

Beguiling or Boring

(Touring Techniques)

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Have you ever followed a docent giving a tour that was exciting, entertaining and informative as well? Have you ever followed a docent giving a boring tour? Let's explore the difference between a "beguiling and a boring" tour.

As docents, most of us go through extensive training, learning about convergent evolution, adaptive radiation, and sexual dichromatism. We study the fossorial, saltatorial, and scansorial creatures. And, not to be overlooked, methods of reproduction: viviparous, oviparous, and ovoviparous are also discussed in depth.

Most often, docent training sessions are presented in a lecture type format with very little attention devoted to teaching techniques. Many have not had experience in teaching prior to becoming a docent. It can be difficult to choose what is important to tell their groups and translate this information into language the students will readily understand. Most tours only last an hour, making it impossible to relate everything you know about each animal . . .thank goodness! If you attempt to do this, you will lose the attention of your group no matter what the age.

I have found in my twenty-three years of touring at the Los Angeles Zoo that all the talk about bones, teeth and taxonomy simply does not interest any group. It turns out to be just that-all talk. However, it is when we discuss the behavior of an animal that we immediately capture their attention. After all, where does it say that ethology is not as important as animal classification?

I overheard a docent (not from the Los Angeles Zoo, of course) with a third grade class while standing in front of some siamangs. These magnificent primates were racing, arm over arm, around their exhibit. Their loud hooting could be heard over a mile away and the throat pouch was inflated to almost the size of their head. The docent's comment was, look at their gular pouch and watch them brachiate." These third graders did not have the slightest idea what a gular pouch was and had never heard the word "brachiate". She could have called attention to the powerfully long arms as compared to the smaller weak legs and ask the students if they could guess why their bodies developed this way. She might have asked if they knew the reason for the loud calling and talked about the importance of establishing territory of some animals. This could be followed with questions such as why do dogs bark, birds sing, cats spray, and bears claw trees. Involving them by relating the siamang's behavior to something they already were familiar with would have increased understanding and provided a more lasting impression.

First impressions are lasting impressions. Timing is very important. As a matter of fact, the first five minutes usually determines just how successful your tour will be. Please remember that teaching in the zoo is quite different than in the school. In a classroom situation, all are facing the same direction. They know they are there to learn in spite of a few distractions. When in the zoo, however, the children are there for fun, so how do we compete with chimpanzees that are fighting? If you have done your homework, you will know that this is the time to talk about social behavior, dominance and why it is important to have a leader.

About thirty years ago I attended a workshop on leadership. I recall little of the three-hour session with the exception of a clothesline where a hammer and group of spoons were hanging. These visuals represented how children learn. It graphically asked the question: is it better to hammer them over the head with cold facts or spoon-feed them with bite-sized bits of information? Obviously, too much information will overwhelm and be easily forgotten while giving small morsels to be taken home and shared with family and friends will not only be memorable, but will very possibly stimulate further reading on the subject. Making the learning experience fun can increase the probability of retaining information throughout a lifetime.

What makes a successful tour? I have found four necessary ingredients: ask questions, include humor, use examples, and be enthusiastic. Now, let's examine these points more closely.

1. Ask Questions

This is a method to keep the students involved and also discover how much preparation they had prior to their visit. I once toured a very polite and attentive fourth grade class. However, I forgot to ask questions until we had reached the third animal on our tour. It was then that I found that none of these children spoke English. You can see that asking questions about background and experience can provide significant clues as to how to proceed.

2. Include Humor

It has been proven that learning is far easier when in a relaxed state of mind and having a good time. This does not necessarily mean you must be a first-rate storyteller. A play on words or simple colorful descriptions can accomplish this for you. It doesn't hurt to have a few (tasteful) animal jokes up your sleeve to toss out while you are waiting for the "slow walkers" to catch up. Example: What happens when you cross an elephant and an alligator? You get a purse that remembers where you put it! Or how about this one: Why does the jackel hunt at night? So he can use his jack-o-lantern! You may get a few groans, but you will have your group responding. With humor, you have everyone's attention and that is the time to give your most important message. Remember, if you want your group to listen, you must give them what they want to hear in order for them to listen to what they need to hear.

