THE LANGUAGE
OF CONSERVATION

POETRY IN LIBRARY AND ZOO COLLABORATIONS

Jane Ashfield (United States, 1953–)

The same instant as the
others try to say this
I take scarlets

from

MAPLE

[Image of a boy pointing at a wooden board with words written on it, set in a forested area.]
The Language of Conservation
The Language of Conservation

Jane Preston
Editor

Sandra Alcosser • Lee Briccetti
Dr. John Fraser • Dr. Dan Wharton
Executive Editors

Poets House
New York City
Place

On the last day of the world
I would want to plant a tree
what for
not for the fruit
the tree that bears the fruit
is not the one that was planted
I want the tree that stands
in the earth for the first time
with the sun already
going down
and the water
touching its roots
in the earth full of the dead
and the clouds passing
one by one
over its leaves

—W.S. Merwin
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Editor’s Note

The Language of Conservation is a project that pairs poetry installations in zoos with programming in public libraries to create public dialogue about issues of conservation. This volume seeks to lay out our experience with a groundbreaking project to document these achievements and engage other collaborations of this kind.

Research included here demonstrates that the overwhelming majority of visitors to the zoos respond positively to poetry displayed there: up to 90% of visitors to participating zoos read the poems; up to 92% of those visitors could cite specific poems they’d read; and half of them drew explicit connections between the poems and the conservation mission of the zoo.

The project was a collaboration between professionals of diverse disciplines. Accordingly, we have included essays written by contributors who use distinct vocabularies and radically different frames of reference. As this volume is intended for readers from a similarly wide range of perspectives, we have organized the material in a way that will help individuals find the kind of information they are looking for easily. Here is a brief introduction to the various components of the volume.

Introductory material: The volume begins with a Preface by Marsha Semmel, from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, for whose support and faith in this project we are very grateful. The Foreword features comments made by U.S. Poet Laureate W. S. Merwin when he met with librarians at Poets House in 2010. His remarks on the nature of art and its relationship to issues of conservation are reproduced with his kind permission. The tripartite Introduction that follows includes three essays: Dr. Dan Wharton, co-creator of the Language of Conservation, speaks to the potential, and the urgency, of this work; first poet-in-residence Sandra Alcosser describes the poetic philosophy that undergirds it; and Lee Briccetti, Executive Director of Poets House, provides an in-depth overview of this three-year project and its history. This complex arrangement of introductory material is indicative of the range of voices readers will find in the volume as a whole, including administrators, scientists, and poets.

Section One describes the project through the eyes of the poets-in-residence. Sandra Alcosser describes her experience as curator of the installation in Brookfield, IL, which is managed by the Chicago Zoological Society. She is followed by poets-in-residence Joe Bruchac, Alison Hawthorne Deming, Mark Doty, and Pattiann Rogers, each of whom
describe how the project went forward in the cities where they worked. Section One concludes with a summary of the outcomes of the project, based on research conducted by the Institute for Learning Innovation (ILI), evaluators for the project.

Section Two provides specific information for those who would like to further replicate this project by creating similar initiatives in their own communities. It begins with a meditation by poet Sandra Alcosser on the methodologies of successful curation. An in-depth discussion of the principles of effective graphic design for poetry installations follows, written by Dr. John Fraser. The section concludes with “Replication Q & A,” a set of brief, practical suggestions for those who would like to design a project such as this and get it off the ground.

Section Three provides three articles on collaboration: first, how the project leadership sought to create the conditions for productive collaborations between poets, zoos, and public libraries; then, an article on some of the outcomes of the zoo to library relationships, which draws heavily from material previously published by the American Library Association on their website, Programming Librarian. An in-depth analysis of how these relationships worked, based on interviews with all participants conducted by ILI, follows. Finally, in an article written by Dr. Fraser, readers will find a discussion of implications for cultural institutions as suggested by the collaborations at the heart of this project.

Section Four presents a discussion of the techniques employed by the evaluators in their research, followed by their full report.

Section Five charts some of the writing available to poets as they curate installations, offered by honorary advisors and other poets. These essays are succeeded by the book lists Poets House and its partners prepared for the libraries who participated in the project. Rather than a comprehensive bibliography of the literature, these are lists specifically drawn up to facilitate acquisitions by public libraries.

Appendices provide a list of honorary advisors to the project, contact information for participating institutions and consultants, and brief biographical information about the contributors.

In regard to the photographs throughout this volume, we have sought to make the best compromise between two alternatives: either presenting the installation within the context of its surroundings or presenting the installations in such a way as to ensure that the text of the signage is readable. As neither alternative is entirely acceptable on its own, we present each sign with as much of its surroundings as possible and, in all cases, provide the language of the installation as well, adjacent to the photograph.

We hope this volume will provide helpful information for those who are intrigued by the Language of Conservation. Indeed, we hope the project recently concluded becomes only the first of many such endeavors. We believe it offers hope for a new way forward; one of many ways forward, we hope, for there is much work to be done.

Jane Preston
Managing Director, Poets House
Preface

The Language of Conservation, building on a successful, IMLS-funded pilot project at the Central Park Zoo in New York, brought together esteemed poets, librarians, and zoo professionals in five sites—New Orleans, Little Rock, Jacksonville, Milwaukee, and Brookfield, Illinois—to engage families and people of all ages at zoos and libraries in an exploration of the relationship between the plants and animals and the spoken and written word.

A collaboration that originated with the Wildlife Conservation Society and Poets House in New York City, the project created a series of family events through signage in the zoos, poetry readings in the libraries, reading events for children and adults, activity books, poetry contests, and online resources. This volume examines the national, IMLS-funded Language of Conservation project, evaluates its impact, explores the challenges of creating effective collaborations across types of institutions, and provides a “toolkit” for other libraries, zoos, and museums that may want to create their own collaborative projects.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) is an independent federal agency that supports museums and libraries in their roles of sustaining cultural heritage, fostering learning and innovation, and building the skills of those who work in these institutions. Through grants, convenings, resources, research, and leadership activities, the agency enables libraries and museums to serve their communities more effectively. IMLS encourages collaborations between libraries and museums that will engage diverse audiences and provide rich learning experiences. Libraries and museums are community “anchor” institutions, trusted places where people of all ages, individually and in social groups, come together to learn and grow, find information necessary to their work and their lives, forge stronger community bonds, explore the world around them, and feel connected to each other.

The Language of Conservation drew on the skills of poets (led by Montana’s Poet Laureate Sandra Alcosser), librarians, and zoo professionals to explore relationships between human beings and the natural world. The poems in the zoos helped families think about animals and plants in new ways and re-imagine their own role in the broader environment;
the programs in the libraries suggested ways that adults and children alike could find more ways to explore poetry, other forms of literature, and science. The Language of Conservation thus linked our fascination with animals and plants with the power of literature, and spurred audiences’ curiosity to learn more.

Finally, the project created new bonds between the staff and volunteers in the participating libraries and zoos, developing collaborative relationships that will continue long after its conclusion, as these institutions continue to re-examine ways that they provide gateways to new knowledge and learning.

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Beauty / before me / I walk
—Anonymous, from “The Navajo Night Chant”
Foreword

W. S. Merwin
United States Poet Laureate, 2010-2011

On the Life of the Imagination

The following comments were transcribed from an address by W. S. Merwin to a group of librarians gathered at Poets House in New York City on October 21, 2010.

It’s a way of being in the world that we’re talking about. That’s what the arts are about, and that’s the relation between the arts and life as a whole—they are simply aspects of the same thing. I love the idea that you’re carrying poetry into the zoos now. I don’t know what the animals will make of the poems, but there’s a lot that we don’t know.

~

How do you explain any poem? People say, “I don’t read poetry because I don’t understand it,” and I think that’s because they’re coming at it from the wrong end. Children don’t skip rope because they understand it, they skip rope because they want to skip rope. When you finish listening to one of the late Schubert sonatas, you don’t understand it—that’s not why you listen to it. When you do anything that you love doing, you don’t do it because you understand it. Understanding is something that comes afterwards, when you can attach words to it, but the words never come close to the experience. When you look at Leonardo’s “Lady with an Ermine,” do you understand it? When you look at Vermeer’s “Girl Pouring Milk from a Pitcher,” do you understand the milk from the pitcher? I don’t think so. We don’t go back to read poetry because we understand it. We go back to it because we love it, and because we hear it, and it enters into us.

~

I’m just surprised, day by day, by the way human beings are behaving now. I know we’ve always behaved this way to some degree, but we seem to be getting worse and worse and worse. The viciousness, and the
negativity, and the destructiveness, and the indifference to what we’re doing—it seems to me to be getting worse all the time. I want to try to say something about that, and about what I think the connection to the arts is. The great thing that really distinguishes our species, that we can love and respect about humankind, is not how much smarter than the whales we are (because we may not be smarter than the whales), or how wonderful our language is, because even language is not something unique to us. It is the primacy of the imagination, and our ability to recognize that in the suffering of people dying of AIDS in Africa, or of the whales dying of starvation in the Pacific Ocean, or of any of the species that are being snuffed out, we are not exempt. We are a part of it. That suffering is our suffering. That is our world that they are leaving.

