Central Park Zoo Audience Research 2018

Executive Summary

Since 2013, Central Park Zoo (CPZ) has supported ongoing audience research to understand visitor experiences at the zoo. Building on this research history, the 2018 audience research project focused on the following questions:

- Who is coming to CPZ and why?
- What do visitors know about WCS and CPZ?
- What do visitors do during their visit?
- What do visitors remember about their visit?
- What conservation actions do visitors intend to take after their visit?

Findings

Tourists comprised the majority of CPZ visitors, however, attendance by New York City residents peaked during the summer, when they made up about 25% of visitors. Regardless of where they were visiting from, CPZ visitors were motivated to visit the zoo to spend time with family and friends and see animals. Reflecting the large tourist audience, about one-quarter visited because they identified it as a New York City landmark. Although more than half of visitors said they had heard of WCS, recognition was stronger among locals than tourists, with most tourists not knowing about the relationship between CPZ and WCS.

During their time at the zoo, visitors spend the most time at exhibits where they had close-up views of large or active animals. These seemingly serendipitous views into animals' lives were the basis for many visitors' most memorable moments, prompting some to reflect that their visit inspired a deeper appreciation of animals. Visitors also valued learning animal facts.

Visitors had low awareness of WCS and CPZ-led conservation work. Those who were aware of these efforts tended to recall work with snow leopards and bears, reflecting two exhibits with the most messaging about these conservation efforts. Visitors are highly concerned about wildlife and believe that their own actions impact wildlife and the environment, however, their awareness of conservation actions they could take was general (e.g., donate money) or relied on previous knowledge (e.g., recycling), suggesting that they would benefit from clear directives on how they can help wildlife.

Implications

WCS excels at designing spaces and interpretation that provide visitors with the sense that they have a personal view into the animals' lives, behavior, and stories. Leadership should consider how to capitalize on the positive feelings and interest these experiences generate to provide additional messaging about WCS- and CPZ-led conservation efforts, acknowledging that visitors readily identify the CPZ brand, but are less certain about what WCS is. Additionally, visitors' limited awareness of individual-level conservation actions suggest that they would benefit from specific information about how they can contribute when they return home. Strategically building up the interpretation and incorporating diverse strategies, such as exhibit interactives and live interpretation, may increase awareness on both topics.

The next phase of audience research could build on these findings by creating and testing messaging that applies various approaches to prompt visitors to take action, such as social norms and individual-level actions. Additionally, we may consider testing how to best highlight the landmark features of CPZ's animals, architecture, and history – such as through guided tours or a self-guided tour brochure – to provide additional value to tourists.