

## Tedious Teacher...Who Me?

(Touring Techniques)

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Somewhere between the routine of homemaking and the dignity of the executive world, we find a very exciting creature called a Docent. Docents come in assorted sizes and shapes, from different social and economic backgrounds, and they all have the same goals: to share their love of animals and the opportunity to share their knowledge with others. There is no doubt that our education is superior. But, as teachers there is usually some room for improvement as few of us have had little experience in presenting information in a manner which stimulates and retains the interest of our audience.

The majority of our zoo tours are elementary school children and in this day and age many lead unstructured lives. Records show that for every 13,000 hours spent in the classroom, the average child spends 15,000 hours in front of the television. Living with a single parent, or both parents rushing off to work, crowded classrooms, English as a second language, all serve to make teaching more challenging than ever. With more visuals, encouraging student participation, using show business techniques, and asking questions...we can make a difference. Let us resist the old temptation to overwhelm and overload. It is our privilege to develop a thirst for knowledge, an enthusiasm for learning about wildlife and the world around us. Several years ago, I had an eight-year old tug at my jacket and say: "Lady you talk too much". A not-so-gentle reminder to

us all to give and take experiences that are fun for everyone. How we begin our tours can make a big difference! First impressions are lasting impressions! The first four minutes can determine how the audience will receive you. In these four minutes they decide if they like you and whether or not you or your message will be interesting. Sixty-five percent of that first impression is non-verbal. Ask yourself if your body language has an air of cheerfulness or does it say: "I don't want to be here"? Do you remember to smile?

Your first comments are also very important. If you have third graders you might start off with humor. Ask them if they know why ducks don't like to fly upside down? "Because they don't want to quack up," or "Why does the duck cross the road?" "Because it is the chicken's day off." Sure these can be corny, but even if you get a groan you will have their attention. A few months ago, I walked up to some very negative junior high school boys. They greeted me with: "I suppose you are going to lecture us." I assured them that I would merely walk along with them and answer any questions they might have. These kids opened up and asked more questions than I had answers for. It was one of the best tours ever! I have also found with this age group that boys like "gory" details. Sometimes I begin by telling them how some of the California Condors were captured: "A huge pit is dug and covered over with branches and brush. Then a dead cow or goat is placed on top. Now the difficult part . . . a volunteer climbs into this hot, smelly pit with millions of flies and just waits patiently. When the condor flies down and starts to feed, he grabs it by the legs. His partner, who has been waiting under the shade of a near-by tree, comes in to finish the capture. After this tale, the boys hang on almost every word I have to say and I seize that opportunity to give them the really important information they need to know.

I have witnessed docents pick up a group that has just gotten off a bus after a long, hot ride and having them stand in front of a blank wall, go on and on about the difference between mammals, birds, and reptiles...a good way to draw blank expressions. Of course it is important, but why not wait until in front of the alligator before talking about reptiles? We learn ten times more by what we see than by what we hear, students of sight and sound tell us. If your favorite animal is not on display, move on to the next exhibit. No matter how many interesting the "pearls" you are ready to cast, they will not have the impact if the group can't see what you are talking about.

Questions...are one of the best methods of "feeling out" a crowd, and learning how much preparation they have had prior to their visit. This is also a great method to involve the group, but remember to include everyone, not letting one or two be the "know-it-all". Ask "open ended" questions. Begin with why, how, what or tell me. It is very important not to have a child feel embarrassed by giving the wrong answer. Each one in your group should leave the zoo feeling better about themselves than when he/she came. Don't hesitate to let the students feel important... then tell them so.

Humor...is such an important part of any presentation. Laughter is contagious and records show we learn and retain more easily when we are in a relaxed mood and having a good time. Remember, the humor

does not have to elicit a belly laugh; a smile or slight snicker is sufficient. Have at least some form of comedy relief every ten to fifteen minutes to keep audience refreshed and relaxed. Humor can be a play on words, simply colorful descriptions or comparisons such as: camel...a worn out sofa; alpaca...a jeep of the Andes; scavenger...a garbage disposal; omnivores...junk eaters; cheek pouches...doggie bags; strong gorilla...halitosis; ischial callosities...rump bumpers. Everyone wants to be entertained and this is a terrific way to capture the attention of a group. It allows them to hear the important points you are trying to get across.