Out of that imagination comes, on the one hand, compassion; on the other hand, the arts, and they’re connected to each other. The arts somehow remind us of our kinship with all other life, and with the mortality of other life—the ephemeral, precious nature of every other form of life.
It is perhaps fair to describe science as a method that condenses human experience in a way that makes patterns much more visible and comprehensible. The power of this method is obvious in everything we see, hear, and touch and the world changes every single day as a result. Despite some misunderstandings on this point, science does not operate on truth but on workability and openness to being found false. Armed with the straightforward objectivity that science offers, humans have become much smarter about the past and present but perhaps far more confused about a future that plays out on a dynamic, ever-changing landscape.

For several hundred years now, the world’s wildlife populations have diminished in direct proportion to human success in solving ages-old human problems in increasing food supply, having better access to shelter, and conquering diseases. In short, our lives have improved on the premise that less nature and more technology is better for humanity. We now know that there is a vicious curve in this trajectory and dramatic adjustment is in order. But how do we make adjustments on behalf of the natural world when no one is in charge of it? Will the extinction of the passenger pigeon and the Tasmanian wolf play out as unfortunate chapters of human history or something more profound, an opening scene to the undermining of the natural systems that support human civilization, perhaps even human life itself?

The answer lies in gifting humanity with some truth, not just the clear-eyed objectivity of the past and present, but a deep-rooted consensus on why subjective visions of a perfect world are valid.

Zoological gardens collectively reach well over 150 million people annually in North America alone, and worldwide the figure is conservatively estimated at 500 million, a double-digit percentage of the entire human population. It is no wonder that zoos are sobered by this...
Incredible opportunity to reach and touch humanity on the subject of conservation and the wildlife extinction crisis. The *Language of Conservation* project emerged as an experiment to see if a new way of thinking about interpretation of the animals and the zoo setting *per se* could do something that the traditional, more pedagogical approach could not. The immense popularity of zoos seems to stem from an innately human fascination with animals—no surprise, considering that wildlife and its often lush surroundings represent resources that make human existence possible. In that sense, zoos continually seek to be the venue for sparking that spontaneous feeling of well-being that springs from viewing some of the most colorful and fascinating components of nature—wildlife.

Given that the sighting of animals is first and foremost an emotional experience, it seems that interpretation of the experience would be most effective if it, too, spoke to human emotions. Given also the urgency of inspiring zoo visitors to take action on behalf of a rapidly diminishing wildlife heritage, then the task of interpretation must be both to speak to the aesthetics of an intimately personal experience and to sound an unprecedented call to arms, urging participation in the effort to turn the tide of destruction, an effort that must be, but is not yet, everyone’s responsibility. The concerns of poet and scientist could find no better meeting place.

Here poet and scientist become both teacher and student, the scientist setting the stage with the facts about the animals and their uncertain futures and the poet finding through time and space all the voices that have celebrated humanity’s relationship with nature as both uplifting and seriously vital to body and soul. Biological accuracy and artistic expression combined communicate in ways neither can alone.

In just a few words, the poets have captured the truth that “a culture is no better than its woods” and for the people and the animals there is “no difference.” And, “they have places to go to, too.” Rising above the haze of uncertainty and mortality, whether of the individual, the planet, or the universe, what should we do? “Plant a tree.”

Jacksonville Zoo

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In the very earliest time, / when both people and animals lived on earth, / a person could become an animal if he wanted to / and an animal could become a human being. / Sometimes they were people / and sometimes animals / and there was no difference.

— from “Magic Words,” after Nalungiaq, translated from the Inuit by Edward Field
The old man
must have stopped our car
two dozen times to climb out
and gather into his hands
the small toads blinded
by our lights and leaping,
live drops of rain.

The rain was falling,
a mist about his white hair
and I kept saying
you can't save them all,
accept it, get back in
we've got places to go.

But, leathery hands full
of wet brown life,
knee deep in the summer
roadside grass,
he just smiled and said
they have places to go to
too.

—Joseph Bruchac
Could it be true we live on earth? / On earth forever? // Just one brief instant here. // Even the finest stones begin to split, / even gold is tarnished, / even precious bird-plumes / shrivel like a cough. // Just one brief instant here.

—Nezahualcoyotl, translated by Edward Kissam and Michael Schmidt

SANDRA ALCOSSER
Poet-in-Residence, Language of Conservation

In Service to the Natural World

… it is not half so important to know as to feel.
—Rachel Carson, from The Sense of Wonder

In 2004 I began work as a poet at Central Park Zoo for

- 24 species of mammals
- 63 species of birds
- 48 species of reptiles
- 20 species of amphibians
- 3 species of fish
- 9 species of invertebrates

every one, but the poet, on the Red List of Threatened Species—all of us working with the scientists as ambassadors for world conservation.

Invited to curate an installation of poetry for Poets House and the Wildlife Conservation Society, the first installation of its kind, I began to create a theoretical foundation for the program. With one million visitors from all over the world each year, I wanted the poems at the Central Park Zoo to be a celebration of our connection to the physical world, and the poets whose work was selected to be those who worked in service to sustain that world.

Dr. Wharton, a conservation biologist who was then the Director of both the Central Park Zoo and the Species Protection Program for the Snow Leopard and the Western Lowland Gorilla, met with me each week to select short lyric lines from poets like Nezahualcoyotl, the 15th-century philosopher-king who planned cities and created zoological gardens and arboreta in pre-Columbian Mexico:


Could it be true we live on earth?  
On earth forever?  

Just one brief instant here.  

Even the finest stones begin to split,  
even gold is tarnished,  
even precious bird–plumes  
shrivel like a cough.  

Just one brief instant here.

And Birago Diop, the 20th-century Senegalese poet, translator, ambassador to Tunisia, and veterinary surgeon who built a hospital for animals in Dakar.

—Judith Wright

The poems became part of a six-acre, twenty-seven century poetry installation in Central Park. Etched in glass, wood, and stone; in rainforest, red panda pavilion, and penguin house, they flew brightly from banners and curled across rafters, stairs risers and benches.

Central Park was itself an ideal place to begin a collaboration between poetry and science. It exists because of the vision of a poet—William Cullen Bryant—and was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted to be experienced in the same way as a poem. Marianne Moore, Federico García Lorca, and many other poets once sat among the animals of Central Park Zoo. I am so glad that Marianne has decided to give the inhabitants of the zoo a rest, Moore’s mother once sighed to Elizabeth Bishop, complaining about Moore’s attention to her muse.

In front of hundreds of people crossing the Brooklyn Bridge one evening, national laureate Billy Collins asked us to explain—what exactly are you doing in the zoo? He was not the first to ask that question.

Living for over thirty years at 4,000 feet in the Bitterroot Mountains of Montana, surrounded by bear, moose, elk, goshawk, and wolverine, in situ, I am reminded daily of the endangered nature of our shared lives and ecosystems. And working with zoological societies, I have discovered them to be major supporters of world conservation.

The scientists believe that we can help them build an emotional bridge between science and nature, between culture and the physical world. With these installations, we are testing their hypothesis and proving it to be true. Through a series of entrance and exit interviews, the
Famous

The river is famous to the fish.

The loud voice is famous to silence, which knew it would inherit the earth before anybody said so.

The cat sleeping on the fence is famous to the birds watching him from the birdhouse.

The tear is famous, briefly, to the cheek.

The idea you carry close to your bosom is famous to your bosom.

The boot is famous to the earth, more famous than the dress shoe, which is famous only to floors.

The bent photograph is famous to the one who carries it and not at all famous to the one who is pictured.

I want to be famous to shuffling men who smile while crossing streets, sticky children in grocery lines, famous as the one who smiled back.

I want to be famous in the way a pulley is famous, or a buttonhole, not because it did anything spectacular, but because it never forgot what it could do.

—Naomi Shihab Nye
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
—Jalal al-Din Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

The naturalist E. O. Wilson has called *Homo sapiens* The Poetic Species because our cognitive infrastructure is so dependent on learning by analogy and metaphor. The *Language of Conservation*, a three-year project funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, puts this notion to the test, asking if the poetic species can be engaged in an affiliation with other living creatures through—well—poetry! In the mix are ten institutions in five U.S. cities; their millions of visitors; five acclaimed poets; a professional evaluation team specializing in innovative learning models; and Poets House, a national poetry library and literary center in New York City, the initiative’s co-originator and manager.

In broad strokes, the project brings together zoos and libraries—among the most highly visited of public institutions in our nation—to help visitors experience a deepened conservation ethic through installations of poetry in the zoos. These permanent installations establish what amounts to innovative walking anthologies—huge poetry banners, diminutive placards, poems running up staircases, lines hanging from the rafters—helping visitors see more in what they see, and take a moment to reflect on the magnificent creatures around them. Poems come from many of the world’s great traditions of poetry and, sometimes, from the animal’s place of origin. In affiliated libraries, special displays, collections, and aligned events create citywide conversations about environmental stewardship.

