

Learning & Engagement Programs Report 2021

Date: January 28, 2022

To: Board of Management

From: Senior Director, Strategic Communications & Guest Experience

Wards: All

SUMMARY

This report will update the Board of Management on the primary activities and achievements of the Learning & Engagement Branch at the Toronto Zoo for the year 2021. 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, a roster of public programs for a variety of audiences/ages, virtual experiences, and summer camps.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Senior Director, Strategic Communications & Guest Experience recommends that:

1. The Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo receives this report for information.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no financial impact resulting from the adoption of the recommendations in this report.

DECISION HISTORY

There is no decision history available for this item.

COMMENTS

In 2021, Learning & Engagement programs continued to be heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, with careful planning and consideration, we were able to

continue to build on the achievements of 2020 and were once again able to welcome children to the Zoo for a summer camp experience. Also in 2021, we experienced tremendous growth and success in connecting with our guests through virtual means, continuing to share our stories and conservation messages. In 2021, the Learning & Engagement Branch also led the design, planning, and implementation of the Climate Action Learning & Leadership (CALL) program, which is focused on providing opportunities and skill development for BIPOC and marginalized youth to learn about climate change and wildlife conservation at the Zoo and take steps towards careers in this sector. Through our programs and experiences (combined on-site and live virtual), we were able to reach an estimated 415,223 participants and generate \$764,315 in revenue.

Also, included is a summary of Wildlife & Science outreach programs which are administered by the Conservation Science Division and educational experiences provided by our Guest Experience team.

Key accomplishments in 2021:

Ongoing Pandemic Continues to Reduce Opportunity for Onsite Programming

In a typical year, the Learning & Engagement Branch is excited to develop a roster of programs to connect with audiences of all types and ages; however, with the pandemic, legislative and health & safety requirements and closures all significantly reduced our capacity to connect with guests onsite. Despite this, with safety in mind, we were able to once again welcome guests for our summer day camp (Zoo Camp), our Grade 11 Biology summer course (Zoo School), and a small number of family presentations, while also continuing with the success of our virtual programs and implementing a new award-winning program focused on BIPOC and marginalized youth.

Climate Action Learning & Leadership (CALL) – Award Winning New Program Providing Positive Growth Opportunities for Marginalized Youth

In 2021, the Learning & Engagement Branch, working with Human Resources and the Wildlife Conservancy, were successful at receiving a federal grant of \$380,527 to implement the Climate Action Learning & Leadership (CALL) Program. This is a unique action-oriented program borne out of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) principles, and involves working closely with various community partners. The aim of this program is to engage and inspire youth from traditionally marginalized communities, including low-income neighbourhoods, Black, Indigenous, People of Colour (BIPOC) community members, and new Canadians to take action to combat climate change. Through the unique experiences offered by this program the goal was to raise awareness of the opportunities and development of employable skills for these youth to find their own calling in the career fields of climate change and conservation science. One of the key aspects of this program was to provide these individuals with the knowledge and skills to create their own climate change call to action project within their communities and wider networks. The CALL Program engaged youth in two broad programs:

Building Leadership through Climate Action Internships (Ages 18 to 30): paid internship for 10 individuals, delivered over 12 weeks (3 separate cohorts) and included eight weeks of hands-on skill development through, training, education, and job shadowing throughout the Zoo. Each intern was also responsible for conceptualizing and

implementing a community-based climate action project over a four-week period, putting their learning and knowledge gained to use while developing leadership experience.

Engaging Climate Action Champions (Ages 15 to 17): a four-week program that took place over July and August for a total of 39 participants over four cohorts. Over the course of the four weeks that participants attended the Toronto Zoo site, they learned from Zoo staff about biodiversity and climate change, and their impacts on wildlife. A key aspect of this program was also having the youth work together in small teams under the guidance of Zoo staff to create and deliver action-oriented projects.

The following is some feedback about the impacts and success of the CALL program from two of the participants:

“Everything about the program was great! Our AMAZING CALL mentors ... were more than amazing. They were with us every step of the way, and they definitely made our time at the zoo more exciting. They brought in so many guests and introduced us to so many people, all of which gave us a very blessed experience.”