3. Use Examples

When you talk about the alligator and tell how his metabolism slows down during the cold weather, you are not making any particular impression on a fourth grader. I tell about the two-year old who fell in our alligator pool (due to a parent's carelessness) and how the old male swam very slowly toward this child. I explain why it was lucky that it was such a cold day. If the weather had been hot, he would have rushed to this screaming, thrashing "thing" in the water and we would have had a tragedy. Having created some degree of suspense, I found my group listening intently as I went on to talk about reptile behavior in the winter. Yes, the child's father pulled him out just in time!

4. Be Enthusiastic

Enthusiasm is essential. How often have you heard a guide using a monotone or singsong voice? Granted, we must repeat the same facts and stories we have used before, but we do have an advantage over actors in a play who must say the exact lines night after night. We have the freedom to add new information, change our delivery, and try new ideas. Although some of these may "bomb", so to speak, simply repeat the ones that succeed. Take a risk-vary your tour. I will guarantee you will not become bored nor will your group.

I have a shoebox filled with index cards containing valuable information I have collected over the years. When I hear or read an interesting item, I scribble it down. When I have a few minutes, I type this on a file card and store for future reference. Many of my docent friends comment on my great memory, but it is really my shoebox that produces those long forgotten "pearls". If you decide to adopt this method, be sure to include the source and date of your information on each card; this will lend credibility to the content.

I realize I am giving far more ideas than you will ever use. Some of these will not be new to you, but I trust you will find some useful and perhaps, just what you have been looking for. My objective here is to stimulate your thinking so you will create some of your own touring techniques that will make your tours more fun and thus more informative. Possibly the following, together with some additional touring suggestions will do just that.

Rhino...has very poor eyesight. While standing in front of him, have everyone squint their eyes until almost closed. This is the way a rhino sees-poorly.

Giraffe...has an 18" long purple tongue. You can use a long narrow 18" piece of cloth to demonstrate this. I have four popsicle sticks fastened together and this makes a definite impression rather than just quoting 18 inches.

Sandpaper...sample from your pocket aids in explaining how rough the surface of the tongue of a lion is which enables him to lick the flesh from bones of prey.

Gorillas...walk on their knuckles and can't walk very far standing in an upright position. Explain that they can't lock their knees. Have the whole group bend their knees slightly while walking to the gorilla exhibit.

Kestrel (or Sparrow Hawk)...has eyes so sharp he can spot a moving mouse at 120 feet away. But, do you know how far 120 feet is? I pace off this distance ahead of time and when the group is assembled, I point to the selected object 120 feet away.

Bear often stands upright to look around. Have group stand on toes and see how long they can keep their balance. Telling them that bears are plantigrade is going to "go over their heads", but demonstrating how the flat foot gives better balance will be an example to be remembered.

Primate Hand...exhibits precision grip. Have them tuck their thumbs into the palms of their hands. Ask them to try to unbutton a shirt or tie a shoelace using their fingers only.

Tiger Whiskers...enable this predator to sneak up on prey. Ask the class if they have ever tried to sneak into the house in the dark without making any noise...putting their arms out in front of them to keep from bumping into furniture. Whiskers afford cats the ability to judge distance so they can creep up on their prey quietly.

Feather...is a clue to the bird who left it behind. Show one to the group at the beginning of the tour and ask them to identify the bird it came from somewhere along the tour.

Marsupial Embryo...size is explained visually by the embryos I made out of clay. I also carry this ceramic embryo which has proven to be an impressive visual aid. Ask the group to look at their thumbnail -that is about the size of a kangaroo when he is born after only a thirty-four day gestation (if you don't feel like working in clay).

Baby Bear...only weighs as much as a pound of butter when he is born.

Uakari...the red-faced monkey from South America cracks the shell of the Brazil nut with his front teeth. This nut is easy to carry along in your pocket too.

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