

Closing the Loop: Helping Visitors Make the Connection Between Inspiring Animal Exhibits and Conservation Action at Home



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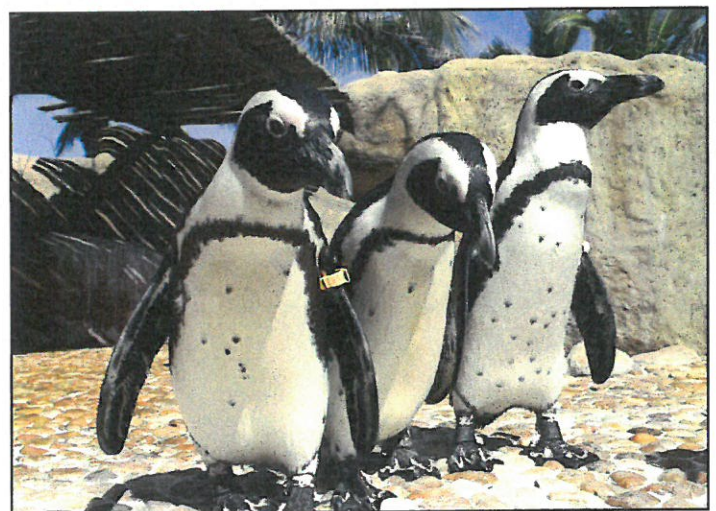
One of the challenges faced by an aquarium or zoological park is how to help visitors to connect the inspiring animal exhibits that they see with conservation messages, especially those about climate change and sustainable living. In order to address this challenge, uShaka Sea World currently has two completely different exhibits designed to inspire behavior change in visitors and have linked these to a national awareness campaign.

uShaka Sea World

uShaka Sea World is situated in Durban on the east coast of South Africa. It consists of a 5.7 million U. S. gallon (22,000 m³) salt water aquarium and dolphinarium. Visitors enter the aquarium through the iconic wrecked ship and after descending a ramp housing a genuine skeleton of a southern right whale, can stroll through five different galleries – themed as the remains of different wrecked vessels, gazing into six large and over 30 smaller exhibits. The Sea World bottlenose dolphins and Cape fur seals are presented to visitors during daily demonstrations, while a specially designed penguin rookery houses African penguins.

African Penguins

According to the 2010 IUCN Red Data List, the African penguin (*Spheniscus demersus*) is heading for extinction. African penguin numbers in the wild have declined by up to 90% over the last 100 years. The latest research indicates that there are less than 25,000 breeding pairs of penguins left in the wild. It is these facts that led to the species being declared as Endangered. Sea World has housed African penguins since 1980, when the first stranded birds were received. Since then the colony has grown and hundreds of penguins have hatched successfully. The program is now so successful that the birds are able to be sent to supplement the gene pools of other ex situ breeding colonies.



Three African penguins in the uShaka Sea World penguin exhibit.

Education through Inspiration

Around the world, aquariums are in a unique position to positively impact the environmental attitudes and behaviors of millions of visitors each year in an entertaining and enjoyable environment. At uShaka Sea World, our approach is to firstly create awareness through realistic live exhibits. We cannot expect visitors to care for animals that they do not know exist or to solve problems that they do not know about. This is a particular challenge in South Africa, where the word "aquarium" does not exist in any of our indigenous languages. Our live animals are ambassadors for the oceans – inspiring visitors to care. Our first step is to reach our visitors' hearts.

Once we have created awareness, we then need to connect visitors to the oceans. We try to help our visitors understand that everything in nature is connected and that we are connected to our environment. Our second step is to reach our visitors' minds.

So often the problem when teaching about aquatic environments is that visitors do not feel that they can make a difference – the ocean is too far removed from their daily lives. This is why it is essential that our interpretation has a call to action. This empowers visitors to take positive action. The third step, hopefully, reaches their hands – through their actions.

The African penguin is just one of the amazing animals at uShaka Sea World which inspire our visitors. uShaka Sea World has recently launched two bold new initiatives, both of which use the penguin as an icon to help our visitors to make the connection between the amazing animals they care for and their lifestyle at home.

Penguin Promises

The "Penguin Promises" campaign was hatched in 2011, in collaboration with the Animal Keepers Association of Africa (AKAA). Unlike many campaigns that ask for money, this collaborative campaign asks people to make a "Promise to the Penguins." With the tag line "We don't want your money honey, we want your love," this campaign encourages people to choose to make one change

in their daily lives to become more environmentally responsible. They are then asked to record their behavior change promise via a website, a postcard or e-mail. Their promise is their commitment to the environment. The campaign is multi-faceted and utilizes social media, with a dedicated website (www.penguinpromises.com) linked to Facebook and Twitter accounts as its primary communication tool. An annual "Penguin Waddle," along the 81 mile (130km) section of the coastline of South Africa which houses the most wild African penguin colonies, generates a great deal of media coverage and participants range from school children to animal keepers and rural community members. Participating organizations also regularly host special events to highlight the campaign.



