

Learning & Engagement Programs Report 2023

Date: January 18, 2024

To: Board of Management of the Toronto Zoo

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, as well as other educational experiences at the Toronto Zoo for the year 2023. 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

2023 was an outstanding year for the Learning & Engagement Branch, with overall the highest annual revenue ever achieved at \$1,427,740 (see appendix 3). Zoo guests were signing up with excitement for experiences across many categories, from our day camp and overnight camps to adult learning programs, and Wild Encounters. Overall in 2023 we were able to reach a total of 28,229 participants through our programs and experiences (combined on-site and live virtual) to share important messaging about the Zoo's conservation efforts and how guests can get engaged to help. In addition to the activities of the Learning & Engagement Branch, this report contains 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 2023:

Zoo Camp and Child-Only Programs

In 2023, Zoo Camp once again opened registration to many eagerly awaiting parents. Our camp, which is designed for children ages 4-16, largely sold out within 45 minutes of registration opening. Weekly themes are created for the various age groupings, providing meaningful learning experiences that build from year-to-year, through nature activities and conservation messaging during this week-long program. In total 1,729 children participated in the program, which generated a total revenue of \$666,901. Included in this is our Before & After Care program, which continues to be a resource that many parents take advantage of.

The Learning & Engagement Branch also offered drop-off programs for children, such as PA Day programming and a March Break Camp, which provide exciting and fun learning opportunities for children to explore their passion for wildlife outside of the school system.

Serengeti Bush Camp & Pyjama Party Overnight Program

In 2023, the Serengeti Bush Camp program completed a site upgrade project, which included rearranging the tent platforms and installation of a second firepit to support multiple youth groups simultaneously and allowing us to maximize revenue opportunities, as well as installation of new gardens, site and interpretive signage, and path improvements. The evening programming is modified annually to encourage repeat visitation. In 2023, Bush Camp had a record-breaking year with 4,525 people participating in the program, generating \$488,464 in revenue, our highest since the program launched in 1998.

A new Pyjama Party Overnight program was developed and has been well received by youth groups in the fall and winter months, with 409 people participating in 2023. This experience is in high demand and is expected to continue to generate positive revenues for the Zoo in the coming years.

Adult and Family Programming

Consistent with the success of our other public program categories, both adult and family programs were highly successful in 2023. We were again able to offer our Love at the Zoo Valentine's program, as well as bat and wolf themed evening programs, which all continue to draw large crowds. The Learning & Engagement Branch also

worked closely with the Conservation Science team to offer two programs targeted at post-secondary level students, academics, and topic enthusiasts, which included Lemurs & Lagers, as well as Scientific Cultures and Cultural Science: The Secrets of Zoo History. We also partnered with the Adopt-A-Pond Program to co-deliver a sold-out turtle nesting workshop for families to support conservation of these at-risk native species. Overall, these programs combined generated \$34,050 in revenue from a total of 699 participants.

Wild Encounters and VIP Tours

Our Guest Experience team delivers personalized tours offered through the Wild Encounter and VIP Tour programs that allow for a close connection between our guests and our animals. Wild Encounter tours, first initiated in 2019, involve a 15–60 minute walking tour that provide small groups of 6-8 people an up-close experience in one of our accessible behind-the-scenes areas where the Zoo's conservation initiatives are highlighted. In 2023, 5,200 guests attended Wild Encounters generating over \$300,000 in revenue. Survey results show engaged and positive reviews for the programming and staff providing the tours. Also for 2023, 49 Special Event Wild Encounters were booked to celebrate birthdays, gender reveals, and other events resulting in a revenue of \$14,690.00.

New mini encounters were implemented this year as an accessible option at a lower price and to create a more inclusive environment for guests. Ranging from \$15.00 to \$20.00 per person, these encounters highlighted species such as the Lake Malawi cichlids, stick bugs, Watusi cattle, and many more. These mini encounters were a great success with 479 guests participating in July and August.

Wildlife Science: Species Recovery Outreach

Our Species Recovery team contributed to educational outreach through various grant funded projects supporting conservation of Species at Risk (SAR). Many of these are ongoing initiatives to connect with different parts of our community, in Toronto and beyond. These efforts are summarised in the table below.

Program	Activity	Impact
Adopt-A-Pond (targeting reptiles and amphibians)	Classroom Presentations	Events: 3 People Reached: 98
	Other Presentations (including off-site outreach tables, shoreline clean-ups, virtual presentations, and guided nature walks)	Events: 28 People Reached: 4,411
	Community Science (Turtle Tally and Frog Watch)	Participants: 262
	Educational Resource Distribution	Items: 5,737
Great Lakes (targeting fishes and mussels)	Classroom Presentations and Festival Booths sharing knowledge on Aquatic Species at Risk	Classes Reached: 979 People Reached: 18,424
Native Bat Conservation Program (targeting bats)	On-site Events (Family Bat Night and Bats & Beverages)	People Reached: 175

	Community Science (Scarborough park bat monitoring and backyard bat monitoring)	Participants: 60
	Bat Exhibit	Visitors: 10,000 (estimate based on 25% of Zoo guests since opening, a counter will be installed for 2024)
Turtle Island Conservation (targeting SAR & connection to Indigenous communities/stewardship)	Outreach Presentations (on-site & off-site outreach tables, virtual presentations, Indigenous guided tour of Tundra Trek & Americas animals)	Events: 6 Classes Reached: 10 Peopled Reached: 150
	Ceremony at Toronto Zoo	Events: 3 People Reached: 200
	Community Science (TD FEF project – Workshops in First Nation communities focus on SAR turtles and snakes)	Events: 2 People Reached: 49