The presence of the scientific community in the *Language of Conservation* has meant that our efforts have been shaped, from the beginning, to evaluate hypotheses against evidence. In other words, one major raison d’être of the project is to determine if our elegant model works, and if...
it works similarly to the earlier, single-city prototype in New York City. This new, multi-city initiative has created a more collaborative process between divergent institutions and focuses specifically on how shared learning can be articulated into a replication model useful to other geographical locations once the grant cycle is concluded.

This is a complex, multi-layered project. In many of the host cities, the zoos and the library systems had not before worked on a major project together. The culture, structure, and management practice of each institution is different. Furthermore, the inter-disciplinary nature of our premise implies uncharted territory. So it is with enormous gratitude that we thank everyone who has participated—more than eighty people, including leadership teams from zoos and libraries; zoo curators, animal keepers, graphic designers; staff librarians, events coordinators; poets-in-residence and a national advisory group of poets; and Poets House staff.

The impetus for the project is also complex. And it is urgent. Human behavior is changing the living world. Most scientists agree that we have come to a moment of environmental crisis that has profound implications for the future of our own species and for the planet we share with other forms of life. Extinctions have become so accelerated that it is predicted half of the species on earth will be lost within the next century, the highest degradation of biodiversity in millennia (Wilson, 2002).

Many scientists and environmental activists who are most concerned about human impacts on biodiversity have called for educational programs that join emotion with rational analysis in order to create a deeper and more enduring conservation ethic.

Many scientists and environmental activists who are most concerned about human impacts on biodiversity have called for educational programs that join emotion with rational analysis in order to create a deeper and more enduring conservation ethic. Certainly, this has been one of our major goals, as one by one, millions of people are being invited to experience the language of science and poetry placed side by side. Early project evaluations indicate that the poetry enables a change in perception, allowing an alignment of learning with feeling. It is our hope that feeling will become an impetus for action. Changed thinking is already part of change. This brief introduction outlines what we did, how it came about, and offers some brief personal observations related to the project’s possibilities for generative conversation between institutions.

**Project Basics**

Poets-in-residence were matched to zoos to create permanent installations of poetry that might cause visitors to pause and reflect, establishing a metaphorical means of relating to the dazzling creatures before them. The installations of poems at zoos were intended to work with, not replace, scientific interpretive labels. Poetry selections—generally 40 poems or fragments at each zoo—were carefully considered by poets-in-residence in tandem with zoo specialists for effective placement and scientific precision.

Throughout the project, collection building, book displays, and public programs at the participating libraries made the project visible and teased out the issues in public forums.

How lucky we were to have among our group of poets Pulitzer Prize winners, National Poetry Series winners, and former State Poets Laureate. Each had a superlative national publishing history; each had a passion for animals and the environment; and each was a generous synergy-maker. Joseph Bruchac worked in the Little Rock Zoo; Alison Hawthorne Deming in Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens; Mark Doty in The New Orleans Audubon Zoo; and Pattiax Rogers in The Milwaukee Audubon Zoo. Sandra Alcosser, who originally created the prototype program with us at the Central Park Zoo in New York City in 2003/4, became program mentor. She also worked on an installation at The Brookfield Zoo—just outside of Chicago—with the visionary scientist, Dan Wharton, who had moved there from the Central Park Zoo, and who had been so fundamental to the inception of the prototype initiative in New York. (More on that later.)

What follows is a general outline of the Language of Conservation’s many constituent parts:

**Year 1: Team Building**

- long-range planning and baseline analysis for evaluations
- development of a project Wiki to enable participant conversation and peer-to-peer mentoring
- development of tip sheets for partners on poetry programming, publicity, and evaluation; selection of poetry for installations; graphic design of signage, etc.
- selection of poets-in-residence for placement at zoos
- development of a Poets Advisory Committee of nationally-acclaimed poets (to advise on content and serve as a potential speakers bureau)
Poets House started from the premise that poetry can be about anything and good poems can help people comprehend anything, in a deeper, more complex, and multi-dimensional way. We are a species with language. Language is key to individual thinking and community interaction; and poetry distills the expressive, musical, and emotional strengths of language. Certainly it has surprised some people, indeed some of the partners in this project, that the poetry works. Not because visitors to the zoo become students of literature—but because poetic thinking and metaphor are intrinsic to the way the human mind operates, and are the chief mechanism through which we describe and grasp abstraction (Deutscher, 2008).

Atom from atom yawns as far / As moon from earth, as star from star. —Ralph Waldo Emerson, from “Nature”

**Antecedents**

The basic idea for the *Language of Conservation* started about 10 years ago when I met Dan Wharton, then-director of the Central Park Zoo in New York City. Dan expressed concern that zoo visitors often seemed to have no understanding of the growing role of zoos in species preservation. He was urgently concerned that visitors were leaving the zoo without a sense of being personally implicated or moved toward stewardship. We both agreed that poetry might create a bridge that could invite visitors into deeper thinking and feeling. As Ezra Pound said, poetry “presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.”

• a two-day convening for key staff from all participating institutions
• poets-in-residence work at zoos; research poems for installations
• library resources, bibliographies, and displays created
• initial literary events feature poets-in-residence at libraries

**Year 2: Zoo Installations and Library Literary Events**

• poetry selections vetted with partners
• permissions for poetry installations sought from rights holders
• poetry placements finalized
• design of poetry placards and signage
• pre-installation evaluations at each zoo
• public launch of installations
• libraries present joint programming and publicize installations

**Year 3: Events, Evaluation, Dissemination**

• program series in libraries create citywide exposure
• evaluation of library and zoo visitors’ experiences measure impacts on conservation thinking
• final summative evaluation and articulation of learning models
• publications in popular and academic journals
• presentations at literary and scientific conferences

**Year 4: Publication**

That poetry can act as the tensile thread that brings all these organizations together may seem counterintuitive. But Poets House has seen its audiences increase exponentially over the last twenty years. Just a note about Poets House: we are one of the great places for the poetic species, a 50,000-volume national poetry library and home for the art form. After more than twenty-five years of distinguished programming and collection building, we have recently opened a lively, new home on the banks of the Hudson River, where readers and writers and audiences of all kinds experience poetry with pleasure and understanding.

Little Rock Zoo
The goal was to offer another intimate connection to the animals through the artful, mediating voice of poetry. So, we teamed up and wrote an initial grant to the Institute of Museum and Library Services to enrich zoo signage with poetry. Blessedly, Sandra Alcosser was willing to leave her home in Montana to become our first Poet-in-Residence. Together, Dan and Sandra created the first prototype program.

Early in our work together, focus groups with poets revealed their suspicion of zoos (cages!) and zoo personnel’s suspicion of poetry (who would like it?). But ultimately, over the course of that first project, a cultural shift occurred and the evaluation mechanisms that could describe the importance of the poetry helped to generate a sense of discovery among zoo staff. Everyone wanted to do something that enriched their audiences’ thinking and supported their institution’s basic environmental mission. Most significantly, evaluations of the project in the Central Park Zoo documented an increase in visitors’ emotional connection to the animals once the poetry was installed. Also, in exit interviews, when asked what part of zoo signage they remembered, visitors to the Central Park Zoo often quoted from the poetry. But when asked, point blank, if they liked the poetry, many did not know that what they liked was poetry.

This confirmed what Poets House had learned through our work with public librarians over the previous decade: when people experience poetry, they are often surprised and delighted. But, if you tell them it’s coming, they get nervous. And the scientists and curators at the zoos were nervous. Until, that is, they saw the poetry work.

Science and poetry have similar roots—in observation and articulation. But poetry, so rich in metaphor, activates the imagination through a process that transfers affinities from dissimilar subjects to one another, creating a new way of seeing. This metaphorical facility also transfers feeling.

In New York, even before the professional evaluators’ interviews and surveys were completed, I had a personal sense of excitement as I overheard a vigorous conversation between a young boy and his mother soon after the poetry installation opened. They had come upon a Gary Snyder couplet, “The secret / and the secret deep in that…” detached from the rest of the poem. The young boy was positively exasperated that he did not know the secret.

“Well, what do you think the secret is?” asked the mother, trying to engage her child’s imagination. Later, in another location near the polar bears, visitors could read the whole poem and think more about the network of connections between animals in their habitats, discovering the secret animal inside another animal’s belly. An environmental conversation that could take many directions was begun.

—Maurice Sendak, from Where the Wild Things Are
Making More Creative Institutions

Our work through the Language of Conservation has created an infrastructure of co-agency between different kinds of institutions, as well as the different languages of science and literature. These joint energies have created cooperative public spaces that respect imagination and invite generative thinking.

