

Let's Bring Out the "Spring Outs" at the San Antonio Zoo

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As winter gives way to refreshing spring days, the San Antonio Zoo is inundated with energetic and enthusiastic school children, parents, and teachers from the local community. As the zoo and our docents strive to meet the educational and recreational needs of these sprightly visitors, we have tried to balance 1) the high quality standards of our traditional educational presentations with 2) the desire to interact with as many of our customers – both young and old – as possible.

In 2004, our docents broke away from the tried-and-true classroom presentations (K-1) and hour-long tours (2nd grade - high school) we typically utilize weekdays, August through May. Although effective, we were only interacting with a very small percentage of the visitors, especially during our busiest months – March through May. Instead, we've opted for customized outdoor presentations – **Spring Outs**, following the thematic communication and environmental interpretation philosophy espoused by Dr. Sam Ham, Professor of Resource Recreation and Tourism at the University of Idaho. Nine different Spring Outs are presented every Tuesday-Friday, March-May, following the general topics of "Adaptations", "Interactions", and "Diversity". Our docents have researched and customized their own 15-20 minute thematic presentations, using our presentation animals and biofacts while gathering and creating new interactive props/ materials. The benefits are numerous:

- Higher quality presentations focusing on discrete themes instead of random facts and trivia
- Multi-modal delivery methods which engage the auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning styles
- More flexibility for the schools visiting the zoo. They now have a menu of nine different themed presentations – each one meeting the required Texas educational standards for science – to pick and choose from during their visit
- Clearer environmental messages disseminated to a larger number of visitors, not just scheduled school groups
- Happier docents who have moved outside their comfort zones and are fully focused on researching new information and trying new presentation methods.

The Topics

In Texas, public schools use state-wide standards and yearly tests to measure student academic success. As such, field trips are largely determined based on standards-friendliness. A committee of docents researched these standards (www.tea.state.tx.us/teks/) to find topics common to multiple grade levels. Since our outdoor presentations – Spring Outs – would have unpredictable grade levels, we determined that general topics which met several grade level standards would be optimum. The three topics selected were

- Adaptations
- Diversity
- Interactions

We further stratified these topics into three classes – mammals, reptiles, and birds. This would make it easier for formal educators to pick and choose their presentations and it allowed equitable usage of our presentation animals.

The Structure

Using Sam Ham's book, *Environmental Interpretation*, individual docents were challenged to create their own theme-based presentation for each of the three topics – adaptations, diversity, and interactions. Previously, many of our formal and informal presentations had been based on general topics – mammals, coverings, predators, adaptations, etc.—and sprinkled with enough facts and trivia to make Alex Trebec proud. Although the information was good, we often noticed the presentations were 1) overwhelming to the audience, 2)

presenter-focused as the docent racked his or her brain to pull forth new information to titillate the audience, or 3) too long.

A **theme**, we learned, is a **central or key idea which satisfies the question, “So what?”**, to the audience. It is very specific and is the foundation for all relevant information brought forth in the presentation. The table below shows a sample of some of the themes our docents have used for each of the nine presentations

	Adaptations	Diversity	Interactions
Mammals	An animal’s teeth help it get lunch	Mammals have coats and they tell quite a story	Not all mammals want a lot of friends
Reptiles	Reptiles have different ways of acquiring food	Lizards come in all shapes and sizes	Reptile parental care varies
Birds	Birds’ beaks and feet are like a tool box	All birds have feathers, but they’re not all alike	Birds’ courtship varies, just like humans

Once our docents selected a theme, they outlined their presentations with 2-4 key points to expand and elucidate the theme. Again, having the theme as the compass has kept us from straying “off-task” and using 2-4 main points has kept the presentations from rambling. Below is a table of some sample themes with main points.

Theme	Point 1	Point 2	Point 3
All birds have feathers, but they’re not all alike	The structure of a feather varies	The function of a feather varies	
Reptile parental care varies	Little to no care (e.g., turtles)	Limited care (e.g., pythons, Komodo dragon)	Strong reptile care (e.g., crocodilians)
An animal’s teeth help it get lunch	Grinding teeth	Piercing, ripping teeth	Combination of both

Logistics

Currently, we do not have an amphitheatre or small stage at the San Antonio Zoo, so we have selected specific spots within the zoo which meet our criteria for a good presentation location:

- Shady
- High traffic
- Electrical outlet
- Complementary exhibits, wildlife, surrounding for the presentation themes.

Docents are assigned to “class” teams of 2-3 and are rotated monthly. For example, one team may be assigned to present “mammals” for the month of March, and will conduct three different themed presentations daily for each of the three topics – adaptations, diversity, and interactions. By rotating monthly, docents alleviate boredom, build camaraderie with different members, and are exposed to varied styles, themes, and teaching techniques. Here is a typical schedule:

	Mammals (Near the hippos exhibit)	Reptiles (In front of Komodo dragon exhibit)	Birds (In front of Big Lake)
	9:45 – Adaptations 10:15 – Diversity 10:45 - Interactions	9:45 – Adaptations 10:15 – Diversity 10:45 - Interactions	9:45 – Adaptations 10:15 – Diversity 10:45 - Interactions
March	Tom, Sue, Marcia	Pat, Jerry, Diana	Karol, Genny, Paul
April	Jerry, Karol, Paul	Tom, Genny, Marcia	Sue, Pat, Diana
May	Genny, Marcia, Pat	Karol, Sue, Diana	Tom, Marcia, Jerry

Presentation Techniques

To formalize the presentations, we use microphones, carpet squares for “seats”, pylons to cordon off specific areas, and white boards to advertise the presentation times, topics, and themes. Although each docent team is empowered to create their own learning environment, we have stressed using multi-modal methods for three learning styles: 1) Auditory, 2) Visual, 3) Kinesthetic.