Azan – CALL Engaging Climate Action Champions Participant

(full blog post: <https://medium.com/@azanalnur2006/the-importance-of-wildlife-conservation-8b70a57940ff>)

“CALL internship was an excellent opportunity for me to learn about animals and climate change. I always wanted to do something about climate change and animal conservation, but I was unable to do something about it due to a lack of opportunity in my community. Thanks to the CALL internship I was able to meet lots of amazing people at the Toronto Zoo. Who taught me a lot about climate change and conservation. I am grateful to them. Because of the CALL internship, I feel like I am better equipped for the future and many other climate changes challenges we might face in the future. Thank you CALL program for giving me this amazing opportunity to learn and have fun at the same time.”

Farhan – CALL Building Leadership through Climate Action Intern

The CALL Program was the recipient of the Eleanore Oakes Award for Education Program Design from the Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums (CAZA) in 2021. This award recognized the CALL program for its achievement in enhancing conservation knowledge, and for promoting positive conservation attitudes and behaviours.

Virtual Programs Continue to Connect with and Engage Many 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 led a series of virtual programs that were first developed in 2020, to continue to share the important messages about conservation and to connect audiences to wildlife. These include a variety of fee-based programs that 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 species selected by the guest, providing more in-depth content on that specified animal. 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 the customer can add a personalized message. This past year we also developed Zoo Keepsakes, an option to celebrate important milestones in the lives of the Zoo animals, such as their first birthday. Customers receive an exclusive video with milestone markers and conservation information about the animal as well as a matching plush toy and collectible pin from our retail store.

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. In addition to the programs conducted with EBTSOYP, the Learning & Engagement Branch also offered six free virtual events in support of schools during their closures and transition to online learning. These 40-minute programs were broadcasted live on the Toronto Zoo YouTube channel and combined had an estimated over 350,000 students watch live along with an additional 346,400 new views of the saved videos to date. These videos continue to be available to view for educators to use. We also hosted a special Family Day program for the Scarborough community cohosted by our local MPP Vijay Thanigasalam and his team. The program was custom built to host nearly 1,000 Scarborough community families on a tour through the African Rainforest Pavilion, including an interactive question and answer period with the Zoo educators and a Wildlife Care staff at the end of the tour.

In total for 2021, through the variety of existing and new virtual educational opportunities offered by the Zoo, we were able to offer 1,065 programs and connect with an estimated 414,000 participants during the live programs and generating \$120,841 in revenue for the Zoo. Between the live viewership and additional views for our tours available on YouTube, the Learning & Engagement Branch achieved a virtual reach of over 760,000 people in 2021. 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. As many of our free programs are posted on our social media they are still accessible world-wide and are accumulating views.

New Onsite School Programs Created to Provide COVID Safe Visits for Students

While the Toronto Zoo is traditionally a popular destination for school field trips, 2021 was once again a challenging year due to the global pandemic. From the beginning of January, public and private elementary and secondary schools were closed. Education moved to teacher-led remote learning, with a provincial state of emergency declared on January 14. By the end of January, several regions had resumed in-person learning, however these were regions in more remote areas, not the local regions surrounding the Toronto Zoo.

In response, the Learning & Engagement Branch continued to connect with students through our roster of paid curriculum-based virtual programs, delivering conservation education messages to approximately 23,099 students in 2021.

As students returned to in-class learning during the fall months, the Zoo continued to offer virtual programs for those groups that were not able to attend in person, as well as developed a new offering of on-site school programs called Edu-Treks. Edu-Treks were designed with COVID safety in mind, eliminating the requirement for an indoor classroom and moving the learning to occur entirely while touring the Zoo site. Each Edu-Trek is 1.5 hours in length, and while public schools remained unable to participate in field trips, these new programs were popular amongst private schools, resulting in connecting with approximately 534 students and their teachers and generating \$1,884 in program related revenue in addition to the revenue associated with admissions.

Promotion of School Programming Opportunities

In order to maximize the exposure of the educational opportunities available for students, the Learning & Engagement Branch makes annual 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 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 2021 due to the COVID pandemic and field trips being placed on hold, brochures were updated electronically and made available on our website for educators to view when required.

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).

Zoo School - Delivery of Grade 11 Biology Credit Courses

In 2010, the Toronto Zoo became established as a private school with the Ontario Ministry of Education and gained the authority to grant school credits towards a student's secondary school diploma. Since its inception, Zoo School has been a very popular program. Due to the provincial closure of schools Zoo School operated in a 100% online format for 2021 with students attending online sessions four days a week for six weeks. They covered the same material as they would during a regular in-person Zoo School session with behind-the-scenes tours conducted virtually. A total of 18 students successfully gained their grade 11 university biology credit, resulting in \$32,310 revenue.

The new online format was received positively by students and parents – see comments below.

