

COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS



Going Green with Local Communities

BY ALINA TUGEND



At the corner of Forest and Vine, a busy intersection in the Avondale section of Cincinnati, sat an eyesore – three vacant and deteriorating buildings.

“They were trashed,” said Sophia Cifuentes, the sustainable communities advocate with the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden in Cincinnati, Ohio. The derelict buildings were one more sign of the problems faced by what Cifuentes called “a neighborhood with a lot of challenges and with a lot of negative tension between the Zoo and the community.”

The Zoo acquired the property in 2010, and with the help of a local company, Building Value, which hires adults with disabilities or disadvantages, took apart the homes piece by piece and recycled 93 percent of the material.

“We put up a beautiful stone wall that says, ‘Welcome to Avondale – Home of Cincinnati Zoo,’ and a garden with native plants and grass,” Cifuentes said. It was both an effort to create a partnership with the community and to develop a green space with perennial and sustainable plants in the surrounding neighborhood.

The project, as the Zoo had hoped, spurred more such initiatives. “People would ask, ‘Can you help with this vacant lot or that one?’” she said. More recently, the Zoo has worked with partners—including the Cincinnati Reds—in major makeovers of community and recreation centers to create more attractive, sustainable and efficient buildings and surroundings.


Zoos and aquariums are aware that educating visitors about environmental concerns is not enough. They must also reach beyond, into the surrounding neighborhoods to provide the communities with the resources to make a difference.

Tori Craig, the program and curriculum coordinator for Gabriel’s Place, a community-based food education non-profit located a mile from the Cincinnati Zoo, said Zoo volunteers have helped in developing a community garden, greenhouse and chicken coop, as well as planning



An overhead view of the PG All Star Park community makeover project on which the Cincinnati Zoo collaborated.





The Missouri Botanical Garden and the Saint Louis Zoo’s “Milkweeds For Monarchs” initiative involves planting 25 milkweed gardens in schools throughout the city.

and serving weekly free meals that feed approximately 120 people. Her junior chefs—teenagers that take an eight-week cooking and gardening class—also visit the Zoo to learn about such things as composting.

“By being directly involved here, they’re making an effort to show the community they’re interested in the health and happiness of their neighbors,” Craig said. To help meet environmental challenges, Craig said, “The involvement also drives home the way people can change their lifestyles and habits.”

The programs don’t have to necessarily be extravagant to have an effect. The Saint Louis Zoo in Saint Louis, Mo., is part of an ongoing city-wide program to bring back the monarch butterfly, whose population has declined by more than 90 percent over the last two decades due to habitat loss and chemical use.



Saint Louis Zoo’s “Milkweed for Monarchs”

The Zoo's education staff is collaborating with the Missouri Botanical Garden on the outreach portion of the program. Called "Milkweeds For Monarchs," this initiative involves planting 25 milkweed gardens in schools throughout the city, teacher training and liaising with neighborhood information specialists.

The Zoo's entomology team is also collaborating with area scientists to research the effectiveness of these and other urban milkweed gardens in supporting monarch populations.

"This is a powerful way to engage the community through outreach education and civic conservation," said Wanda Evans, the Saint Louis Zoo's sustainability coordinator.

Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)-accredited facilities have long brought creative learning techniques into classrooms. Chris Schmitz, education curator at Utah's Hogle Zoo in Salt Lake City, Utah, said that in 2010, "I made the decision I wanted to do something regarding polar bears."

The Zoo is an ambassador site for the conservation organization, Polar Bears International, and for the past five years, the Zoo has run the Polar Bear Challenge. To participate in the challenge, a classroom chooses an environmental action it wants to do for 21 days, and the students use a specific formula to calculate the reduction in their carbon footprint due to their actions over those three weeks.

The winner receives Zoo tickets, T-shirts and a large framed photo of a mother polar bear and cubs, along with \$500 worth of books related to the Arctic, polar bears and things children can do to make a difference for the environment. Two runners-up also receive prizes.

The challenge averages approximately 2,300 participants annually, Schmitz said.

Some classes participate in meatless Mondays. One got rid of its plastic cutlery and brought back silverware. One ran a bike-to-school campaign.

