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Can Red States Have Green Zoos?

The eccentric zookeeper, decked out in a khaki pith helmet and camouflage shorts, bounced around the Cincinnati Zoo’s “Lords of the Arctic” exhibit with her voice booming through a megaphone as she warned my third grade class that fossil fuels are causing the polar bears’ homes to melt away at an alarming rate. From that moment in my young life, I was invited into the climate change discussion and I have never left the conversation. Children visiting southern zoos, however, do not receive the same overt global warming message as shared with me by the Cincinnati Zoo. Since zoos across the South do not send as direct an environmental message to their patrons, socially acceptable rhetoric is necessary before southern zoogoers are willing to join the climate change conversation.

Through the implementation of educational tactics, such as a credible lecturer, scientific reasoning, and emotional appeal, the Cincinnati Zoo formulated and significantly contributed to my current literacy of the climate change topic. According to a New York Times article, “surveys show that American zoos and aquariums enjoy a high level of public trust and are ideally positioned to teach” (Kaufman). However, zoos in the southern states face an ethical dilemma when educating zoogoers, both young and old, on the topic of climate change. As a result of the economic and political atmospheres of their region, in which climate change is regarded as a threat to capitalist ideologies, zoos in the South must selectively filter the environmental information they present to their patrons. The tailored rhetoric utilized by southern zoos allows for these institutions to talk around polarizing environmental terms, such as the “greenhouse gas effect,” while still educating zoogoers on the urgency of climate change. When southerners would typically disregard global warming due to the economic and political criticism surrounding this topic, the specific discourse used by zoos in the South allows for patrons to develop personal concern for life on Earth.

When it comes to climate change discourse, zoos throughout the South must walk a fine line between disseminating a concern for global warming and offending their patrons. In an interview with Jeremy Cumpton, the Director of Conservation, Education, and Wildlife for the Hattiesburg Zoo in Mississippi, the cities surrounding Hattiesburg are hesitant to discuss the topic of global warming because the region associates the term “fossil fuels” with high-paying jobs rather than global warming. Thus, to align with their patrons’ beliefs, the Hattiesburg Zoo is forced to take a hesitant approach as well (Cumpton). Cumpton states that only “15 to 20%” of the Hattiesburg Zoo visitors believe that climate change is a pressing matter. One reason he gives is that many of the zoo’s visitors find employment through the oil industry—an industry which supports much of Mississippi’s economy (Forestry & Energy). Since burning fossil fuels is a necessary component to the oil refinery process, addressing climate change in a pointed manner would cause a major riff in the community.

Another barrier that southern zoos encounter when it comes to environmental education is the “politically polarizing nature of climate change” (Clayton 460). Historically, the South is a predominantly conservative region. Most conservatives reject a belief in climate change as it implies a “criticism of capitalism and traditional American values” (Clayton 462). Since most southern families depend upon the petroleum industry as a major source of income, conservative politicians in the southern region oppose environmental regulations for fear that their constituents will perceive them as hindering job growth. As a result, zoos across the South must strategically discuss climate change in a manner that neither alienates visitors nor dents ticket sales (Kaufman). Southern zoos utilize nonpolarizing rhetoric while trying to convey the urgency of climate change in order to remain sensitive to the economic and political ideologies of their conservative zoogoers.

While discord between zoos and conservative patrons could be entirely avoided if the topic were not addressed, zoos have an ethical responsibility to inform zoogoers of the concerns related to global warming. As conservation institutions, zoos have the ethical duty to preserve animals and their habitats. Since frequent changes in weather patterns destroy habitats and cause many animals to go extinct, zoos have discovered that educating the public on the urgency of the climate change crisis is the most effective way to protect animals from the devastations of global warming. Furthermore, zoos serve as the ideal site for environmental education to take place because these institutions are the primary place where animals rely on humans to fight the climate change crisis. By allowing guests to directly observe animals whose natural habitats are being destroyed by global warming, visitors form an emotional connection to the animals. Research has proven that climate change is more “self-relevant” when individuals feel a personal connection with the natural world (Clayton 461). Developing emotional relationships with animals allows for zoo visitors to associate climate change with pity and fear for the survival of a certain species. Thus, zoogoers begin to view climate change as a humanitarian and zoological issue rather than a purely economic and political controversy.

Southern zoos face the ethical dilemma of educating their patrons about climate change while remaining sensitive to the fact that these same patrons have financial and political interests that do not support conservation measures. For this reason, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) included a session during their September 2018 conference to help zoos in conservative states navigate the topic of climate change without offending their patrons.