Inducements to this kind of creativity and connectivity are not just good for art. They make better workplaces, educational institutions, and cities. This project has required each institution to reach outside their specialized language—to be open to a new way of communicating—in order to forge a new opportunity for public learning.

It may also be possible to say that these institutions’ willingness to create proximity between the language of science and literature has been a positive step toward enacting a new social dynamic that emphasizes alignment of intellect and feeling. Is that enough to change the cultural dynamic in a particular city? What would be enough? Where do we start?

Although our culture may be more nervous about poetry than other cultures, wherever they are, human beings like creativity, skill, and surprise. And that is where we can start. My five-year-old nephew literally jumped with glee at the Central Park Zoo when he saw quotations from Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are. “That’s mine!” he exclaimed.

One by one, millions of people, both adults and children, have experienced poetry in these zoos as a means to understand a shared aliveness with other creatures.

References


How the Project Went Forward:
The Experience of the Poets in Five Cities

...in Wildness is the preservation of the world.
—Henry David Thoreau, from "Walking"

Brookfield Zoo
People come here now more than to fill their eyes—they come to fill their souls.

—Dr. Alejandro Grajal, Chicago Zoological Society

A zoo is a living museum, and kin to a living person, or more precisely, a human family, it has an ecology, a purpose for being, and a need to share its story.

I felt this powerfully at Brookfield Zoo, over two hundred acres surrounded by a tree-lined suburban community designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, a community of brick homes and meandering sidewalks twelve miles west of Chicago.

I began to understand the integrity of our work one day over lunch with the Director of Brookfield Zoo, Dr. Stuart Strahl. We spoke about tools: how they reveal our intelligence and integration with the physical world. Dr. Strahl told me that his family had had a farm on the Chesapeake Bay that they deeded to the Audubon Society, which he helped turn into a progressive environmental center. On that land he started a tool museum to preserve the intelligence of our place upon the land. As he spoke, I observed the holistic nature of a conservationist’s work, remembering that he and Brookfield’s visionary team had surveyed every corner of the zoo, as he had once surveyed his family’s land to determine its wise, long-term use.

Over the 77 years of its existence, Brookfield Zoo has become a vital member of the community. Each time I walked from the Metro Train Station, I passed through the zoo’s gates with Chicago kids from diverse backgrounds who participated on a daily or weekly basis in Chicago Zoological Society’s incredibly active and successful Young Conservationist Programs.

The work of a poetry curator is to help a place tell its story. I had been hired by Elizabeth Barlow Rogers in Central Park in the 70s because my slight frame and passion for walking, pen and notebook in hand, reminded her of Frederick Law Olmsted. Although resemblance ended there, in starting Poets in the Park, I became deeply familiar with Olmsted’s plans and the history of the park, so my return in 2004 for

My words are tied in one / With the great mountains / With the great rocks / With the great trees / In one with my body / And my heart.

—Yokuts Prayer
the first installation of the Language of Conservation came with prior knowledge of the zoo and a deep love for the park that embraced it.

Although I had grown up in the Midwest and attended school in Lake Forest, Illinois, my work in Brookfield was a whole new adventure that began with hardhats in a construction zone. Poetry would be woven into a new exhibit area—Great Bear Wilderness—one of the most ambitious installations created by Brookfield in 75 years. Only a visionary like Dr. Wharton, co-creator of the Language of Conservation, and the new Senior Vice President of Animal Programs, would have been trusted to invite poetry into the construction. Great Bear Wilderness promised a spectacular new home for the iconic animals of the North American continent: the Mexican gray wolf, American bison, grizzly bear, bald eagle, raven, and polar bear. All of these animals, except the polar bear, and of course the raven, had been brought back from near extinction by conservation action, and it was hoped that by persuading visitors to trim their carbon footprint and pursue other conservation action, the polar bear and its habitat might be saved as well. With this hope, Brookfield Zoo had partnered with organizations in the West that preserve hundreds of thousands of acres of critical habitat: Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative; American Prairie Foundation; Vital Ground; and Polar Bears International.

To select poems for the 7.5-acre site, we often circled around a table in the educational staff’s trailer. We sat like family, six distinct personalities reading the poems I served up and responding. For each animal or ecosystem I provided half-a-dozen selections written by Native American and other American poets who worked in service to the natural world. We read the silences and enthusiasms of each person at the table.

Casey Schulke, a young poet and the Interpretive Programs Coordinator for Brookfield Zoo, would oversee the details of the poetry installation and the programming that surrounded it. She selected these lines by Sylvia Plath, from “I Am Vertical”:

Compared with me, a tree is immortal
And a flower–head not tall, but more startling,
And I want the one’s longevity and the other’s daring.

Casey described herself as someone who grew up in a rural Alaskan Athabascan village of 300 people—where she learned that duct tape, moose, and a good cup of tea can fix just about anything. Great Bear Wilderness was her first project of this size, and we were lucky to have someone with her energy, sense of adventure, and love of language as our point person.

Early in our collaboration Andre Copeland selected lines by John Muir:

When we try to pick out anything by itself,
We find it hitched to everything else in the universe.

Muir, who tied himself to the top of a fir tree in the Sierras to ride a windstorm, smell the chafing of resinous branches, and hear tense vibrations of pine needles against each other, reached across 140 years to touch Andre Copeland, the Interpretive Programs Manager at the Zoo. Cherokee, Creole, and African American, Andre, who spent his childhood in and out of hospitals with asthma, recalled his mother saying, as she sat by his hospital bed:

See that spider Andre. See how slow it crosses the ceiling?
You watch that spider. He’s your friend.
By the time that spider crosses from that corner to the next, returns, and comes back again, by the time that spider crosses this ceiling two times, I’ll be back.
Right here beside you.

As an adult, Andre loves spiders—the exquisitely precise 19th-century lithograph of arachnids by German biologist Ernst Haeckel is on his screensaver. Later, Andre brought forward another poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar for Andy Murashige, the Lead Designer for Brookfield Zoo’s Creative Services, to feature at Riverside Library.

The library installations thrilled me. Andy had the freedom to place poems on risers, walls, and windows, and he did it with real panache. The day before the opening of Language of Conservation at the zoo, we toured the poetry exhibits at both the Brookfield and Riverside Libraries and met with the fantastic staff members. Friday evening we returned in a torrential downpour to read for a packed house at Brookfield Library. The library staff made Language of Conservation bison stickers to go on each book in the exhibit and imprinted the sidewalks with bison tracks right up to the door. State Assemblyman Zalewski opened the program, talked about conservation, then Laura Van Prooyen, a fine Brookfield poet—who claims she jogs the streets each morning to the cries of zoo peacocks—provided introductions. Everyone, including the mayor, was present, as well as representatives of numerous groups including the Metropolitan Library. The president of the bank and members of the local farmers’ market expressed interest in exhibiting our conservation poems. The programs at both libraries are too extensive to describe here, but they included poetry and conservation collaborations between many schools, senior citizens’ groups, the libraries, and Brookfield Zoo. The library collaborations were a true gift of spirit on the part of Brookfield Zoo and the wonderful library administrative staffs.

Earth laughs in flowers
—Ralph Waldo Emerson, from “Hamatreya”

As a quiet little seedling / Lay within its darksome bed, / To itself it fell a-talking, / And this is what it said: // “I am not so very robust, / But I’ll do the best I can;” / And the seedling from that moment / Its work of life began.
—Paul Laurence Dunbar, from “The Seedling”
Eagle Poem

To pray you open your whole self
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon
To one whole voice that is you.
And know there is more
That you can’t see, can’t hear,
Can’t know except in moments
Steadily growing, and in languages
That aren’t always sound but other
Circles of motion.
Like eagle that Sunday morning
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky
In wind, swept our hearts clean
With sacred wings.
We see you, see ourselves and know
That we must take the utmost care
And kindness in all things.
Breathe in, knowing we are made of
All this, and breathe, knowing
We are truly blessed because we
Were born, and die soon within a
True circle of motion,
Like eagle rounding out the morning
Inside us.
We pray that it will be done
In beauty.
In beauty.

—Joy Harjo
My own interest in conservation stretches back at least as long as my love for poetry, which began when I was a small child and heard my grandmother reading to me from *A Child’s Garden of Verses* by Robert Louis Stevenson. Though I didn’t realize it back then, that very title suggests that poetry is something green and growing, likely to be found outdoors, to be cared for and nurtured like a garden. I wrote poems all through elementary school and high school, memorized so many that I often recited from memory in the back of the room the classic poems my English teacher was reading at the front of the class. However, my stated aim in life was to have a career as a naturalist or to work in a zoo. But not just any naturalist or zoo worker—someone like Edwin Way Teale, who wrote *Autumn Across America* or the San Diego Zoo’s Belle Benchley, the author of *My Animal Babies*. I would be doing what Gary Snyder calls “the real work” and writing about it.

