cultural landscapes, and to support First Nations communities in their commitment to the protection of biodiversity in Ontario. The impacts of COVID-19 and the restrictions in place in all Indigenous communities across the province have made our outreach and education initiatives more difficult; however, TIC did transition to hosting Indigenous specific events through the Zoo's Facebook Live channel and partner platforms. We have reached approximately 250 individuals this year with education and outreach across all First Nations programs. TIC has made all of our resources available as free, online downloads to make our resources more accessible for Indigenous community members and educators. For the coming year, TIC is hoping to receive multi-year funding to expand turtle head-starting and re-introduction program to a First Nation community in southern Ontario and to work with that community to preserve and showcase their traditional knowledge regarding turtles.

As part of the Great Lakes Program public campaign for freshwater mussels, "I am Important! I am Protected!", the Clam Counter app for freshwater mussel reporting and identification received 60 reports in 2020 showing an annual trend of increasing reports over four seasons since its launch in 2017.

Additional Great Lakes-focused programs, Aqua-Links and Blue Schools partnered with a combined total of 15 schools. As part of the Aqua-Links Program, students and educators from eight schools reared approximately 2,800 Atlantic salmon fry for release into tributaries of Lake Ontario. The salmon are cared for by the students in classroom hatcheries from the egg stage to the fry stage when they were then released by Zoo staff (due to covid restrictions) with some students watching via live stream. Seven schools participated in the new Blue Schools program to conduct in-school water audits and implement water-saving actions in their schools. Some of the actions implemented in 2020 included rain garden installations at two schools, installation of water bottle refill stations and associated educational signage.

Operation Conservation Program Delivered to Youth from the Malvern Community

Funded by the Tippet Foundation in the amount of \$15,640, this program offers youth a two-day, immersive experience that serves to promote interest in the natural world and develop stewards for the environment, who are equipped to take an active role in wildlife conservation under the guidance of a supportive coordinator. Seventy-three students participated in this two-day immersion program in 2020; funding to support this program has been received from this foundation since 2002.

Learning Opportunities Expanded for Underserved Communities Through Model Schools Passport Program

One of the key challenges of the Toronto District School Board's Model Schools program is to strengthen and increase parent involvement, a critical factor in student success. Participation in this passport program allowed students and their families the chance to experience the Zoo and share an enriching learning opportunity together that they may not otherwise have been able to do as a family, nor with their school, as a result of financial limitations. In 2020, 392 children and 458 adults participated in the program resulting in revenue of \$8,500.

Overnight Programs for the Fall / Winter Redeveloped for Youth Groups

At the start of 2020, the Learning & Engagement Branch undertook a re-development of our Pyjama Party Overnight to create an experience that generated the most WOW! As part of this, we combined a visit to the Lumina experience and added new and exciting light projections in the participant's sleeping space. We also re-developed the activities the children completed as part of their overnight experience and culminated with a craft using wildflower seed paper that allows each child to 'become the seed of change'. Unfortunately, we were only able to deliver the program to two youth groups prior to the COVID pandemic, but we continue to look forward to offering this overnight experience in future years.

Valentine's Dinner and Educational Presentation Continues to be Popular

In February of 2020, the Learning & Engagement Branch once again hosted a special Valentine's dinner and program for adults, which builds on the program that was initiated in 2011 and continues to be successful. For 2020, a new presentation and program was developed focusing on the various forms of companionship as observed in the animal kingdom. Over three evenings we had strong participation and revenue (234 participants and \$24,979 respectively, plus an additional \$1,075 generated through a silent auction). The program has grown in popularity and is expected to continue to be a crowd favourite in future years.

Despite the many challenges experienced in 2020, the Learning & Engagement Branch remains very proud and excited about the many ways that we were able to continue to engage people with wildlife and conservation education. The experience and knowledge gained in 2020 will help to continue to extend our reach to provide positive learning experiences for more individuals from not just our local environment, but across Canada and beyond. As we look forward into 2021, we are planning to continue building on this success of our virtual programs, will look to again offer the Wild Tails Family Camping

experience, and remain hopeful in our ability to offer onsite Zoo Camp again in the summer months.

CONTACT:

Heather House
Manager, Learning & Engagement
hhouse@torontozoo.ca
416-392-5937

Heather House
Manager, Learning & Engagement

ATTACHMENTS:

Appendix I – School Programs Brochure 2020
Appendix II – Sample E-Newsletter – Educators' Edition (October 2020)
Appendix III – Learning & Engagement Programs 2015-2020