“I just wanted to thank you for all your hard work to make this possible. Connor had a wonderful experience!”

“Thanks for providing a very engaging class. She is loving it.”

“Charlotte is enjoying the program very much, and it is helping toward her future career in veterinary medicine. “

“Samantha is really enjoying the course! I'm so jealous that she gets to see so much of the zoo.”

Conservation and Wildlife Educational Outreach

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

The Adopt-A-Pond Wetland Conservation Program (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, and these circumstances continued through 2021. These efforts included nine Facebook LIVE episodes, three Instagram Question and Answer sessions on the Toronto Zoo Instagram platform, a virtual Turtle Nesting Workshop for the City of Pickering and nearby residents, and the first-ever hybrid Snakes of Ontario Workshop, where some participants were present in-person while others tuned in virtually. These live events, combined with Facebook posts on the Adopt-A-Pond Facebook platform, resulted in approximately 50,000 people being reached, some well outside of our typical geographic audience reach, and over 10,000 engagements / interactions.

Further to these virtual ventures, AAP continued to facilitate the Turtle Tally and FrogWatch community science programs in 2021. Volunteers submitted 507 frog and toad observations and 1,111 turtle observations from within Ontario, for a total of 1,618 observations submitted between April 6th and November 8th, 2021, and over 45,000 observations since the inception of 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 15th Annual (and 2nd virtual) Turtle Tally and FrogWatch Volunteer Appreciation Day was held in November 2021, with over 30 households tuning in live, and more watching the recording at a later time.

Last, but not least, AAP distributed 2,370 printed materials by mail to members of the public. These include: 61 books, 400 brochures, 1,050 laminated identification guides, and 133 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 2021, AAP distributed 81 of these crossing signs, which will be up for their first full spring-summer-fall seasons in 2022.

Our First Nations program, Turtle Island Conservation (TIC), continued a virtual presence in 2021 due to the impacts of COVID-19 and restrictions in place. For National Indigenous History month, a series of five videos on traditional Indigenous storytelling were created and uploaded to the Toronto Zoo YouTube account and shared on social media platforms. This series reached just over 36,000 people across the YouTube videos and shared social media posts. During the summer of 2021, TIC, co-led with AAP, was able to create six in-person shoreline cleanup events using funding from the Great Lakes Local Action Fund in occurrence with current provincial restrictions. The events took place in partnership with Indigenous communities throughout Ontario, including Alderville First Nation, Six Nations of the Grand River, Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation, Magnetawan First Nation, and the Urban Indigenous Community in Toronto. Overall, a total of 46,881 m² of area was cleaned, 238.5 kg of trash collected, 10 education signs installed, 224 education materials distributed, 26 social media posts created, and 183 participants were involved.

2021 was another highly successful and exciting year for the Great Lakes Program (GLP). The GLP is proud to announce being awarded the 2021 Significant Achievement Award from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums in the Education Award category. Additionally, the GLP received the 2021 Partnership Award from long-time partners in aquatic conservation, Ontario Streams. The GLP reached over 11,500 students through in-class virtual presentations delivered in English and French in over 30 different school boards and livestreaming on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram resulted in over 80,000 views of GLP virtual content. The GLP also reached 4,000 students during a livestream interview celebrating World Oceans Day. Finally, the freshwater mussel reporting and identification app, Clam Counter, received 67 reports of freshwater mussel sightings in 2021 following an annual trend of increasing reports since the app launched in 2017.

Additional Great Lakes-focused programs, Aqua-Links and Blue Schools were modified in 2021 due to restrictions related to COVID-19. Since we were unable to enter schools to place and monitor Atlantic salmon hatcheries, we reared 300 Atlantic salmon fry at the Toronto Zoo and participated in virtual programming with partners at the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters. We released the salmon fry in spring 2021 via livestream on social media. As part of our Blue Schools Program we worked with partners at Credit Valley Conservation to install rain gardens on school properties in 2021. These rain gardens minimize runoff from school properties that can be harmful to nearby waterways by causing erosion, high turbidity, and pollution.

