

by: Jenny Reineck, Zoo Atlanta

This paper isn't entirely about palm oil. While palm oil is the example I plan to use, I don't want to write about things that you can learn on your own, through your own research. I want to explain the method I use for simplifying such a complex conservation message, and my hope is that you can use this method in conjunction with a number of different conservation messages throughout your home zoo. I am going to take you on my journey that led me from my research about palm oil, to the method that I use to explain it to zoo guests, and I'm going to show you my method in such a way that you can apply it to any conservation message you want.

The fact is, people don't want to come to the zoo and listen to a 30-minute soapbox about conservation. Zoocheck Canada conducted a study at the Toronto Zoo, watched visitors at seven different exhibits, including the elephants, and determined that people spend 117 seconds on average at each exhibit. Now, we all know that this isn't always the case. I've seen people visit an exhibit for less than 117 seconds and I've seen people stay with me for up to an hour. But I think we can all agree we have a very limited amount of time and we need to use this time wisely.

A smarty-pants physicist by the name of Albert Einstein once said that "if you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." Sometimes we, as zoo docents, get so excited about all of the information we know, that we just start spouting off different facts without really organizing the information first in our heads. This means we can end up giving our zoo guests more confusion than overall knowledge. You can't expect to explain the intricacies of the palm oil crisis to an everyday zoo guest over the course of those 117 seconds unless you deeply understand the issue. If you think about it, it makes sense. We have the most trouble explaining something when we don't fully understand it ourselves. So I want you to think about that Albert Einstein quote as my main theme of this paper. If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.

And the other thing I want you to keep in mind is that, once again, the point of my paper is so that you can apply the method that I use to any conservation message no matter where you interpret in your zoo. Maybe you like talking about the ivory trade at the elephant exhibit. Maybe you volunteer at an aquarium, maybe snakes are your thing, or birds. When I explain my method to you I want you to keep your animal in mind.

So I am going to provide an overview of the palm oil crisis. A very different overview than what I say to my zoo guests. It's very brief, just so you can have a bit of background knowledge, but most importantly so you can understand how I got from my research to my method. First and foremost, I am not a palm oil expert. But I've done a lot of reading and a lot of research about palm oil, and I'm going to give you an overview. Then, I'm going to show you my method for simplifying such a complex issue, and you'll be able to see the difference. The difference in the amount of information I give you right now, versus how much information I give zoo guests every time I volunteer.

The Overall Theme/Concept of the palm oil crisis is that : (Palm Oil is Good, Deforestation is

Bad). It's an insanely complex issue without an easy resolution, but the main goal will be to make sure docents (and zoo guests) don't misunderstand the issue, or misunderstand their call to action. Sometimes when people misunderstand this issue they think of palm oil as a dirty word. It's not! Palm oil is an extremely efficient crop, can absolutely be produced sustainably, and quite frankly is the key to conservation. Thinking back, how did the palm oil crisis even begin?

Back in 2006, the FDA started requiring companies to list the amount of trans fat in their products on the labeling of consumer packaged goods--and as a result, everyone started freaking out about trans-fat, so companies that make snack foods started looking for alternative ingredients to put in their products so that they could boast "0 grams of trans-fat" on their packaging.

Vegetable oils have to be solidified in order to be used in consumer packaged goods, and in order to be solidified they have to go through something called a hydrogenation process. So on products that contain trans fat, you'll notice something in the ingredient list called partially hydrogenated vegetable oil. The partial hydrogenation process is what causes the trans fat to appear. So when brands started looking for alternatives to rid their products of trans fat, they found palm oil. Palm oil is usually fully hydrogenated, rather than partially hydrogenated, which makes the product trans fat free. So companies were like "cool, let's use palm oil." So suddenly, there was this huge demand for palm oil by some of the biggest brands in the world, and farmers in 3rd world Indonesia thought "hey! we can grow that!"

And grow they did. Their supply met the increasing demand from overseas brands. Something to note. Oil palm trees are not native to Indonesia. Even though they thrive in warm, humid environments, oil palm is a crop that was introduced to Indonesia by poor farmers hoping to make money off of it. Problem is, islands are only so big, with only so much land. And as the demand for palm oil has grown, the need for more land has grown. And the quickest way to get some land, plant some palm oil trees, harvest them, and make a quick buck? Burn down a huge section of pre-existing rainforest and start a palm oil plantation. Problem with this plan? That huge section of the rainforest has--had--dozens of critically endangered species using it as their, well, home. 1 acre per second. That's the current rate of destruction.

