

A Case for Zoos as Places of Peace

By Nevin Lash, RLA

Are We There Yet?

As this 2020 continues to unfold, we find the zoo world finally jumping on a bandwagon that we have been pointing to for years! How can Zoos be more a part of the social fabric of our communities? What role can Zoos play in helping our communities heal and be reborn with the values that we all share? When combined across the country and world, can our Zoos be a driving force for global change related to climate change, social justice and conservation of natural resources?



We've been suggesting that zoos consider themselves "places of peace" for years. They can undertake a Peace Master Plan that would look at all functions at the zoo to refocus their actions to make sure that they are as inclusive, respectful, and as diverse as possible. The zoo should be a model of safety, kindness and wellness for the staff and its collection, and attract partners that will assist the zoo with funding in a variety of ways. We would expand the scope of those virtues into the community to align with other organizations that have similar core values, and amplify our voices to call out unjust issues and actions in the community and country and to make tremendous growth towards a more secure and sustainable tomorrow.

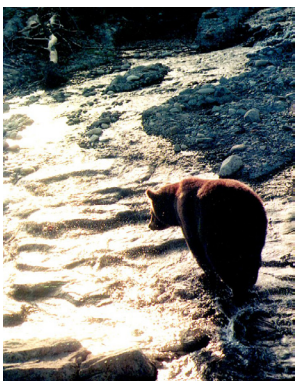
As a planning and design firm, with these Master Plans, we look for "Projects of Opportunity" that allow us to be involved with efforts that bring about transformational growth for our clients. These projects take what is broken and turn them into centers of excellence.

By involving all the stakeholders of the Zoo, we can solve multiple issues and get buy-in from all participants. These tend to be complex projects that strive for lofty goals, and in the end become a beacon of change at the zoo that all involved can be proud of, solve major problems and engage user-groups in the community to participant in new ways.

"Projects of Opportunity" can be found at small zoos and large. When confronted with the opportunity to reach new goals, even unlikely places (such as small towns or community groups), can take on transformational projects that engage new funding sources and take their place within their communities as a voice of a new tomorrow. You need to look 'outside the box' to make this happen.

Ursa's Path To Peace

Ursa was born in the early 1990's with the goal of designing human communities in harmony with nature and natural communities in harmony with people. Gail and I were introduced to the Landscape Immersion concepts being development in modern zoos across the country in the 1980's, coming after the Woodland Park Master Plan by Jones and Jones. Human cultures and animal communities were interconnected; places were established that told the story of ecosystems and their animals were exhibited at our zoos in ways that brought the zoo visitor into a state of "suspended reality". They were virtually transported into those places and could better appreciate conditions that shape the environments of those animals. These natural habitats had animals living in normal social settings with expansive views, replicator plant materials, appropriately shaped natural features for climbers and water features that would facilitate animals natural behaviors.



By hiding the animal barriers with dry moats and hidden fencing, the line between the animal's habitats and visitor spaces can be blurred. The visitor paths were narrow, viewing areas were intimate settings, and architecture either hidden or themed to fit into the story of the place found in the interpretive graphics, project title, and the many artifact clues that alerted the visitor that they were no longer at the zoo, but transported in the habitats of these exotic animals. It was labeled "Landscape Immersion", and while at CLRR, Nevin was involved in some of the best exhibits that showcase this style built in the 80's and 90's including Woodland Park's Northern Trail, Zoo Atlanta's African Tropical Forest, Brookfield Zoo's Habitat Africa, and Denver Zoo's Primate Panorama.

Projects of Opportunity

When Ursa was formed, wanted to expand the Landscape Immersion vision to include Animal Wellness by improving conditions for captive animals in zoos worldwide. It wasn't enough to present a better storyline and themed environment, we wanted to focus on the animals and make sure each species within these complexes were given real space and complex environments that mimicked their natural worlds. We wanted to give them comfort, choices, freedoms and challenges that weren't found in previous zoo exhibits. We saw these environments as life-long homes for generations of animals, and they needed to be designed for growth and flexibility. We would inspire our clients to develop multiple habitats, comfortable, interconnected care centers that allowed for animals to be treated with respect and given quality care in environments that provided for their needs with innovative solutions for humane care.