The presenter stated that 42% of adults in the predominately Republican state of Utah feel that more severe environmental laws and regulations would cost too many jobs and would, ultimately, injure the economy (Halvorsen). However, 48% of Utah’s population feel a sense of wonder about the universe at least once a week (Halvorsen). When presenting this data, the lecturer associated a negative connotation to the term “environmental regulation” and a positive connotation to the term “connectedness” (Halvorsen). The speaker used these nuances to reveal how communities regard certain words as negative and others as positive. The connotations people associate with certain terms can strongly influence the way in which ideas are perceived. With that in mind, the presenter stressed the importance of focusing zoo education on the ways in which climate change has impacted animals and avoiding unnecessary discussions regarding money or politics.

While the AZA PowerPoint is minimalistic in design, the context of the presentation remains straightforward. For instance, one of the PowerPoint’s slides is solely dedicated to the bolded and capitalized word “**RESPECT**.” This slide emphasizes that the only way for zoos to gain respect from patrons is to show respect in return. While many zoos are founded for the purpose of preserving wildlife, it is oftentimes difficult for zookeepers and educators to consider the perspective of a lay person who is not a conservationist. Thus, it is necessary for zoo educators to demonstrate respect for others’ opinions before forcing pro-environmental ideologies and initiatives upon visitors. Doing so allows for zoo educators to better understand the reason their conservative visitors regard climate change discussions as taboo. Furthermore, conveying respect helps zoo educators to build a level of trust with their guests. Zoo educators intend that this newfound trust will motivate zoogoers to actively listen and learn from environmental lessons rather than tune out the global warming message as part of a preconceived “liberal agenda.”

According to Cumpton, who attended the AZA Conference last year, the “Green Education in a Red State” session had the highest attendance of any AZA session. As evidenced by this session’s large turnout, zoos across America now recognize that zoos in conservative regions must walk a fine line between teaching about environmental issues and being conscious of their patrons’ qualms about climate change. The AZA Conference offered plenty of suggestions on how to address the issue of climate change most effectively with zoogoers. After attending such conferences, zoo educators have adopted and implemented different strategies within their own zoos.

An effective method among southern zoogoers is for zoo educators to be cognizant and consistent with their word choice when discussing the polarizing topic of climate change. Brian Davis, Vice President for Education and Training at the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta, ensures that his “guests will not hear the term global warming [because his] visitors are ‘very conservative [and] when they hear certain terms, [his] guests shut down’ ” (Kaufman). The Georgia Aquarium, in affiliation with Zoo Atlanta, has seen their visitors become offended when staff members use traditional environmental language, such as “global warming” and “fossil fuels,” which have a negative connotation among southern patrons. Situations like these have inspired institutions across the country “to develop, test, and refine their model” of climate change discourse (Kaufman). Zoos have learned that educating guests on climate change without including words that carry political bias helps visitors develop a concern for the environment.

Tone and diction are two important components to the climate change discourse utilized by southern zoos because these two literary elements can influence how certain ideas are perceived by a defensive audience. The tone used by zoo educators when addressing the environmental impacts of global warming is generally “casual and chatty” (Kaufman). For instance, zoo educators are using the phrase “heat-trapping blanket” in lieu of “greenhouse gas effect” (Kaufman). Simplifying scientific terms aids in the learning process for zoogoers of all ages and prevents preconceived climate change notions from hindering the development of new opinions. This casual tone mimics the same tone used when speaking to an acquaintance and communicates a friendly discussion rather than a scornful diatribe. Patrons feel as if they are partaking in a conversation rather than being accosted for their economic and political views (Kaufman). The inviting tone and diction used by zoos serves as an offer for southerners to join the climate change conservation and prompts patrons to develop a broader perspective on environment crises.

Similar to the institutions in Georgia, the Hattiesburg Zoo is mindful of their word choice when discussing climate change. This zoo has found that their patrons are more receptive when they avoid using the terms “climate change, fossil fuels, and greenhouse gases” (Cumpton). “While those are three big terms,” Hattiesburg Zoo educators have discovered that when they teach the concepts without explicitly stating these terms, they receive “almost no backlash from the community” (Cumpton). The ways Cumpton and his fellow educators teach these concepts is by circumventing the three terms mentioned earlier and focusing on more general concepts, such as how the oceans are getting warmer and how the ozone layer is depleting (Cumpton). Strategically introducing these environmental concepts, rather than explicitly using the terms that define these concepts, enables visitors to fully comprehend the scientific reasoning that explains these processes without interference from society’s prejudices.

