

“WHAT’S THE NEXT GENERATION ZOO? AND WHO’S EVEN ASKING THIS QUESTION?”

Philly Zoo Gala Talk, Jon Coe. 2 November 2015

I’ve been a student and designer of zoos, safari parks and nature reserves for over fifty years. Back then the worst zoos were rows of steel cages and the best zoos were rows of concrete grottos. Zoo directors were animal collectors and zoo keepers ranked at the bottom on park department payrolls. No one ever asked, “*WHAT’S THE NEXT GENERATION ZOO?*”

I’m proud to have been a leader in the evolution to naturalistic “immersion” animal displays, creating mosaics of themed landscapes. The public loved this, but most animals still spent 16 hours every day in indoor dioramas or night cages. And no one asked “what’s next?”

With my old firm CLRdesign we developed the idea of “rotation”, where animals in adjoining exhibits could time-share, improving their opportunities a little. A few American zoos ran with this idea, but not many. But Philly Zoo was the first to ask “what’s next?” As a result your animal trail system has gone viral in international media, has the attention of most American zoos and is being used in Guadalajara, Mexico, studied by the Asociación Primatología Española and recommended by the World Association of Zoos 2015 Animal Welfare Strategy, to name only three examples.

Of course there are both practical and intrinsic reasons for these changes: to do more with a small campus, to reinvigorate your market and staff and also to watch lemurs and tigers bounding through the trees across the campus and see delighted kids following them; to make this a “happening” place to work and a must-see international destination.

I’ve suggested the idea of animal rotation and trail systems to other zoos. Why were you the first to succeed with it? 1. Because the idea is nature-based and your senior staff understood this and foresaw the benefits to the animals. 2. Because your Board leaders weren’t afraid of change and were actively looking for the next big idea and 3) because your staff leaders were very patient, allowing the ideas to win support from within and then grow organically from section to section.

So what is next? Firstly, you’ve come a long way in a short time. You are consolidating your gains by introducing still more animals to the trail systems, getting more animals into the trails at the same time while giving guests more to see, evaluating scientifically what can be improved and increasing staff capacity even more widely. If we consider trail construction the “hardware”, you are now upgrading the supporting “software” to improve performance. Then the real fun begins! The trail system has proven trails can be displays as well as a means to go places. But wait until the animals have exciting new places to go! The South End can be developed as a “waterhole” where different animals come and go all day and well into the evening, where big birds fly, hippos, jaguars and giant otters swim (but not together) and bears do natural bear things on queue. The focus of this “edutainment” will of course be natural behaviours and Philly Zoo’s practical actions in local and international wildlife and habitat conservation. But there is no reason not to enjoy a good meal and good company while being “edutained”.

So is this the next gen zoo? Yes, partly, but this is only the foundation. The next revolution will be in the “software.” Next-gen animal management will give animal’s far greater competence, choice and control over their own lives. Why can’t monkeys (aided by training and smart gadgets such as those in advanced livestock and dairy industries) run the monkey house? Next-gen visitors will want to collaborate with animals in their shared experiences, see themselves as animals see them, have their own treetop trails and share all this instantaneously, internationally, actually and virtually. Next-gen zoo businesses will still want to be the unique must-see, must-do place, both actually and virtually, confident in their progress and always preparing for the future.