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Initiative for an Environmental Education Qualification



The DWV (German Wildlife Park Association) is a professional association with over 150 members representing almost all important private, communal and national wildlife parks in Germany with a total area of round 25.000 ha and 8.8 million visitors. Modern professionally managed wildlife parks are important centres of expertise for animal welfare, nature conservation and protection of species, as well as for environmental education. From the very beginning the DWV has placed great emphasis on environmental education. Featuring the complexity of nature's interrelationships and ongoing conservation and research efforts in tandem with the organisation's overall work and the public presentation of local and global environmental projects, which are seen as essential duties and are presented to the members as suggestions for practical implementation into enclosures.

Establishing A Quality Seal

Our intention goes above and beyond pure educational factors by suggesting the introduction of a quality seal for its members which not only communicates the values expressed by the World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy, but also protects and strengthens the commercial existence of each individual member establishment. For example:

The qualification initiative of the DWV rests upon learning about sustainable development (BnE). The studies are orientated towards interested parks in order for them to gain knowledge, improve decision-making and show responsibility for their own establishment. But, all efforts are of little use if visitors do not notice them. People decide to visit a zoological park on the basis of available information. This applies even more so when the previous visit did not turn out satisfactorily.

It is essential for any high quality work to be outwardly visible. The certification is an important way of advertising the attainment of a quality standard and is a mean of evaluation for the regulatory authorities and for potential investors and sponsors. This means: The certification is received when an independent body assesses that a pre-defined attainment level has been reached. A prerequisite is the definition of the criteria to be met and these must be universally applicable. Unlike the German TÜV (road worthiness test) where the criteria and procedure are well known, the qualification procedure which the DWV wants to introduce must be developed from scratch. Important elements of the certification should focus on concepts for visitor management and service (personal assistance, pathway management, positive visual designation). This cannot be about inventing a uniform system as it will always be dependent on the individual circumstances. The justification as to the means and method employed is more important than the adherence to a predetermined artificial structure.

The objective will be achieved when visitors come to visit the zoo because they trust the certification and leave with a feeling they have experienced something special, having viewed nature and animals from a different perspective. What can the participants expect during the certification process? Initially they will be given guidelines on the certification requirements and then have time to put into practice concrete steps within their institution to meet them. Subsequently trained 'scouts' will be used to evaluate the level of compliance with the criteria list of the DWV.

Common seal (*Phoca vitulina*):
keeper talk at Westküstenpark St. Peter
Ording. The presentation serves education purposes
and checking the animals at the same time.

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White pelicans (*Pelecanus onocrotalus*):

learning about animal behaviour at Vogelpark Marlow, an impressive experience.

The procedure is structured in three levels so that each animal park can be adequately certified according to facility and size. The first level is fulfilled through participation in the qualification procedure itself and an intent to develop sustainable environmental education for their institution. This implies recognition that there are areas which can be improved. After several training courses, level two will lead to an external appraisal of the institution. Parallel to this, the 'scouts' will have been instructed on the various aspects of the certification requirements and will liaise with the project managers of each institution. Together they will review all elements applicable to the institution and discuss them with a view to making possible improvements. At the third level, the requirements which are needed for obtaining the certificate are made more specific, comprehensive, time-consuming and finally more worthwhile.

For instance, level three expects:

- an identification with the World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy
- the local implementation of the agenda 21, the Rio declaration on environment and development
- or the participation in a project for species conservation.

These principles should be integrated in each individual institutional concept.

Every member can decide for themselves which level is appropriate to its institution and can best facilitate the attainment of the certification, but it is recommended that all levels be completed.

Aims of the Procedure

The German Wildlife Park Association (DWV) plans an "Environmental Education Quality Seal" in line with the objectives of the EU Zoo directive and the World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy. The main purpose is:

- to motivate as many zoos as possible within the short term to participate in the certification, and
- to establish a symbol of quality in the medium term, which will signal the high standard of environmental conservation involvement and therefore have a positive economic impact.

A vital task for the German Wildlife Park Association is to encourage members, irrespective of area size, number of visitors or animal holding, to participate in the certification process. The process has both pro and contra aspects, but the longer term advantages outweigh the short term disadvantages:

Cons – today	Pros – tomorrow
time consuming	quality improvement
expense factor: certification	employee satisfaction
administrative assessment and preliminary investigations	visitor growth
investment if needed	positive media presentation
changes in the sequence of operations	risk minimisation
	increased receipts, cost cuts
	increased credibility

The intention of the preliminary seminars is to minimise the disadvantages and to amplify the benefits. Thus each individual park as well as the entire association receives a qualitative upward revaluation.

Practical Implementation

Detailed drafting of the certification will be undertaken at the start of the project by a working-group constituted from two expert committees who will submit proposals for the practical tests to a selection of German Wildlife Park Association (DWV) members. A preliminary hearing, attended by representatives of the "Deutsche Bundesstiftung Umwelt", WAZA and other zoo organisations, will give every participant the opportunity to be convinced of the feasibility of the project. As part of the framework of the qualification initiative, the DWV has already carried out a census to establish the willingness to participate in such a scheme. In September 2009, the DWV office found 65 participants who would be interested in attending the seminars from the 52 institutions surveyed. UNESCO proclaimed the 'World Decade of Education for Sustainable Development' from 2005 till 2014 during which time the principles of sustainable development should be embedded in education worldwide. In view of the critical budgetary position of regional and local governments, extra-curricular learning, already integrated in many zoos and animal parks, will play an increasingly important role.

Looking at 'How?' in the environmental context, from an historical perspective, there has been an interesting development over the last thirty years. Up until the 1990s it was the large and costly display boards and wall charts in the nature information centres (with a formal educational character) which were highly praised.



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Visitors dive into ecology by using a quite unfamiliar perspective at Natur- und Umweltpark Güstrow.

Their value in extra-curricular knowledge dissemination has been increasingly questioned, which can leave many zoos and wild animal parks facing a need for action. Future attention will be particularly turned to informal BnE learning which has been the subject of concern for a sub-committee of the working group on the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. The DWV certification links to this. The structured inclusion in everyday work of environmental education can support and motivate both formal and informal learning by the workforce.

The encouragement of further development of individual attractions, as well as for the entire institution, requires an intense integration of all employees to get the complete message about the individual environmental education programmes across to the visitors.

The image of the institution will be subject to particular appraisal in the course of the environmental education quality initiative. This is good public relations and extends to the area surrounding the institution. Through popular support and the complete coverage by the park, our environmental education qualifications initiative can potentially effect regional development in various different ways.

After all, visitors come to the park mainly on holiday and in their free time. The improvement in visitor informal education, implicit in the framework of the DWV qualifications initiative for environmental education, has a significant value. Theoretically, animal enclosures in conjunction with BnE offer an ideal connection for ecological, economic and social questions arising out of the themes of nature and species conservation and hunting, as well as the keeping of old farm livestock breeds and domestic animals. In this way the qualifications initiative for environmental education at an ecological level leads to a better external communication of nature conservation thoughts through which new projects can be stimulated or current projects supported. At the social level, it encourages through a suitably improved programme the interaction between the visitors and supports the aim of the DWV to promote interest in ecological connections and also achieve a wider environmental awareness. Through the high quality of the educational choices in the appropriate value added surroundings (integrated quality optimisation) and through cooperation with other animal parks, the participating institutions should also expect improvements at the economic level.

The vibrancy associated with the German Wildlife Park Association's qualifications initiative for environmental education, with its three dimensional programme, epitomises sustainability and offers the necessary background for a successful BnE. ■

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