

TRYPHODRA

Art

AT THE ZOO

BY ALINA TUGEND

The Langston Hughes poem,
Mississippi Levee,
is written on a green picket fence in
New Orleans' Audubon Zoo, right
across from the giraffes. A beautiful
poem in its own right, it has special
resonance for visitors, many of whom
survived Hurricane Katrina.

The poem, one of 32 scattered around the Zoo, is part of a national trend among zoos and aquariums to incorporate arts in a way that doesn't feel extraneous, but integral to the message and mission of education and conservation.

"Art is another way to engage and create empathy," said Dennis Kelly, director of Smithsonian's National Zoo in Washington, D.C. "Art can be an important motivating factor."

It is also a way to attract people who typically don't visit zoos or aquariums.

"At our poetry readings, we had middle-aged people," said Brenda Walkenhorst, director of education projects for the Audubon Nature Institute. "That's not our general population."

The Zoo's poetry installation, which ran from 2009 to 2011, started with a \$20,000 grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), a federal government program; Audubon was one of a half-dozen zoos around the country to receive a grant to incorporate poetry, Walkenhorst said. The Zoo partnered with New Orleans public libraries as well.

Each zoo got its own poet-in-residence; Audubon's was Mark Doty, an award-winning New York poet.

LEEVE, LEEVE,
HOW HIGH HAVE YOU GOT TO BE?
LEEVE, LEEVE,
HOW HIGH HAVE YOU GOT TO BE
TO KEEP THEM COLD MUDDY WATERS
FROM WASHIN' OVER ME?

LANGSTON HUGHES,
"MISSISSIPPI LEEVE"

“Visitors liked it—people would say, ‘how beautiful to sit and read poems,’” Walkenhorst said. The poems, most of which are still scattered around the Zoo, could be prominent or understated—etched around the butterfly garden, on stairs, hanging from trees.

Less subtle, but just as distinctive, was the National Zoo’s art installation of giant plastic sculptures, which ran last summer from Memorial Day through Labor Day. The Zoo worked with the non-profit Washed Ashore, which gathers garbage from the beaches and “transforms it into art through community organizations and artists,” said Angela Haseltine Pozzi, Washed Ashore’s executive director and founder. Ninety-five percent of the rubbish is plastic, and that’s what they use to create their oversized penguins, turtles, sharks and even coral reefs.

None of the plastic is artificially colored or in any way prettified by the artists—the idea is to be able to identify what the original pieces were—although the results are surprisingly attractive.

“It has to be great art, but we’re very careful to have recognizable items in your face,” Haseltine Pozzi said. “It’s a tricky balance, but we have to show the problems and need to get the message across.” Washed Ashore has exhibited in about 15 zoos and aquariums.

The message certainly got across at the National Zoo, which created an entirely new volunteer program for the exhibit. Usually volunteers are intensively trained for 30 hours through an in-person program, said Kirstin Schoeninger, an education specialist with Friends of the National Zoo, which manages the volunteer program.

But for the exhibit, they recruited 100 people who were trained for four hours in-person and also took online courses to teach them basic information about the Zoo, as well about plastics and ocean pollution. The volunteers were also allowed a more flexible schedule than is typical for Zoo volunteers.



© Adam Mason, Smithsonian National Zoo

Washed Ashore gathers garbage from the beaches and transforms it into art.

“We got a different group of volunteers—those who also expressed an interest in art,” Schoeninger said. And as with the Audubon Zoo, the exhibit attracted some visitors who might never come to the Zoo, she said, noting that about 25 percent of visitors said they knew about the exhibit before arriving at the Zoo and approximately 20 percent of those people said they specially came to see the colorful figures.

Signs stood alongside the artworks telling people what they could do to address the plastic pollution crisis, including stop using plastic bags and single-use plastic water bottles. One of the most arresting pieces of work, Haseltine Pozzi said, was a 25-foot coral reef made entirely of Styrofoam pieces gathered off the beach. It sat directly, across from the Zoo’s actual coral reef display.

When coral reefs die, they lose their color, and “people could visualize what a bleached coral reef looks like,” she said.