The Most Common Misconception: "How terrible! I am going to boycott all products with palm oil and tell all of my friends to do the same!" Well, here's what would happen if you successfully did that. Companies would get wind of this change in consumer tastes (just as they did with trans fat), and hear the message from the consumer as "Palm oil is bad! No more palm oil!" So the companies would then seek genetically similar oils to replace palm oil. Problem? These 'similar' oils come from plants that are incredibly less efficient to harvest than palm oil, resulting in even more burned down rainforest than before. Conclusion? Palm oil is not bad. In fact, as long as consumers have a need for pre-packaged and preserved foods, palm oil is great--because it absolutely can be produced sustainably, but farmers don't have an incentive to produce it sustainably. It's easier and faster to just do it their way. So how do we (we as in you, me and our zoo guests) incentivize farmers hundreds of thousands of miles away?

Do it through the brands. Brands need to tell the farmers “We don’t buy palm oil that isn’t sustainably produced.” How do we get the brands to say this to the farmers? We, as consumers, tell the brands “We love your product! But we don’t buy products that have palm oil that’s not sustainably produced. Mind switching?” Sounds simpler than it really is, but the key ingredient is that last sentence. How do we get more consumers--all consumers--to say that phrase to all of the world’s brands?

The good news is, we live in a time where people are caring more and more about what is in their food, where the ingredients came from, and how the ingredients were harvested. Chipotle is a great example. It’s becoming trendy to eat ethically. We can capitalize on that. Most people have never heard of palm oil. So when you have that initial conversation, where you say “Heard of palm oil?” and they say “No.” and you say “Well you’ve eaten it or rubbed it on yourself this week, I guarantee you,” that makes them feel uncomfortable.

So in summary, rainforests get saved by farmers who harvest sustainably, who will do so when brands ask the farmers to do so, who will do so when consumers ask the brands to do so, and the consumers will ask the brands to do so when they become aware of the unethical ingredients in the products in their home.

But that’s too complicated! How do I explain that to a zoo guest? More importantly everything that I just explained to you about palm oil took a few minutes, a few paragraphs, and, most importantly, your undivided attention. Three ingredients you have none of with your zoo guests. So how can you expect to explain this crisis (or any other complicated conservation message for that matter!) to them in such a short amount of time? Well, let’s think back to what I said at the beginning of this paper.

Once again, the purpose of my paper is not to teach you all about the palm oil crisis. Why? Because guess what--you can do that on your own! You don’t need me! There is SO much information on the internet, on NPR, on the news, everywhere you can read about and learn about all of the little nuances of this issue. I’m not here to teach you all about the palm oil crisis because you can go home and do that learning yourself, so why can’t we expect the same from our zoo guests?

Newsflash: We can. We can absolutely expect the same from our zoo guests. So what happens is this changes our mission as docents and volunteers. Our mission is not to “Teach zoo guests about the palm oil crisis.” Our mission is to “Get zoo guests to CARE about the palm oil crisis, even though they don’t fully understand it.” We only have 117 seconds. Our job is to send zoo guests home with a simple, easy to understand, consistent call-to-action. How do you do that? How do you make someone care about something they’ve never heard of? Well, it’s my personal belief that there’s a secret ingredient. The secret ingredient to making people care, melting their hearts, striking their emotions, and empowering them to enact change is right behind you.

The animal in the zoo. Why? Because it's hard to look at zoo animals with **apathy**. It's hard to see something like it, be given context around it by a docent, and **not care**. So I want you to think about the animal that you like to interpret at your zoo, and ask yourself what makes **you** care?

the key to finding your voice and crafting an effective message is starting with what you already care about. Which animal do you care about at the zoo? How are they affected by the palm oil crisis? Or are they? If not, what threatens them? What is it about the animal that makes you care? Follow these steps: (1) research the conservation message (do it yourself, I can't do it for you) (2) identify the Easy Action item (in this example, buy the right brands) aka the **BOTTOM LINE** for the zoo guest (3) and finally, craft your message.