I carried my love of poetry and the natural world on to Cornell University, where I spent my first three years of study as a major in Wildlife Conservation, before switching to an English Major after several elective courses in Creative Writing showed me where my greatest passion was. But I didn’t leave the natural world behind. My first published poems in *The Trojan Horse*, the Cornell student literary magazine, were about animals. Such poets as James Wright, Gary Snyder, Robert Bly, the haiku masters of Japan, and the great Chinese masters of the Tang Dynasty strengthened my unspoken conviction that poetry and nature were as naturally connected as fertile soil and rain.

Also, as I grew older, I became more visibly connected to my own American Indian roots, where that link between the power of language and the life all around us is implicit. My first book of poetry in 1971 was called *Indian Mountain* and, with the collaboration of my co-author Michael Caduto, I published several books that use traditional American Indian stories to teach about the natural world—the *Keepers of the Earth* series. (These books can be found in the gift shops of many zoos.)
All of this may make understandable why I was so delighted to be part of this project and felt that it was a natural fit. In fact, a poem of mine called "Birdfoot’s Grampa" was used in the pilot program at the Central Park Zoo several years ago, where I took part in the inaugural reading to a large audience that included a number of seemingly appreciative sea lions.

It has long been my belief (not original to me, of course) that one of the things poetry can do (not the only thing, of course) is to give voice to the voiceless. Thus, poems that are for and about animals, plants, and the ecosystem within which we live, can serve a very practical purpose. Of course, I also believe that the play of language, the shape a poem makes in the mind of the reader, is a reward in and of itself. But, like traditional American Indian stories, a poem can fill the dual role of both entertainer and teacher.

I do not believe that the vast majority of human beings support the destruction of our ecosystem that is now going on in every corner of our fragile planet. Nor do I believe that this sort of destruction where, for example, in cutting down the forests of Indonesia to clear the way for palm oil plantations is resulting in the decimation of countless species such as the orangutan, is absolutely necessary. There is always a middle way. But how do we bring people to awareness without frightening them, without making them feel guilty, without making them harden their hearts and just turn away because it is too painful to hear?

I believe that poetry is one of those ways. Most people, when they go to the zoo, do so with open hearts. They’re often with their children. They’re ready to look and listen, to take delight in something new, to exercise what Rachel Carson called the “sense of wonder.” Thus, when presented with lines of poetry that tie in to that experience, they read them gladly and may carry away with them—sometimes subconsciously—the messages those poems impart. Those lines of poetry become lines of life, lifelines. And just as one brief meeting with a great soul may change a person’s life forever, so, too, one line of poetry may do the same, may waken an awareness of and a determination to better care for the earth.

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poets, librarians, and zoo people, I read similar enthusiasm in everyone’s faces. Personally, I got the feeling that I could have worked well with any of them. Later, when I would get the chance to make visits to all of the other zoos involved in the project aside from New Orleans, I would see clear evidence of that original impression of mine. I found the poetry installations at all those zoos to be effective, moving, and extremely impressive in many ways, including appropriate choices of poetry, placement of the poems, use of various techniques to display and mount the poems, and the support given by each host zoo to the project as a whole.

My own zoo (note how I’m taking ownership) was the Little Rock Zoo and though I would happily have accepted the post of Resident Poet at any of the others, I now consider myself particularly blessed to have been paired with the zoo and library people in what has now become one of my favorite cities.

I can’t go any further without making mention of the lead people in the Little Rock team: Jj Muehlhausen and Delbert Dawson at the Little Rock Zoo and Bettye Kerns at the Little Rock Library. The ways in which they planned and marketed our project, worked with me, kept in constant contact with me and (just as importantly) worked with each other were exemplary. The lesson I took away from that partnership is that, in any future such programs (of which I hope there are many), one cannot stress strongly enough the need for continued, thorough, and regular communication between the poet, the host library, and the host zoo. Everyone needs to be kept in the loop and everyone needs to know what they’re expected to do and when. That way we are all sharing the load and aware of tasks, time frames, and schedules. Actually, the fourth leg of the table (or, if we want to keep it in the realm of zoology, the elephant) that kept it all in balance and moving along was Poets House. I was constantly impressed by the smoothness of their operations, the way they managed not just to respond to but also to anticipate needs.

I know that each poet and their team had their own methods of coming up with the choices, placements, and display elements for the poetry in each zoo. And I was impressed with how well everything seemed to work in the other zoos I was fortunate enough to visit. However, let me share what our method was at Little Rock.

First of all, I made a site visit during which I met all of the people at the library and the zoo with whom I’d be working. I’d already done a poetry presentation in New Orleans, sharing a number of poems that I felt tied in to our theme of “Conservation Poetry” from various poets and parts of the world. It turned out that my presentation had inspired the
Third, after choosing the poems, we would come to an agreement together about where and how each poem would be displayed, taking into account the need for variety, for making the poem appropriate to the animals and their settings, and the need to render these poems into forms durable enough for them to last for years.

In making that initial selection of poems to choose from, I tried to do several things that I believe were reflected in the final choices of poems for exhibit.

These were to:

1. Choose poems of high quality that matched our themes of conservation and awareness of the natural world.

2. Represent a wide range of voices with poetry that is ethnically, racially, and culturally diverse, as well as including poems by women and men. Not just American and British poetry, but also poems from Africa, Asia, South America, Europe, and Native America, some of which were presented in bilingual format.

3. Offer diversity in the types of poems—poetry from past and present, formal rhymed poetry and free verse, and poetry for children.

Efforts were also made to include the local poetry community and Arkansas poets. Although no poems from Arkansas writers ended up being chosen, local poets attended events at the zoo and library and were invited to present as part of the overall project.

I visited the Little Rock Zoo several times, including during the official opening for the event which coincided with another event at the zoo, thus drawing a larger crowd. I observed (not just at Little Rock, but at every other zoo I visited) how often the poems stopped zoo visitors, how they would pause over them and read silently, then look again at the animals. In many cases, people would read the poems aloud. The Little Rock Zoo is very much a community zoo and I observed how many of those who came to the zoo seemed to be working-class folks—not your stereotypical audience for poetry. But from what I saw—and what others have told me—they loved it. We were reaching groups of people who might otherwise have never seen such poems or given much thought to the messages they contained.

Little Rock Zoo people to choose one or two of those poems as samples to display. They did a great job of spreading the word about poetry and our project throughout the entire zoo before I got there. As a result, while at Little Rock Zoo I was given a thorough tour of the facility, met the keepers in charge of each exhibit, and worked out the approach we’d follow in selecting poems for the zoo. The plan was a simple one:

First, based on my knowledge of the zoo’s animals and the zoo layout, and my discussions with the zoo people of where they’d like poems displayed, I would put together a large selection of poems. Not just one for each area, but several.

Second, those poems would be discussed by not only the coordinators of the project at the zoo, but also the people directly involved as the keepers for each area. Thus, the elephant keepers chose the Yoruba praise poem about the elephant and so on. Our feeling was that it gave everyone in the zoo more of a sense of ownership in the project. (And, I should mention, my old love for Robert Louis Stevenson resurfaced when we chose the poem “The Little Land” from A Child’s Garden of Verses for the Children’s Area in the zoo.)

The Earth and myself are of one mind.
—Hinmaton Yalatkit (Chief Joseph)
The preservation of life, the education of the public, even the restocking of creatures in their original habitats after they have been literally saved from extinction by zoo programs (as in the case of the San Diego Zoo and the California Condor) have taken the place of mere voyeurism.

Luckily, most of the living poets whose work we wished to use seemed to understand that and gladly gave permission for the use of their poems. There were only two exceptions. But those exceptions show us how much more work needs to be done to let people know the roles that zoos are playing. And, I would suggest, our project is one of the best new ideas to help do just that.

One more thing is worth mentioning. I travel widely as a visiting writer in schools and a storyteller and frequently speak at library and reading conferences. Invariably, without exception, every time I have mentioned the Language of Conservation project, there has been one question asked of me. I heard it in Arizona, in California, in Massachusetts, in Virginia, in North Carolina, and many other places. The question is this: “When is the project going to come to our local zoo?”

All I could answer was that ours was a pilot project. However, my hope is that there will be more to come, that the line we have begun to draw connecting zoos and poetry will only grow longer and remain unbroken.

The only marginally negative part of my Little Rock experience is something that bothered the library people, but didn’t bother me at all. It was that the audiences for the two poetry presentations I did at the library were not as large as the librarians had hoped. Drawing a large audience to a poetry reading at any library is not an easy thing. And those who were there seemed genuinely interested. Work in building a larger audience for poetry is something that has to be continually pursued in every community—through workshops, poetry slams, and regular public events to let people know what they can expect and lead them to look forward to it.

I believe that this project has both fulfilled its potential and demonstrated its viability in all of the ways I’ve mentioned. It has entertained and educated, created awareness, and also helped people see zoos in a new way.