“People came in and saw these huge sculptures they really couldn’t miss,” Schoeninger said. “It was striking—people said, ‘it’s beautiful, it’s interesting, it’s devastating.’”

The exhibit affected more than the visitors—it had an impact on the way the Zoo does its own business, Kelly said.

“In working through the installation, it caused us to look at ourselves and think more deeply, just like we were asking of our guests,” he said. “We no longer give out free plastic bags, which saves over 4,000 bags a year. And we’re moving towards refillable water bottle stations.”

In 2015, the Philadelphia Zoo in Philadelphia, Pa., offered visitors a similar experience when it worked with a dozen artists from around the world to create larger-than-life sculptures of endangered animals using reused, recycled and repurposed materials. The name of the exhibit? Second Nature: Junk Rethunk.

“... we set up six different tables throughout the Zoo, put butcher paper on them and encouraged guests to *draw* ... An artist or two and a docent were on hand at each table to help with the artwork and with facts about the animals.”



The sculptures include spark plugs, cardboard, and other sorts of, well, junk—there was a 35-foot tree made with car parts and kitchen tools and just about everything in between. And crocodiles created completely out of chewing gum.

Barbara McGrath, the Zoo’s art director, told the *Broad Street Review* at the time of the exhibit that through art, especially contemporary art, people can be encouraged to think about bigger issues. “That is what we have to do—we have to be thoughtful,” she said. “We have to come up with new ideas. We have to apply our thinking in new ways.”

For the Seneca Park Zoo in Rochester, N.Y., it was art and photography that attracted a new clientele to the Zoo.

“We need to do outreach to millennials to get them to understand about zoos and get them to care about conserving,” said Pamela Reed Sanchez, executive director at the Seneca Park Zoo Society.

So, the Zoo decided to partner with a local group of artists through DNO Art Collective, Rochester company, Rowe Photo, and Tamron Lenses.

On a Sunday in September, “we set up six different tables throughout the Zoo, put butcher paper on them and encouraged guests to draw,” Reed Sanchez said. An artist or two and a docent were on hand at each table to help with the artwork and with facts about the animals.

Rowe Photo and Tamron Lenses also set up a station where photographers could try different lenses and filters and check them out to use around the Zoo. Guests could also get pointers on how to better shoot animals.

“This is Rochester, home of Kodak, and there’s a very high level of amateur photography here,” Reed Sanchez said. The event was such a success that the Zoo plans to do it again in 2017.

Music and zoos may seem a bit more of a stretch, but that’s not how Buttonwood Park Zoo in New Bedford, Mass., saw it. When Terry Wolkowicz, the education director for the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra, reached out to Carrie Hawthorne, the curator of education at the Buttonwood Park Zoo to see if she was interested in being part of an educational program with elementary schools, she thought it was a great idea.

“She came in and brainstormed with us, and out came the idea of animals evolving from water to land and sky,” Hawthorne said.

The idea was to teach children—about 10,000 students from 40 elementary schools participated—about motion in music and in animals.

In classes, using a magnetic graphing board, children—mainly 3rd and 4th graders—could graph animal locomotion and then hear their graphs performed by the orchestra’s musicians. When visiting the Zoo, children were able to see animals moving and hear music that moved just like the animals. The Zoo donated 10,000 passes, Hawthorne said.

Finally, using students’ animal motion melodies, the symphony created a new piece that premiered at the New Bedford Symphony Orchestra’s Young People’s Concert; it was played, along with videos of the students analyzing animal and musical motion, original scientific illustrations and Buttonwood Zoo animals.

This year, the Zoo and the symphony plan to continue using music to learn about the gravitational pull of the planets and then learn about habitats next year.

Too often, music is used as an add-on, or a way to perk up science—singing a song about dinosaurs when learning about them—rather than as an integral part of the lesson, Hawthorne said. “This is art and science coming together. This isn’t just putting music in to make it fun. I’m learning about music, Terry’s learning about science and the kids are learning about both. It deepens understanding of evolution and classical music.”

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The Bedford Symphony Orchestra, partners with the Buttonwood Park Zoo to explore connections between motion in music and in animals.