At the same time, Gail was working in on her Ph.D in Forest Economics, with study areas in wild settings of endangered species, to attempt to solve the problems of human and animal conflict over natural resources. Her travels and study sites took her to Belize; where Howler Monkeys were being displaced by rural farmers who clear-cut the monkey's forest along the river. Working with local conservationists, she studied the attitudes of the local people towards the monkeys (called Baboons!) and was able to see that with proper incentives and opportunities for ecotourism businesses, farmers would maintain forests along the river and along property lines so that monkeys could maintain their access to feeding areas, and tourist can predictably view monkey troops in those areas. She also worked on projects in Indonesia, Ecuador and in North Carolina to assist local peoples maintain access to livelihoods without the destruction of natural habitats of a variety of wildlife. She recommended and documented a variety of ecotourism enterprises that could supplement farming and help protect animal habitats in sensitive ecosystems, providing real conservation success for these species and other species that share their habitats.

In the zoo world, together, we took on projects that provided real improvement to the lives of captive endangered species in a variety of settings. These projects were also able to solve problems due to human and animal conflict in a variety of ways, creating peaceful and healthy solutions to previously inhumane conditions for the animals involved.

Here are some examples of projects that we spearheaded that are designed to improve "animal wellness" and a variety of settings:



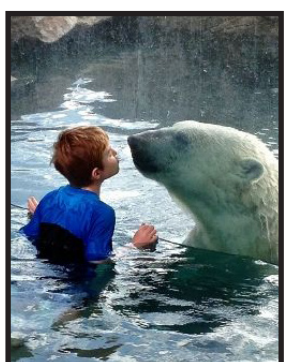
- Dallas Zoo Sumatran tigers were living in a 20'x40' barred cage with concrete floors, wall and ceiling. Four feet away on a straight sidewalk the visitors would line up and stare at tigers, then lions, then cheetah, in settings that could easily be used for any unfortunate species. We worked with the zoo staff to create an expansive, multi-habitat environment and holding facility for up to seven big cats. This new rotation environment reclaimed a forgotten valley, and created a lush "Thai-jungle" habitat that provides a secluded home for a variety of groupings for the breeding of these endangered Big Cat species. Visitors were transported into the world of the Tiger; a place where Tigers appeared to roam free and visitors were prey. Artificial steel bamboo barriers separated the Tigers as the visitor circulated through bamboo forests, marshes, then up on a boardwalk to the Thai stilt-house perched across the valley that allowed expansive views in two directions to two different habitats giving the illusion that you were in the middle of the Tigers' domain.



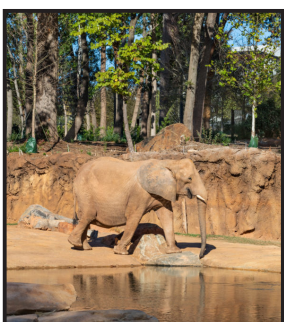
- The Chimpanzees at the North Carolina Zoo were revolting with violence because of the physical relationship between the visitors and the chimps. The chimps felt dominated by the visitors, and were breaking off pieces of their exhibit and throwing them at the visitors. By understanding the Chimps' point of view, we were able to create peace by renovating the habitat and elevating the chimps to the same level as the visitors along a glass wall thus equalizing eye-levels. Additional climbing opportunities were provided and aggression was eliminated. Peace was restored. A new respect for both Chimps and Humans was created. The zoo was able to integrate and expand the chimp group into a multi-male group, and now have continuous new-borns to grow up and thrive in this less-confrontational environment.



• Chimpanzees were being singly-housed and used for invasive research at several National Primate Center across the country, at tremendous cost in housing and care-giving, and they needed to be retired as the use of Chimps for test subjects proved to be minimal. We got involved with a fledgling organization and proposed to the National Institute of Health that we could provide humane care for these chimps at a fraction of the current costs. We helped create the National Chimpanzee Sanctuary at Chimp Haven, where hundreds of laboratory Chimpanzees have been retired to a forest oasis in Louisiana. Large groups of once isolated chimps have taken to the trees and learned to be chimps again. We carefully designed flexible care quarters, with dayrooms for making introductions, large sleeping rooms, and outdoor yards that interconnect with forest habitats. Large groups of chimps are managed with choice, freedom and wellness as a core belief. The natural setting provides environmental enrichment and facility design contains these capable escape artists allowing them a peaceful life as comfortable retirees. They are now given a chance to live a “Chimp Life” for the rest of their lives.