There are some preconceptions out there about zoos. Negative ones. Some of them have been held by such famous poets as Rainer Maria Rilke and William Blake. Any number of poets past and present have written about the zoo as a place of confinement, a tragic setting, even a concentration camp for animals. There’s no doubt that many of the zoos of the past placed living creatures in cramped, unhealthy conditions. But the new generation of zoos and the philosophy of the zoo have changed.

—William Stafford, from “In Fur”
For decades I have been writing and thinking about the power of animals in the human imagination, their plight in a diminishing natural world, and the power of poetic language to strengthen a collective resolve to protect their future. The Language of Conservation provided an exciting opportunity to test these ideas on the ground and in a setting not traditionally considered literary. This “replication” project spun-off from Sandra Alcosser’s outstanding work at Central Park Zoo, but the challenge was to make it new and site-specific.

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. // My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

—Langston Hughes, from “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”
I came to the Language of Conservation with certain assumptions. I wanted a range of poems that would speak from a broad range of cultures and historical periods. I wanted voices that spoke from the zoo’s region and its cultures. I wanted poems from far-flung traditions in which love of nature is a value deeply embedded in an artistic legacy: Native American song, Ancient Chinese “mountains and rivers” poetry, and British Romanticism. I wanted poetry for lovers of tradition and poetry for lovers of innovation in the art, poems from Europe and the Americas, poems for adults and some for children. I wanted the old ways to be well represented, perspectives on animals drawn from a time when a closer relationship with animals was the daily fare. And I wanted some of the poets of our time who have become environmental heroes to be included: W. S. Merwin, Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver. I wanted to find poems that would give words to the ineffable feelings that our encounters with animals so often provoke.

Suffering from the twin maladies of nature deficit disorder and information overload, most urban Americans are hungry for stories of inspiration, a language of genuine empathy and love for our fellow creatures, and a reconnection with the sense that animals speak to the human spirit. More information cannot feed this hunger, but the arts have the potential to do so in a resonant way. This project is a test of that assumption.

I had the good fortune to work with Kelliann Whitney, the zoo’s Education Director, who eagerly seized upon the project and orchestrated the collective decision-making process at the zoo. Any curatorial voice that I found had everything to do with her support, competence, and work with the team within the zoo that helped to make the final poetry selections for the installation. She and I presented the project overview to the Board of Directors. One of their important contributions was to reinforce the importance of the design qualities of the installation. I remain very grateful for this input because I think the inventiveness and graphic dynamism of the installation is one of the distinguishing features of the Jacksonville site.

After touring the site, meeting with keepers and grounds crew for the botanical gardens, and observing where zoo visitors tended to pause or gather, I made an initial selection of over 100 poem excerpts. I made
another site visit with these poems in hand. Having little sense at this stage of what poems were likely to resonate with the zoo staff, I felt it necessary to have a large enough selection that about 75% of it could be set aside, and new material brought in if needed. Kelliann offered additional suggestions for work to be included after her zoo committee had discussed and reviewed potential selections. After a month or two of back and forth exchange, we had winnowed down our choices to twenty-five or so poems. Then I reviewed the overall proposed installation, looking for gaps, balance, and breadth. We eliminated some additional poems at this stage. I was cautious in selecting any Native American material that we should have a clear and trustworthy idea of provenance. With one piece this was not the case, and the more we looked into it the more spurious the source came to be. At this stage I also looked carefully at cultural representation, wanting to ensure that major population groups (including Asian, African American, and Latino) from this region were included.

Jacksonville has a series of bioregional-themed botanical gardens. These are places where visitors frequently sit to rest in the shade and contemplate, and therefore they are very good sites for poems. The Asian Garden, for example, offered a perfect site for placing work from the “mountains and rivers” tradition. The St. John River vista was ideal for placing the Langston Hughes excerpt from “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” highlighting this topographical feature of the city with a work that links a sense of personal identity with the geography it occupies.

We chose words that might capture a sense of what people feel when they encounter the beauty, mystery, sadness, and complexity of nature. That meant poems that speak in a tone of elegy, as with Campbell McGrath’s “Manatee” and Ian McDonald’s “The Sun Parrots Are Late This Year,” and poems speaking in celebration, as with Robinson Jeffers’ “The Vulture” and the Inuit “Magic Words.”

The most important principle in curating the installation was to listen to the collaborators, both the zoo and library partners, to develop a sense of audience for the site and a sense of the values that shape the community’s aesthetic. The best advice I had in the process was Sandra’s encouragement that the process of selection was a conversation with the partners. That was very much my experience and I am grateful for the generous input and thoughtfulness of my Jacksonville partners.

Sometimes, when a bird cries out, / Or the wind sweeps through a tree, / Or a dog howls in a far off farm, / I hold still and listen a long time.

—Hermann Hesse, from “Sometimes,” translated by Robert Bly
My poems have always been filled with animal presences: turtles and swans, horses and goldfish, dogs and whales make regular appearances. I never questioned why until audiences began to ask me, and then I tried to figure out an answer; it seemed that the wordless called to me profoundly, and where no words dwell at all, the poet feels compelled to supply some. Animals make sounds and communicate constantly, but the symbolic entity which is the word seems to be human property, if you discount highly-trained parrots and gorillas, and a retriever’s remarkable ability to understand the word “fetch” even when he can never say it himself. In 2008 I published a book, *Dog Years*, a meditation on living with dogs which is deeply concerned with the relationships between animals and language.

When I first walked through the Audubon Zoo, the problematic relationship between words and looking at animals seemed central. How could poetry offer an invitation to the visitor to do more than look—or at least to deepen what we mean by “looking.” Though I had the wonderful model of Sandra Alcosser’s work at the Central Park Zoo, New Orleans is an entirely different place. The zoo is huge and busy, packed with school groups or children with their parents. How to create an opportunity to connect more fully with the animals on display? It feels decentralized and difficult to map in one’s mind; paths loop away and double back, and far into the zoo you come upon lakes full of waterfowl, swampy places, and even a South American pampa with a long, lonely boardwalk and llamas grazing undisturbed. But the dominant impression is of thronging crowds, and lots of distraction. I hoped that poetry could create points of stillness, occasions of reflection.

Brenda Walkenhorst, the zoo’s Education Director, was not only a welcoming and helpful guide but a collaborator from the very beginning. We walked together from her office to the large, circular fountain that centers the entrance to the zoo, and Brenda told me that she’d imagined a poem painted on the floor of the fountain, under the rippling water.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins, from “Inversnaid”

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**Mark Doty**
Poet-in-Residence, Audubon Zoo, New Orleans

**“Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet”: On New Orleans and the Audubon Zoo**

What would the world be, once bereft / Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left, / O let them be left, wildness and wet; / Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

—Gerard Manley Hopkins, from “Inversnaid”
From there we went exploring, and after visiting major areas of the zoo with Brenda, I wandered on my own for two days, noting any place we might consider placing a poem. I made sketches of exhibits, noting ways in which text might be employed in different contexts, and noting those creatures that particularly struck a chord in me. I identified about forty places around the zoo grounds that might work. An immediate challenge was the sheer size of the place; would the poems just get lost in the busy landscape? And how could they achieve a sort of coherence, at least moving in the direction of tying some diverse and complex realms together? Here was an Asian area, here a snack bar; here are the sea lions, in a beautiful old pavilion, and here is the Swamp with its evocation of bayou culture. How did all this fit?

Back at home in New York, with my list of possible sites in hand, I began to comb my own library, and then to range afield. The most useful and comprehensive resource proved to be Poets House, with its happily rangy library. I wandered the stacks half doing detective work and half seeing what might fall into my hands.

I wasn’t looking for poems to “illustrate” animal exhibits—not, say, a poem about a gorilla beside a gorilla. I was interested instead in poetry’s ability to get at essence, to point us toward the spirit of a thing. So, for example, for a particularly quirky bunch of exotic storks, who seem to like to walk a sort of tightwire displaying their unlikely grace, I thought of these lines from Andrew Marvell’s “The Garden”:

My soul into the boughs does glide:
There like a bird it sits, and sings,
Then whets, and combs its silver wings;
And, till prepared for longer flight,
Waves in its plumes the various light.

Placing this poem in imagined juxtaposition beside the storks, some interesting things began to happen. First, it wasn’t a poem about storks, so there wasn’t a literal correspondence between word and creature. Instead, Marvell’s poem seemed to say some things about birdness; it’s clearly based in observation (“whets, and combs” is quite precise), but this could be many sorts of birds. Whatever particular bird the poet observed has been translated into a figure for the soul, and thus we’re offered a template of the way that human consciousness makes metaphor of other creatures, seeking in them the mirror of our own selves. It’s an
elegant example, but it also contains a bit of mystery, as great poems do; it ends not on the trope of soul-as-bird, but returns to a rich, surprising image of the visual world. We can look at the storks and see “the various light” wave in their plumes, and contemplate how fine it is to be a body in the light of day.