Highlights from 2023 included:

- Our Adopt-A-Pond program completed five shoreline cleanups with community groups both inside and outside of Toronto, including three First Nation's communities (Alderville, Chippewas of Georgina Island, and Magnetawan), and the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. These events engaged a total of 180 participants, who were educated on the impacts of litter on the environment, Indigenous teachings, and collected over 1,700 kg of litter from a total of 25.16 km of shoreline.
- The Native Bat Conservation Program opened a new exhibit connecting the fieldwork and research undertaken by this team to the Zoo site and our guests. The exhibit was opened on October 26th during International Bat Week. The exhibit uses engaging graphics, interactive elements, and Indigenous artwork to connect guests to the bats of Ontario, their plight, and the contribution our Zoo is making to their conservation and recovery.
- The Turtle Island Conservation (TIC) program held the first staff-wide end of life ceremony for grizzly bear, Samson, as well as bison Vlad. TIC hosted two workshops in First Nations communities (Hiawatha First Nation & Alderville First Nation) focussed on a Two-Eyed Seeing Approach for species at risk snakes and turtles. TIC also celebrated National Indigenous Peoples' Day which included Blanding's turtle releases and hosted outreach table during National Day of Truth & Reconciliation.

School Programs and Zoo School (Grade 11 Biology credit course)

In 2023 Zoo School was required to undergo bi-annual inspection from the Ministry of Education and we're pleased that through continual effort and improvement we renewed our authority to grant high school credits as a private school with not a single recommendation or issue noted from the inspection. 36 students received their grade 11 biology credit in 2023 generating \$64,620 in revenue. Zoo School hosted two students on a collaborative Toronto Zoo and CUPE scholarship this past year and it was a positive experience for the students, with their school guidance counsellor commenting

that "...they were so thrilled with the experience. I could literally see it in their eyes how much they enjoyed it. They had only wonderful things to say." Overall students and parents continue to show their appreciation of the quality of experience and education we provide with one parent sharing the following feedback about her daughter:

"...not only did she get to see a lot of cool things at the zoo but she had what is probably the best educational experience of her life so far. As a mom of a child who struggles with school and social situations it made my heart full to hear her talk about it. I hope Zoo school can continue for many, many years."

Within our school programs that support student field trips, the Learning & Engagement team developed 45-minute interactive presentations for the primary and junior school levels that enhance students' learning connecting with the new outdoor orangutan habitat. We also worked to expand and promote the offering of specialist high skills major (SHSM) programs, which is a positive new revenue and learning opportunity for high achieving secondary level students. Further, we also worked to redevelop all of the online teacher and student curriculum resource documents that are offered free to download from our website and support enhanced student learning while they visit the Zoo.

An audio/visual upgrade of the Zoo's classrooms was commenced in 2023. These upgrades are designed to support the students and program participants that sign up for our programs, enabling staff to provide high quality content in an engaging way to meet and exceed expectations.

Through a partnership with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), the Toronto Zoo participates annually in the Model School's Passport Program. This program is designed to provide parents from lower income neighbourhoods with access to local attractions to spend time with their children to support learning outside of the classroom. In 2023 the Toronto Zoo had a very positive response from families participating in this program, where the family receives a discounted admission rate that is equivalent to the school admission rate of \$10 per person (up to a limit of two adults and five children). In total, 6,045 adults and 5,296 children attended the Zoo through this program, resulting in a revenue of \$113,410.

Climate Action Learning & Leadership (CALL) Program

With the financial support from the Toronto Zoo Wildlife Conservancy, the Learning & Engagement Branch was able to continue to support individuals from traditionally marginalized communities with learning experiences at the Zoo. Two opportunities were delivered in 2023, one was a 12-week paid-internship that allows participants to build their conservation and climate change knowledge and employment skills through training and job shadowing with various branches at the Zoo. Six individuals completed an internship in 2023, with feedback from one of them sharing that "...this internship has aroused my interest in the field of conservation and climate action, I will continue to engage myself in similar programs. I will utilize my social media skills to share all the knowledge that I have and will gain with respect to climate change and conservation."

The CALL Program also hosted 39 youth ages 13 to 17 from three community partners of the Zoo: Toronto Community Housing Corporation, WoodGreen, and East

Scarborough Storefront. These youth participated in a 2-week immersive program designed to work on building their wildlife conservation knowledge as well as leadership skills.

Very notable from 2023 is that the CALL Program worked together with the MaRS Discovery Hub to host a workshop with potential collaborators from organizations across Canada and including California. The outcome of this workshop was the development of a roadmap for the CALL program with opportunities to expand the program locally and nationally. This workshop was made possible through a grant from the Mitsubishi Corporation, who donated an additional \$22,000 in 2023 to support program expenses, as well as \$5,000 from BASF.

Overall, 2023 was a very exciting year for the Learning & Engagement Branch, with the highest revenues ever achieved and many exciting program and space enhancements completed. It is expected that we will continue to experience the high demand for our camps and programs in 2024, and where appropriate, incorporate celebrations of the Zoo's 50th Anniversary as we continue to provide positive guest engagement, sharing the important wildlife and conservation messages of the Toronto Zoo.

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SIGNATURE

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ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1 – School Programs Brochure (2023)
Attachment 2 – Sample E-Newsletter – Educators' Edition (June 2023)
Attachment 3 – Learning & Engagement Programs 2019-2023