Auditory Learning Style –According to Jeffrey Barsch, EdD, author of the Barsch Learning Style Inventory, approximately 20-30% of the population’s dominant learning style is auditory. We have been using these ideas to solidify information for auditory learners:

- Repeating information. Continually restating the theme and key points of the presentation in the beginning, middle, and conclusion of the talk
- Reviewing by having the audience restating the key points or naming the animals/biofacts (e.g., “Let’s review. This is a... It lives in... It belongs to this group...” or “What is this again?”)
- Talking about the presentation animal or biofact while it is being touched.

Visual Learning Style – 30-40% of the population’s dominant learning style is visual (visual-pictures or visual-text). These techniques help us capitalize on visual learners’ strengths:

- Using a white board to jot down the key points as we progress through the presentation
- Using different colored markers to color code if using a white board (e.g., list information about point one in blue, point two in black, and point three in red)
- Employing visual aids – biofacts, maps, props, posters, presentation animals – throughout the talk
- Sprinkling our discussion with visual descriptions (e.g., “Imagine yourself soaring high above the earth□” or “Visualize yourself deep in the middle of a rainforest□”)
- Attaching text labels to any posters or photographs we use.

Kinesthetic Learning Style – Anywhere from 30-50% of the population learns best via hands-on learning. We have tried these strategies.

- Keeping the audience moving. Have them touch their spines when contrasting invertebrates and vertebrates. Ask them to touch their hair or show their fingernails when discussing keratin. Let them feel their jaw when explaining how snakes swallow their prey
- Encourage them to role play an animal’s behavior. Have them imitate peafowl’s mating rituals by pecking the ground in “symbolic feeding”. Let them whoop like a gibbon. Show them how to roll up into a tight ball like a three-banded armadillo or hedgehog.
- Touch! Touch! Touch! Give them a piece of sandpaper to feel – just like a lion’s tongue. Encourage responsible touching of presentation animals when appropriate. Let them feel bubble wrap to demonstrate a screamer’s skin. Allow gentle touching of biofacts.

Advertising

Pre-advertising: The following are some methods we have used to market our Spring Outs:

- San Antonio Zoo web site
- Flyers sent to teachers on our mailing list
- Flyers distributed to educators attending any on-site programs

Same-day Advertising:

- Inserts in the San Antonio Zoo maps given to all visitors
- White boards at all three locations – mammals, reptiles, and birds
- Feeders: Each day, there are additional docents not presenting a Spring Out. These docents take out biofacts, puppets, or other “hooks” to strategic locations near the three Spring Out sites. We have had strong success in filtering visitors to our Spring Out sites by having our extra docents placed throughout the zoo.

Lessons Learned

We have completed two school terms of Spring Outs and have surveyed both our docents and the educational community. Here is what we have learned:

1. Educators like the Spring Outs as well as a formally scheduled tour or indoor presentation. More importantly, they just want age-appropriate information that is exciting for the children.
2. Presentation skills become more important. Unlike a formally scheduled indoor presentation or tour, our new audience is not a captive audience. They can choose to leave early or to not stop and sit down. The only way to retain a non-captive audience is to ENGAGE them so they become a captive audience, energized by the information and the presenter.
3. Flexibility is key. What do you do when the presentation doesn't begin for 10 more minutes and you have 75 five-year olds scampering about? What if it's time to start and there are only two people? These are common problems we've had to resolve. There is not one “right” answer; the answer lies with the presenting docents. For the 75 preschoolers, we have started early and finished by the next start time. We have also played a quick game of “I Spy” for 10 minutes using the many nesting birds in the zoo's trees in the spring. Both strategies have worked.
4. Let docents select their roles. Some docents love to use a microphone and take the stage in front of 200 people. Others cringe at that very thought. Since we are using teams of 2-3 docents, the teams can define roles. Some alternate speaking roles during the same presentation. Others alternate for each of the three daily presentations. Still others have one speaker, one animal handler, and one crowd control/contingency person.
5. Our docents love being out in the zoo in the spring, not locked in the education building. What a fantastic classroom!!!!

Spring Out Quick Summary

Why Spring-Outs?	To educate more visitors during our busiest months
What are Spring Outs?	15-20 minute outdoor thematic presentations located throughout the zoo, utilizing presentation animals, biofacts, and props, and following three topics – adaptations, diversity, and interactions
Who presents Spring Outs?	Teams of 2-3 docents who rotate periodically between the three locations – mammals, birds, and reptiles
When are Spring Outs?	March through May, Tuesday through Friday. 9:45, 10:15, 10:45
Where are the Spring Outs located?	Throughout the zoo in regular spots in front of exhibits, not a formal stage or amphitheatre
How are Spring Outs presented?	Using a theme-based approach, as prescribed by author Sam Hamm in <i>Environmental Interpretation</i>