Using this same strategy, several zoos across the southern region of the country direct their focus toward the idea of conservation, rather than climate change. After a simple Google search, it can be concluded that few, if any, of the southern zoos’ websites include the term “climate change” when addressing environmental concerns. Instead, zoos use the word “conservation” to explain why it is necessary for individuals to lead greener lives. For example, the Birmingham Zoo devotes an entire subpage of their website to the topic of conservation. There is no mention of polarizing terms like “climate change” on the Birmingham Zoo’s website. Rather, the website educates visitors on more specific environmental concepts, including how ivory consumption is linked to the elephant poaching crisis (“Conservation”). This redirection of environmental education makes conservative visitors less fearful of being criticized for their economic and political interests.

In understanding that patrons respond with less hostility when southern zoos discuss conservation rather than climate change, southern zoos have implemented a variety of conservation initiatives into their education programming.

Describing climate change education as an “uphill fight,” Cumpton explains that it is difficult to get Hattiesburg Zoo visitors to understand that the only way global warming can be solved is if social change is made sooner rather than later. Since the term “climate change” has been politicized in the state of Mississippi, Hattiesburg Zoo educators have shifted their environmental efforts toward the topic of conservation. Along with the typical plaques explaining an animal’s habitat and lifespan, the Hattiesburg Zoo has strategically placed information regarding conservation issues within certain animal exhibits (Cumpton). Some of the issues that are brought to visitors’ attention are the palm oil crisis and deforestation—both of which directly result in the release of greenhouse gases (Kodas). Through these education initiatives, the Hattiesburg Zoo has been able to teach patrons how conservation threats contribute to climate change (Cumpton). Zoogoers who are able to draw the connection between conservation threats and climate change by using the information presented to them via zoo education are more likely to believe in their own environmental knowledge rather than rely upon the preconceptions engrained in them by society.

In addition to the conservation plaques, Cumpton educates patrons on climate change through formal and informal presentations. In the formal setting, such as summer camps and home school programs, the zoo has an audience “for a long period of time [which they] can focus more on [specific conservation] issues” (Cumpton). This type of long-term education allows for zoo educators to develop a sense of trust with their intended audience. Fostering a sense of trust is vital to the education process because patrons who believe in the validity of zoo educators are more willing to listen and respond to environmental discussions.

During informal presentations, such as Keeper Chats and Public Times, zookeepers will “take out a biofact, [such as] a skull, a pelt, or they might even take out an actual animal [to] talk about some of the hazards” of global warming (Cumpton). This method of communicating conservation information is intimate because only a handful of zoogoers at a time will be listening to the zoo educator’s presentation. Additionally, this form of communication allows for more audience participation because zoo educators allow visitors to ask questions and have a sensory experience touching or holding the biofacts.

Another zoo that has developed a unique conservation education tool is Zoo Atlanta. This zoo has recently created “Coffee and Conservation,” a weekly Facebook video series, during which Rachel McRobb, CEO of Conservation South Luangwa, discusses the conservation efforts taking place in Zambia (“Coffee and Conservation”). In one of the episodes, McRobb explains that, while working on a safari, she witnessed ten different animals die from snares, or wired nooses meant to trap animals (“Coffee and Conservation with Rachel McRobb”). Viewers are drawn into the video by McRobb’s vivid imagery and they begin to develop an emotional connection to the animals suffering from the poaching taking place in Africa. While “climate change” is never explicitly stated throughout the video series, Zoo Atlanta is making headway in educating their visitors, both physical and digital, on an environmental threat that is not as politicized as global warming. Zoos across the South have found that focusing on a less polarizing environmental concern, such as conservation, makes patrons more inclined to listen and respond to environmental topics in a positive manner (Cumpton). Redirecting the audience’s focus on conservation allows for southern zoos to talk around words that implicate economic and political debate while still educating patrons on the importance of living green lives.

When beginning this research paper, I realized that my high level of literacy on the topic of climate change can be attributed to the forward approach that the Cincinnati Zoo took to educate me and my third-grade classmates during a school field trip. My initial search attempt found that southern zoogoers were being shielded from the inevitable truth that mankind is to blame for global warming. However, after conducting interviews and doing more intensive research, I learned that zoos across the South must develop unique strategies to teach visitors about climate change while being sensitive to the economic and political beliefs of their patrons.

In understanding this, I learned that the most effective way southern zoos can communicate environmental concerns to the general public is by censoring the information being conveyed to their zoogoers. As a result, many zoos in the South have learned that they can invite close-minded visitors into the environmental discussion by focusing on “conservation” rather than “climate change.”

While southern zoogoers may not be afforded the same explicit “climate change” language I was exposed to as a child, zoos across the South have developed their own climate change discourse to reflect the economic and political atmospheres of their region. Although there is still resistance to the pro-environmental movement, southern zoos are able to use their unique discourse to change minds and invite more people into the climate change conversation who would not have otherwise participated.

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