And something else has happened too, I think, for those who slow down and take the poem in, and look perhaps from text to stork and back again: a space of contemplation has opened, a bit of reflective quiet in the bustling urban feel of the zoo. Poetry is doing its old work here: returning us to interiority, turning us back inward again.

My father-in-law liked the idea of having me in a boat / for whole afternoons. On the way out to les Fordoches / he pointed out the water moccasins sunning themselves / in Spanish moss clusters overhead, thick black coils / in delicate gray nests. He pointed them out on fallen trees / lying in the coffee-colored shallows at the front of his boat, / and the small alligators too sleeping in the mud flats near / the banks on either side.

—Darrell Bourque, from “Old Women Fishing from Bridges”

Levee, levee, / How high have you got to be? / Levee, levee, / How high have you got to be / To keep them cold muddy waters / From washin’ over me?

—Langston Hughes, from “Mississippi Levee”

It was a joy to choose poems for the other exhibits, 37 in all.

I’m pleased with their range, from Shakespeare to Neruda, Dickinson to a Mesoamerican poet of nearly a millennium ago who composed in Nahuatl. I’m delighted that there’s so much of Louisiana in the mix; back in the swamp are poems evoking bayou childhoods, Cajun culture, and the strangeness of two dreamy-looking white alligators. The zoo’s design team did fantastic work, economically installing poems in inventive ways and surprising places. I loved seeing Frank O’Hara’s lines carved into the concrete curb of a planter of tropical flowers, and Darrell Bourque’s poem (he’s the poet laureate of the state) painted on an old wooden door. There are evocations of New Orleans that seem especially trenchant: Langston Hughes praying that the levees hold, or the great Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert praying to be worthy of living in a great river delta. I’m happy with the polyglot character of the poems; they range across history and cultures.
The unity I’d hoped for seems to have appeared, too, for those who follow the trail of poems around the grounds. The signage is diverse in design but there’s something deftly coherent about the look; once people recognize a poem in its place, they seem to start looking for others.

And there’s a deeper coherence, too, which I first saw in this way. The late afternoon that I first saw the completed installations, I arrived at the zoo around closing time for a celebratory reception, and I could walk from poem to poem in the quiet of the cooling twilight. The poems did what I could barely imagine they would do: they seemed to make the inner life, the soul of the zoo, if you will, visible. It seemed beautiful to me, how the words asked one to see beneath the surface, to see our common life, ours and the animals’.

I’ll add that we’ve had some wonderful events, especially a poetry reading and jazz dance and dessert party put together by the great staff at the Latter Library. And then there was the night I got to sit up in the front of the little train, with a mike headset on, and lead a tour of the poems. It was the fulfillment of a fantasy I didn’t know I had: to lead a tour on the zoo train, pointing out the sights. Only the sights to be seen were the words of William Blake and Mary Oliver, Kay Ryan and Theodore Roethke. It was, and I do not exaggerate, heavenly.

—Walt Whitman, from “I Saw in Louisiana a Live-Oak Growing”
Faith and Hope and Selecting Poetry for Milwaukee County Zoo

A male hippopotamus, living in the Milwaukee County Zoo, is submerged in his outdoor pool, resting. Gradually the water starts to swirl, and it’s possible to see his huge girth beginning to rise from below. His small flippy ears appear and now his eyes open just barely above the surface. On the bank in a corner beside the pool, inscribed on a large stone, is Les Murray’s poem, “Dreambabwe.”

Streaming, a hippo surfaces / like the head of someone / lifting, with still-entranced eyes, / from a lake of stanzas.
—Les Murray, “Dreambabwe”

This song is for the elk / with its throat whistling / and antlers / above head and great hooves / rattling earth. // One spring night, elk / ran across me / while I slept on earth / and every hoof missed / my shaking bones.
—Linda Hogan, from “Elk Song”
And inside the Elk Yard at this zoo, words from “Elk Song” by Linda Hogan are painted in white on weathered boards leaning against a boulder in the shade of a tree, as if someone hiking through a meadow had left a message behind. Beyond, the elk can be seen grazing.

And an excerpt from Lucille Clifton’s poem “breaklight” is in raised letters on a metal ribbon draped before a glassy globe floating in a water-filled basin at the entrance to the Aquatic and Reptile Center:

light keeps on breaking.
i keep knowing
the language of other nations.
i keep hearing
tree talk
water words
and i keep knowing what they mean.

These are three examples of the 54 poems and excerpts from poems installed permanently on signs throughout the Milwaukee County Zoo as part of the Language of Conservation, a project that aims to heighten and enhance the experience of visitors to the zoo by offering them new perspectives on the earth and its living creatures through poetry; to evoke new bonds between zoo visitors and the animals and the lands they come from; and to present a wholly new and positive experience of poetry.

My primary responsibility as Poet-in-Residence for the Milwaukee Zoo was to select the poems for installation, in consultation with my zoo and library partners. The completed project is a work of art resulting from this collaboration. Each poem is presented in a unique way on a sign designed especially for it and placed in a specifically chosen location. The poem, the font used, the size and form of each sign, the materials composing its design, and the location of the installation, all functioning together, result in an experience not like any other artistic endeavor.

Lines from “In Beauty May I Walk,” for instance, by Anonymous, Navajo, are painted on the eaves of a long boardwalk leading into the Peck Welcome Center. The poem is chanting and prayer-like, as this excerpt demonstrates:

On the trail marked with pollen may I walk
With grasshoppers about my feet may I walk
With dew about my feet may I walk
With beauty before me may I walk
With beauty above me may I walk
With beauty all around me may I walk

People are actually walking as they read the poem, the lines in rhythm and cadence with the pace each chooses. “We hear people reading the poetry out loud as they walk. How cool is that?” one of the Zoo artists reported to me.

Engraved on a wing-shaped stone in the Aviary Free Flight Exhibit, where birds fly above, circling and perching high on trees and rocks, are these lines, “The birds don’t alter space. / They reveal it.” from Li-Young Lee’s poem “Praise Them.”

The three stanzas of Marilyn Taylor’s “In Tanzania” conclude with these lines:

Now the deep African sky
lifts a glittering claw;
we, the vulnerable, hear
the rasp of death
and twitch our haunches
as the golden cat
begins her dance.

Each stanza appears on a separate sign framed by branches fastened with rough rope. They lead down the walkway to the Big Cat Compound, where an excerpt from “The Other Tiger” by Jorge Luis Borges is painted on the wall opposite the expansive quarters where two young tiger brothers romp and wrestle together while their mother lounges, dozing.
When I was invited to participate in the *Language of Conservation*, I accepted with pleasure, as I was already deeply committed to the idea of placing poetry in public outdoor spaces. The first time I remember seeing poems written on signs placed outdoors was in 1987 along a footpath in the forest behind the farmhouse where Robert Frost once lived in Franconia, NH. The poems were painted in white on brown boards, as I recall; Frost poems installed stanza by stanza, line by line, along the way. I walked on that path often during the summer weeks when I lived in the farmhouse. I saw the words of these poems covered by tree shadows shimmering with wind, sometimes in stillness. Once the silver thread of a cobweb lay across the words. Once a sign had become dislodged by the previous night’s storm. Sometimes the poems were less visible in fog, sometimes wet and fragrant with forest dew or raindrops dripping slowly from branches above, adding their rhythmic sounds to the meter of the lines. The words presented in this way took on a new quality. The poems possessed the physical presence of a world constantly changing in time with the shifting details of its place. The words had taken on the life, the spirit, of the forest, and the forest had been enhanced by this exchange. Since then I participated in a number of projects that placed poetry in outdoor, public settings, each project gaining in my sense of its importance, until in 2009 I was invited to participate in the *Language of Conservation*.

The search for poems to be installed on signage at the Milwaukee County Zoo began with the basic faith that people will nurture and protect what they take into their hearts, what they come to value and love. My collaborative partners and I hoped that the poetry we chose and the art of the signage together would highlight the grandeur and uniqueness of each animal, engaging the hearts of visitors to the zoo, promoting new connections between them and each individual animal, and that those connections would develop into a deepening respect and regard for the species as a whole that each animal represents. This faith and this hope were paramount during our selection process.

Holding to this faith and working toward these goals, I established several criteria for the poems we chose:

1. The poems selected should celebrate and respect specific animals and their specific characteristics and offer a new perspective and insight on each, for example the poem “Dreambabwe,” by the Australian poet Les Murray, quoted above.

Along the Wolf Woods Boardwalk, beyond which can be seen the forested Wolf Compound, and occasionally a glimpse of one of the wolves watching from the shadows of a thicket, are lines by Pamela Uschuck ending with these words, “What is the wilderness without the beast / and its nations of mystery?” from “Wolf Lecture.”
2. Installation poems should have the power to awaken and evoke emotional responses, in the ways that the best poetry has always done—with subtlety, suggestion, and appeal to the senses, by concrete imagery, by questioning and wondering, by employing original language and the music of the language, by possessing authenticity and honesty, for instance these lines from “This Grizzly” by Reg Saner:

an individual,  
huge-humped and hulking, a sulker,  
bilge-bellied, bossy-broad, is a boreal and forest-fearsome crush of claws,  
is claws alive
with bloom, with tundras of mud;

3. In addition to a few complete poems, the installation should include memorable lines from within a poem that are complete in themselves and can stand alone, like the lines from “Praise Them” by Li-Young Lee, quoted above.