The Penguin Promises Campaign logo.

uShaka Penguin Exhibit

uShaka Sea World has recently revamped their penguin enclosure and has highlighted the campaign through innovative signage and a well-placed post box with specially designed postcards, which visitors can complete and post. The signage highlights the threats facing the penguins and gives visitors suggestions of promises that they can make. The rest of the exhibit includes a photo opportunity with life sized penguin models, a peak into the nesting area of the birds, as well as view of the working laboratory. The live birds are the highlight of the exhibit and with over 50 African penguins on exhibit there is always plenty of action – especially at feeding time.

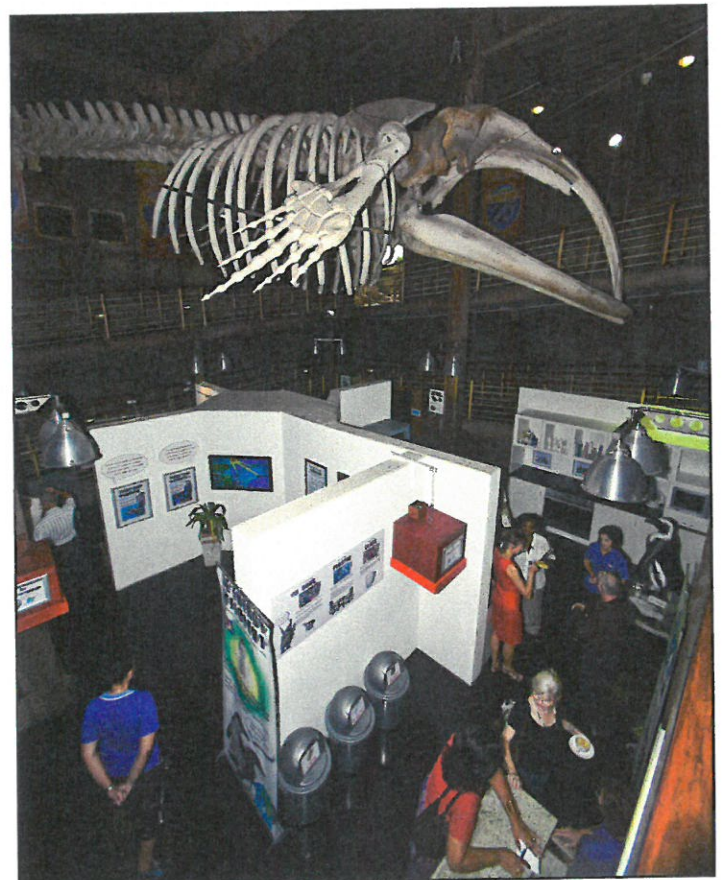


The Penguin Promise post box with ideas of promises.

EcoHouse

In a bold new step uShaka Sea World has ventured beyond animal exhibits into the challenging realm of climate change – more specifically - what visitors can do about climate change. As visitors wander through the interactive “EcoHouse,” an innovative new exhibit situated at the entrance to the aquarium, a friendly penguin invites visitors to explore easy ways to save money by reducing their energy and water use at home. From a full sized geyser and solar panel, to a quirky video of a woman talking from inside the fridge, interactive electricity panels, flushing toilets and flowing showers and much more – the exhibit attracts attention and challenges visitors to action.

Climate change can be a deadly boring topic – ocean acidification, sea level rise, warmer temperatures and food shortages – the topic abounds with doom and gloom. Unfortunately rather than galvanizing action, bad news stories tend to turn visitors off, feeling that the problem is so big that none of us can really make a difference. The EcoHouse addresses this serious problem in a more constructive and light hearted way. The penguin icon links human actions to penguins and gives visitors practical suggestions – using simple financial and ecological sense – which they can easily do at home. The connection to the “Penguin Promises” campaign is at the exit to the EcoHouse where visitors have an opportunity to make a promise to the larger than life penguin and commit to making one change in their daily lives to help reduce their carbon footprint. This photo opportunity is proving to be very popular, with a line often forming at the exit as people wait to make their promise and have their photo taken with the penguin.



The uShaka Sea World EcoHouse under the southern right whale skeleton at the entrance to the aquarium.

The Penguin Promises Campaign, together with the uShaka Sea World EcoHouse and Penguin Exhibit aim to inspire visitors, connect them to the animals and the challenges facing the oceans and then empower them to make a difference. Our overall goal is to help our visitors to return home inspired and motivated to help our environment.



Visitors post their promise to the enormous model penguin.

Evaluation

Both the Penguin Promises campaign and the uShaka Sea World Penguin and EcoHouse exhibits are being evaluated in order to determine their impact. The exhibit evaluations include baseline studies, pre- and post-visit interviews, guest observations and analysis of the "postcard" response system. The results will provide valuable information on how aquariums can use both animal centred exhibits and exhibits without live animals to optimize their impact on visitor behavior. The value of the social media component is also being assessed.

Conclusion

Our environment is under greater pressure than ever before. We in the zoo and aquarium industry are privileged to experience the wonder of nature on a daily basis. We have a responsibility to share our love of the environment and to encourage and empower visitors to make the changes required to ensure that our environment is able to support us in the future. Our small steps in South Africa may not be the most innovative and they may not have the glamor possible with big budgets, but our animal keepers and our organizations care passionately about our environment, and together we, in one of the world's hotspots of biodiversity, will keep striving to make a difference.