If I were to just hand you a few sentences to memorize and repeat back to zoo guests, you wouldn't really take an interest in the issue and you wouldn't feel passionate about what you're saying.

This is My Method, and I believe it can be applied to any message that you give to anyone, conservation or otherwise. When you have a limited amount of time to make a **BIG** impact. **(1) Make Them Care (about the animal), (2) Surprise them with the Easy Action Item and (3) Provide a brief explanation.**

My example? For me, it's not about the silly little 'fun facts' about orangutans. It's about **WHO** they are "as people". It sounds silly given that, well, orangutans aren't people, but that's what resonates with me the most. Conveying the fact that Madu the orangutan is a better "person" than many real human people I know. She took it upon herself to raise 3 orangutans that were not her own. She is more selfless and giving than many humans I have met. It's like when you first start watching a TV show. you don't care who gets killed off in the first episode, because you didn't really know them. But by the end of that first season, you're crying buckets when they kill off your favorite character. Why? because they made you care about the character--the fictional character! So I describe who the oranges are "as people" and develop them as characters for the audience.

Surprise Them: (Simplicity here is key.): At this point, they've identified with an orangutan and care about him/her "as a person." I then surprise them with "You can help save orangutans from extinction -- just by buying the right brands at the grocery store." They're expecting the 2nd part of that sentence to be "by logging on to Save Orangutans International . com and signing petition X" or "by writing a check to Zoo Atlanta" or "by quitting your job, buying a Costco 200,000-pack of fire extinguishers, moving to Indonesia and saving the rainforest." Ideally, your easy action sentence should leave them hanging. Their reaction should immediately be "wait what do groceries and orangutans have to do with one another."

Which is why you provide an explanation. Connect the dots for them. "Deforestation for palm oil threatens orangutans. Palm oil is in everything. You've eaten it or rubbed it on yourself in the past week, I guarantee it. Some companies get their palm oil from sustainable suppliers. Others don't. Download a palm oil app for your phone, or go to rspo.org."

So, to summarize, this is what I said, in total to the zoo guest: “That orangutan up there on the tree, that’s Madu. She just turned 32. She is our resident foster mom. She has successfully raised 3 foster orangutan babies here at Zoo Atlanta. Madu is very caring and has been a great mom to Bernas and Dumadi, and now she’s up there with Remy, he’s 4. They were born at other zoos and when their moms died shortly after birth, they were brought here to be raised by Madu. You can help save orangutans from extinction -- just by buying the right brands at the grocery store. Deforestation for palm oil threatens orangutans. Palm oil is in everything. You’ve eaten it or rubbed it on yourself in the past week, I guarantee it. Some companies get their palm oil from sustainable suppliers. Others don’t. Download a palm oil app for your phone, or go to rspo.org.”

But the zoo guests won’t remember all of that. They might go home with a sentence that sounds something like this: “Madu was a cool orangutan I saw at the zoo. I can help save her species by buying the right groceries. I think there’s an app for it. Palm oil or something.” And this is the goal. And you may think, why is the goal for them to leave with such a poorly constructed sentence, especially in comparison to what I gave them? Because nothing about this sentence is incorrect. They have the care, the knowledge, and the action item--that next step.

THINK SMALL: Really though? It’s just about finding the right words for the limited amount of time that you have. Did I say enough? Did I say too much? Doesn’t matter. What you should be asking yourself is did I say the right words? Did the zoo guest walk away intrigued? Caring enough to think about it later on? Remembering ONLY enough to act on it later on? What is the one thing that an average zoo guest is going to take away from an encounter with you at the zoo, and start to have an effect, no matter how small, on their day to day life? Another way to think about it is something I like to call ‘The Google Effect’ “what is that person going to go home and type into Google?” Ask yourself that after a day at the zoo.

THINK BIG: You can go above and beyond. You can do some amazing things to demonstrate the palm oil crisis. You can have tables, and signs, and activities and demonstrations--but what really matters is your easy action item. Whether zoo guests that you send home are adamantly following the palm oil app or just telling their friends that there is some connection between groceries and deforestation--(something they knew on some level but never really thought about before.) No matter what it is that you choose to do or say at the zoo, the key is getting them to take home that easy action item. Take it home with them. Haunt them. Get them thinking about it so that they will feel empowered enough to do something, to do anything about it later on.