You might consider keeping a list of clean animal jokes to use when interest lags. What do you call a line of rabbits walking backwards? A receding hairline. Or, what happens when you pour boiling water down a rabbit hole? You get a hot-cross bunny. And lastly, why does an elephant wear red "tennies"? Because the "nine-ees" are too small and the "eleven-ees" are too large. I didn't say you had to have 'em roll in the aisle!

A Quotable Quote: "It is important to tell your group some of what they want to hear, to earn the right to tell them what they need to hear."

Repeat your important points. You can give the same information many different ways, using different examples, wording, etc. As a matter of fact, I am repeating some of the important points I have given last year and the year before that. Try it... it works.

Be enthusiastic...Enthusiasm is essential. How often have you heard a guide using a monotone or singsong voice! Granted, we sometimes repeat the same facts and stories we have used before but, we do have the advantage over actors in a play who must say the exact same lines night after night. We have the freedom to add new information and doing so is my best advice to you. Also, learn something new about an animal on your tour each week. Try new ideas; they will make you a better docent. Although some of these new ideas 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.

Use examples...these are not just "cute little stories", but a lasting way of making your point. Several years ago we had six deer on exhibit. When the keepers arrived in the morning, they would find eight to ten animals in the enclosure. The wild deer came down from the hills to socialize and then eat food from our bins before they left. While talking about zoo animals being well cared for and often living longer in captivity, I tell this story: Sure our deer could escape if they wanted to but, why should they when they have everything they need to be content, right here in the zoo.

Statistics...can be employed when pertinent but, can be a real "turn-off". It is far better to make comparisons to something the group is already familiar with. When discussing our loss of rain forests you'll find students will relate to: "Every minute we lose an area the size of 50 football fields".

Theme Tours...are often best for younger children.

1. Look mainly at feet and legs. Ask group where and how they live in order to survive with legs a particular length and shape. The camel has 3" pads on his feet as protection from heat. The long legs allow for air circulation. Also, he spreads his toes so he won't sink in the sand.
2. Predators (big cats)...Why does the tiger have a rough tongue, and how do his canines help him capture his dinner? Why are his whiskers important, and what about the color of his fur?
3. Look at "heads" and the "mouths". How does the elephant use his trunk, his tusks? Why are the eyes on top of hippo's head? Of course these are easy questions... but how much better the kids telling you...than you lecturing.

If group is losing interest, try:

1. Something funny...Jane asked Tarzan to get something for dinner. After a couple of hours, Tarzan came back with a bird and two chimpanzees. Jane said: "Oh no, not finch and chimps again" Well?
2. Something sexy...tigers will mate 30-40 times a day for three to four days. (Only used in special groups but fourteen year-old boys love this.)
3. Something gory...Africans boil the legs of chimps and give the broth to children. They believe this will make them have strong legs. This is pretty sad too.

For the docent who has been around for a long time...you know it all...you remember your training classes and read continually about our wildlife and the problems we are having with our environment. You do not need to refresh. WRONG. You need, more than ever before to review your early notes. All the fascinating tidbits you scribbled, all the unbelievable "goodies" you learn- ed. Re-read that material. It may be "old stuff" to you, but I'll bet it is still new and interesting to your young audiences. Some of our very best information is hiding out in the back of our brains.

Refresh...Refresh...Refresh...I often spend 5-10 minutes the night before a tour and find it can make the difference between a 50-50 experience and a great day. After 25 years of touring, I still get out my old notes.

Records indicate that most students will remember the beginning and ending of a tour the longest. Last week I had 4th grade inner-city boys in my group and as I was concluding, I pulled my "lucky rock" from my bag. I gave them all a chance to rub it and make a wish. After I put it away, one little boy ran back and asked me to please let him rub the rock again. He wanted to change his wish. Leave your group on a big note.

Please don't misunderstand...I'm not saying...Don't give out in- formation. I'm saying: "Don't try to shove too much too fast" and overwhelm with facts. Intersperse your talk with humor, examples, questions, and remember to be enthusiastic.

Such an old saying, but so very important . . . K I S M I F

Keep it simple and make it fun!

*Date presented not known.*