• In Cochrane Ontario, orphaned and nuisance polar bears from the Hudson Bay region were given a long-term home in a huge, multi-habitat complex including the largest captive polar bear enclosures in the world. We designed a natural setting within the polar bears' range to allow visitors an opportunity to learn about them, admire them, and swim with them (from an adjacent pool of course). The facility is a long-term care center for bears like nothing on the planet. This facility was conceived by a small town in Northern Ontario who wanted to help solve a national wildlife problem. They partnered with the Toronto Zoo who helped them develop a Polar Bear habitat with over 2.3-acres of terrestrial habitats a care-quarters for up to seven bears as well as a 16-acre fenced lake that freezes over during their long winter. This sort of environmental enrichment provides a setting for once nuisance bears to become normal bears, with great potential for study, and opportunity for visitor education that is unsurpassed in any zoo environment. By engaging with their townspeople, they were able to get help with in-kind donations for materials and labor that they could never have funded on their own, and with the support of the Toronto Zoo, acquired the expertise and respectability to take on a challenge far beyond their skill-set, and create something spectacular, successful, and to contribute to solving a national wildlife problem.



• Recently at Zoo Atlanta, a miracle happened! With the help of the City, its corporations, and private foundations, a project was completed that has transformed the zoo's elephant program into a center of excellence that could never have been conceived prior to its development. The two female elephants were living in a habitat that was far too small and located in the center of the zoo. When the City asked the zoo to take over a formidable 60,000 s.f., historic building next to the zoo's entry, they also acquired a 7-acre expansion area, and the new African Elephant complex was born. Two large interconnected habitats were established that now allow the zoo to grow its population of elephants to at least 7 individuals including facilities to manage Bull elephants with the Cows. An expansive, 20,000 s.f., LEED gold holding barn has sand stalls, a bridge crane, tamer chute and scale, natural ventilation, day-lighting, and flexibility to manage the expanding herd in ways that the old facility could never accomplish. This was only possible with the city's donation of the Park Building that now functions as their central administrative center and a fantastic Event Center overlooking the Elephant Savanna, providing the people of Atlanta an unequalled experience for enjoying a major new venue for parties, conferences, and fundraising along side a world-class African Elephant center. By stepping up to the challenge to raise over \$50M, the zoo reached further into the community than ever before to raise that money in an amazing pace that allowed the zoo to become a Historic Preservation hero as well as the potential to participate in the AZA breeding program for African Elephants that would never have been possible on the original 42-acre zoo footprint.

Summary

These projects are transformative for each of the zoos that created them. They take advantage of “projects of opportunity” and turn problems into places of pride, prosperity and dare I say, peace. To experience animals in environments that were designed with adequate space and complexity, freedom of choice, comfort and companionship, is completely different from the run-of-the-mill exhibits found in many zoos and sanctuaries. Places that demonstrate humane care and treatment of the animals do more than transport the visitors to a place of suspended reality, they provide a vision of hope and love for these amazing creatures, and can uplift our spirit! We believe that these types of projects, when coupled with public programs and events for the community, can lead to dialogues that are needed to transform our culture into one that is ready to commit to conservation, and act responsibly towards one another. In these peaceful spaces, we can take on the challenging work that needs to be done to combat climate change, social inequity and racism.

We believe that Zoos are capable and ideal places of peace in their community. Visitors feel safe, nurtured and educated and in these times of an uncertain future, Zoos can lead the way to provide a setting to engage the community into a conversation about Wellness for all. Partnering with public agencies and concerned corporate interests can bring in a new class of support that reaches beyond the care of animals and includes wellness initiatives for the greater community.

We, at Ursa International, have always seen the potential for a wider mission for Zoos. We have written about and spoken about this expanded view for Zoos to embrace. Now as evidenced by the June 3, 2020 “Statement on Social and Racial Justice, Inclusion and Equity”, the Board of Directors of the Association of Zoos and Aquarium is seeing that they must take a stand on social issues, and walk-the-walk calling out injustice that they see in society. They have always been seen as experts on scientific matters in their community, they can now engage with their community in more difficult conversations that are needed to work to solve environmental problems. We want to help. The time is now for Zoos to step up to the challenge and take on their expanded role of places of peace in their community.

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