Elizabeth Nafus, a second-grade teacher at Harry S. Truman Elementary School in West Valley City, a suburb of Salt Lake City, has participated for three years in the challenge.

The first time, the entire school participated under Nafus's leadership and won second place with its paper recycling program. The next year, the emphasis was on using reusable water bottles instead of plastic disposable ones, and then in 2013, the goal was to get children and their families to replace plastic or paper bags with reusable bags when shopping and that was the winning year for Nafus's school.

"We tie it back to the polar bears and mention climate change," Nafus said.

Truman Elementary and the Zoo are now participating in a pilot partnership program. Truman gets free Zoo passes for students and teachers, tours of the Zoo and a class on animal adaptation for free at the Zoo.

"It's fabulous," Nafus said. "Sixty percent of our children receive free and reduced lunches, so we have a fair number of children from low-income households. Our field trip budget would not include the class."



Saint Louis Zoo's "Milkweed for Monarchs"



Utah's Hogle Zoo is an ambassador site for Polar Bears International. To participate in their Polar Bear Challenge, classrooms choose an environmental action to do for 21 days and then calculate the reduction in their carbon footprint over those three weeks.



“The task most people completed? More than 1,000 chose to not take a straw when buying a drink.”

The impact of these school programs reverberates, such as with the girl whose father was going to donate bottled water for an event. His daughter insisted that, instead, they bring pitchers of water with paper cups.

Nafus said she hopes to do a “No Idling” initiative next year—a campaign that some other zoos have already implemented.

At the Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium in Tacoma, Wash., Academic and Community Programs Manager Cathleen McConnell, started the “Be a Polar Bear Pal” no idling program in 2011. The initiative includes distributing car window clings, which say, “I am a Polar Bear Pal, I turn my engine off if waiting more than 10 seconds.” McConnell said that this has now been changed to 30 seconds since they have learned that most people seemed to feel a 10-second wait was too short to turn an engine off and on.

The back of the cling encourages that pals, “Idle Less the Easy Way – Skip the Drive-Thru and Go Inside!” Each



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cling comes tucked inside a pocket card with myths and facts about idling. For example, most people think turning on and off their car uses more gas or harms the engine, which isn’t true, McConnell said.

Signs at the guest loading zones urge drivers to turn off their cars if waiting for more than 10 seconds. Especially successful has been the efforts with delivery trucks, such as UPS, Fed Ex® and their armored truck company, said McConnell.

Social media is a key way to reach out to communities, and the National Aquarium in Baltimore, Md., did that through its 48 Days of Blue campaign. The campaign, which the National Wildlife Federation and the Ocean Conservancy also took part in, occurred between Earth Day on 22 April and World Oceans Day on 8 June.

It gave participants a daily challenge, said Nabila Chami, social media strategist for the Aquarium. “It could be something like a home energy audit or getting a



plumber to check for leaks or detoxing your mailbox” by getting rid of junk mail.

“We wanted to show that helping the environment is not as overwhelming as you think,” she said.

The Aquarium ran a low-key version of the campaign last year, but this year stepped it up considerably, Chami said. On the campaign website, participants could click online, indicating when they did the challenge. Approximately 15,500 people visited the website, and more than 7,000 asked to receive emails about the initiative.

The task most people completed? More than 1,000 chose to not take a straw when buying a drink “and we’re assuming more people did it who didn’t go to the website,” Chami said.

Next most commonly completed actions were bringing reusable bags to the store and taking only the amount of napkins needed when eating out.

A follow-up survey, which 667 people responded to,

found that 99.2 percent said they would take the challenge again next year. By using hashtags such as #48daysof reuse and sharing a YouTube video created specifically for the campaign, the initiative reached 1.8 million people on Earth Day alone on social media, Chami said.

“It was a lot of work to get off the ground,” she said. “And it’s interesting to see that people have the capacity or appetite to change.”

And based on the feedback they received, it seems most participants were young renters on the East Coast, so home audits didn’t apply. Next year, Chami said, they might include a challenge about talking to the landlord about a home audit.

“And knowing what the appetite is, we’ll offer far more specific goals next year,” she said. “We want people to feel they are not only doing good but doing good within a community.”

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