In 2021 the Native Bat Conservation Program (NBCP) launched its first Community Science Pilot Project in Southwestern Ontario. This program was designed to engage community scientists in conservation work in order to learn about bat species in Ontario, while also allowing us to collect useful distribution data about species at risk. Volunteers from Saugeen Field Naturalists, Saugeen Valley Conservation Authority, and Huron Fringe Field Naturalists signed up for different periods throughout the summer to place an acoustic recorder on their property in order to identify bat activity. Acoustic data was analyzed during the summer. Volunteers were given personalized reports within two weeks of their data collection, which allowed them to learn about the species that were found on their property. They were also given opportunities to attend specialized bat events throughout the summer to learn about the importance of protecting our Ontario

bat species. A total of 15 volunteers were engaged and 18 monitoring sites were sampled over 116 nights. This partnership was very successful; with a small number of volunteers, we managed to collect data for a relatively large geographic area and recorded six out of the eight bat species found in Ontario. The summary data collected was comparable to the data our NBCP team collected in 2020. All volunteers were excited by their work and would like to be involved with any future projects. We have presented our initial results to our funding partners and the Métis Nation of Ontario. All of our partners have offered their assistance in growing this program in future years.

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 allows 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. Due to school closures and ongoing challenges with the pandemic, TDSB did not run this program in 2021. We hope to continue to be involved when this resumes.

Zoo Camp continues to provide a positive summer experience for youth

In 2021, Zoo Camp attracted 762 participants and generated \$226,961 in revenue. In response to spacing limitations at the Zoo and COVID-related safety for staff and campers, we operated a modified Zoo Camp with reduced capacity. For example, each camp group had reduced cohort sizes and limited the interactions between the cohorts and staff throughout the day. Zoo staff were required to participate in contact tracing when entering camp home bases, and a rental washroom unit was installed for exclusive use by Zoo Camp to ensure social distancing whenever possible. All other Ontario Camp Association (OCA) and government guidelines relating to day camps and COVID-19 were followed accordingly. We continued to deliver staff training with a focus on interpretive techniques, providing the seasonal staff with a skill set to provide our campers with a fun and memorable learning experience at the Zoo.

A variety of special themed presentations offered to engage inquiring minds

In 2021, we were able to bring back some popular Learning & Engagement programs that have historically ran in person. Our Evening with Native Bats program was delivered virtually to 54 devices (representing an equal or higher number of participants) and later in the year we were able to offer a hybrid Snakes of Ontario program with some guest attending virtually (11 devices) with another 16 participants attending in-person. In total, the two programs generated \$874.81 in revenue.

Wild Encounters and VIP Tours

Our Guest Experience team also delivers personalized tours offered through the Wild Encounter (WE) and VIP Tour programs which allow for a close connection between our guests and our animals. Wild Encounter tours, first initiated in 2019, involve a 30-45 minute walking tour that provide small groups of 8-10 people an up close experience in one of our accessible behind the scenes areas where the Zoo's conservation initiatives are highlighted. In 2021, since re-opening in July through December approximately 637 Wild Encounter tours were delivered to 2,973 guests, generating \$186,295 in revenue.

Survey results show engaged and positive reviews for the programming and staff providing the tours. New for 2021, QR codes were added to signage on site and our guest guide which led to an increase in on-site sales over the prior two years. Gift cards were also implemented for the holiday season which were very popular.

The VIP tour program is a new offering added in July 2021. This unique experience provides a personalized tour guide for up to five hours to escort 2-6 guests via golf cart on their own customized tour featuring behind the scenes, private animal interactions, and a sit down lunch. Through these experiences guests gain a deeper understanding of our Zoo's mission and important conservation work leaving many inspired to do their part to help ensure a healthy planet and environment for the future. For this first year of operation, July to December, twenty-one tours were delivered for 80 guests generating \$24,449 in revenue.

Despite the many limitations imposed by the ongoing pandemic in 2021, the Learning & Engagement Branch was able to connect with a record number of individuals, largely through virtual means, and was able to generate revenues to support the Zoo operations. Through our virtual learning experiences, we continue to extend our reach to provide positive learning experiences for more individuals from not just our local environment, but across Canada and beyond. Additionally, we were very excited to launch the CALL program, welcoming some wonderful interns and programs participants, while providing safe opportunities for them to learn and grow their skill set. As we look forward into 2022, we continue to work towards sourcing funding and partnership opportunities to continue and grow the CALL program and are also looking forward to once again welcoming children to our summer day camp and re-opening the Serengeti Bush Camp program for a memorable overnight experience at the Zoo.

CONTACT

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

Steve Jones
Supervisor, Learning & Engagement
sjones@torontozoo.ca
416-393-6376

SIGNATURE

Jennifer Tracey
Senior Director, Strategic Communications & Guest Experience

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – School Programs Brochure 2021

Attachment 2 – Sample E-Newsletter – Educators' Edition (October 2021)

Attachment 3 – Learning & Engagement Programs 2017-2021