4. There should be poems with different levels of accessibility, ranging from brief, wonderful poems that can easily be read by children or anyone reading at a third- or fourth-grade level, to rich poems that require a little more time but that offer rewards for that time. My goal was that everyone visiting the zoo would find at least one poem that he or she liked enough to read more than once.

5. The installation should include a variety of voices, tones, and approaches—serious, lyrical, musing, witty, compassionate, contemplative, light-hearted, celebratory.

6. Poems from many countries, continents, and ethnic groups—India, Australia, Iceland, South America, Europe, Africa, China, and the USA, including Native Americans, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans—should be included.

7. The Milwaukee County Zoo is a large zoo with open landscape areas, undisturbed stretches of forest, a large lake, and smaller ponds. I searched for poems that would complement these features and their seasonal changes, thus heightening awareness and pleasure in the wild land and lives of these areas, a common countryside of our nation.

And does it matter that light, late afternoon, / makes every willow leaf, every mallard feather, / each bristling filament in the doe’s freckled ear / show itself for what it is—a strand of gold / to airy thinness beat, a sort of spirit-tip to tug / us out of the big picture, put us in touch / with the far edge of things where the heart // has been in hiding...”
—Eamon Grennan, from “What Matter”

8. I looked primarily for contemporary poems, believing the language of contemporary poems would be most likely to reach and touch zoo visitors. However, our collection of poems does include a few from other literary periods, with some familiar lines from Wordsworth, Blake, Robert Louis Stevenson, Hopkins, Dickinson, Whitman, and others.
Millions of people leave their homes and travel every year to zoos, parks, and preserves, to mountains and oceans, to visit canyons, rivers, lakes, forests, and deserts. Many signs are erected in these places; some give instructions or directions or warnings; some list data, the historical and ecological facts of the location; some are advertisements. Such signs can be helpful and necessary, but people travel to these sites for a variety of reasons. Many come to remember, to restore old connections, or to rekindle essential perspectives. Many come to marvel at the existence of vigorous lives other than human. Many come for the respite of wide spaces, or for the strength and affirmation of the wilderness. And many are not quite certain why they have come until they arrive and meet again the full force of the bountiful, beautiful, often shocking and unpredictable power of the earth and its life from which we have arisen.

All of these reasons should be respected and acknowledged at the sites and by our arts. The beginning lines of “America the Beautiful,” which came to Katharine Bates in July 1893 as she looked out over the land from the top of Pikes Peak, are eminently appropriate to that particular scene. The words speak of the land and her feelings for the land. “O beautiful for spacious skies, / For amber waves of grain, / For purple mountain majesties...” “O beautiful...” I can hear the gasp of revelation inherent to those two words, a shared recognition of utmost importance.

Expressions of astonishment and gratitude for the earth in all its details of life are abundant in our literature and are being written today by talented poets living in every region of the country, of the globe. As we are affected and altered by the living earth, I believe the earth is altered by the words we choose to use as we experience its lives and its features. We have a vibrant heritage of poetry that has always attempted to touch what matters most to the heart and core of our being, to capture in language the music of our deepest fears and our most energetic pleasures, and to celebrate that which is forever mysterious throughout the wild universe, our home.

This art is primarily outside and tangible, on and of the earth, affected by sun and shadow, the time of day, the wind and the weather, snow and frost, the falling of a leaf, the cry of a bird, the shouts of children.

Throughout the process of selecting poems, I worked closely with the Zoo Director, Charles Wikenhauser; Director of the Creative Department, Marcia Sinner; and her colleague, Julie Radcliffe. Judi Gloyer at the Milwaukee Central Library was also helpful in searching for particular poems and suggesting others. Whenever I had gathered 25 to 30 potential poems, I would send them for review to my three Zoo partners. We would then have a conference call to discuss each poem and decide whether we wanted to keep it or eliminate it. After several lists and several conference calls, we settled on a final group of 54 poems. Chuck, Marcia, and Julie were all good, knowledgeable readers and gave helpful advice and suggestions. I was eager to hear their opinions, as they knew the Zoo, its inhabitants, and its visitors better than I did. The four of us agreed on every poem in the final collection.

The finished installation is a creative collaboration between poetry and the visual arts. The words of the poems, the design of the signs, and their location work together to evoke an artistic experience. This art is primarily outside and tangible, on and of the earth, affected by sun and shadow, the time of day, the wind and the weather, snow and frost, the falling of a leaf, the cry of a bird, the shouts of children. The experience of the signs and their poetry will constantly vary, just as all of these elements are constantly changing. The themes and the goals of this project meld with the processes of the earth, reflecting and becoming one with the earth. The functioning of this collaborative art is also a message in itself.
Summary of Outcomes

At Central Park Zoo and at all five of the zoos of the replication project, design teams worked collaboratively with their colleagues and the poets-in-residence to present poetry and poetry fragments in a variety of materials (plexiglass, vinyl banners, stone, paint, and so on) in locations where one would not expect to read anything, let alone poetry. The poems are not simply “substitutes” for the familiar museum-style signage that accompanies all zoo exhibits (and which some research shows few visitors read). Instead, they complement the animals, providing a richer experience. In some places, poems are inscribed directly onto the materials of the viewing panel, not seeking to compete with the animals for the attention of the public, but providing a conceptual overlay or interpretive element. Elsewhere, poems are arranged laterally, moving visitors along paths. Poems appear on rafters, benches, stairwells, fountains, and other unexpected places. The poems may be playful, ironic, spiritual; full of longing or desire, but they impose no single particular approach or understanding.

While research shows that most zoo visitors remember few facts from educational signs, a study conducted in the Central Park Zoo discovered that nearly half of visitors could cite specific poems they had read. Those results were matched at each of the five zoos of the replication project, where—like at Central Park—interviews were conducted both before and after the poems were installed.

At all of the zoos, responses demonstrated an extraordinarily positive reaction to the poetry installations and extremely high level of retention, with most people able to cite specific poems they had read. At most of the five zoos of the replication project, half of visitors who read poetry during their visit explicitly indicated that they had drawn connections between the poetry they read and conservation issues, consistently mentioning that the poems caused them to think about our human responsibility to act as stewards of wildlife and about the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world.

The full results of the research can be found in the “Evaluation” section of this volume. Specific findings to be highlighted here indicate:

- 70% to 90% of visitors recalled seeing poetry during their visit.
- 82% to 92% of those who could recall seeing poetry could cite specific poems or locations.
- 70% of visitors reported liking the poetry, while less than 1% disliked it.
- 56% to 66% felt that the poetry was easy to understand.
- 54% to 70% felt strongly that the poetry was relevant to “what the zoo is about.”
- 24% to 40% said specifically that the poems made them think about issues of conservation.
- A significant percentage, 13% to 38% of visitors, noted that the poetry changed the quality of their experience at the zoo, prompting a slower, more thoughtful, or reflective experience.

The results were extremely consistent across the five zoos, suggesting that poetry installations on this model will work—anywhere—to deepen the experience of visitors to the zoo and convey the zoos’ conservation message.
Section II

REPLICATION
Sandra Alcosser
Poet-in-Residence, Language of Conservation

Poet to Poet: A Meditation on Selecting Poems for the Language of Conservation

I remain convinced that an appeal for conservation must reach the heart, not just the mind.
—George B. Schaller, A Naturalist and Other Beasts: Tales from a Life in the Field

~

Goal for poets: to rebuild the emotional bridge to the natural world.

~

As you begin this work, make yourself aware of the vision of each cultural center (zoo and library). Become familiar with the knowledge to be shared, as well as the philosophy of each institution. Interview the directors and other members of the staff who are responsible for designing and sharing that vision.

~

Familiarize yourself with the installation spaces: select poems that invite visitors into the exhibits. What activities take place or could take place within each? How might poetry interact? Do a careful analysis of ecotone, niche. Identify areas of play. Be aware of traffic flows, language, cultural patterns, ages of visitors.

~

Art is a conversation. Do what you can to evoke that conversation.

~

On June 26, 2009, Bill Moyers said in a national television interview with W. S. Merwin, “I had a portent of our meeting the other day. We took our two small grandchildren to the Central Park Zoo. And entering the preserve they have there of the Rain Forest, every visitor looks up and sees a quote from W. S. Merwin. Did you know that?”

My words are tied in one / With the great mountains / With the great rocks / With the great trees / In one with my body / And my heart.

—Yokuts Prayer
Engage the reader in mental and physical play. Rather than replicate poetically what a visitor sees (e.g., polar bear installation/poem about polar bear), consider triangulating a space, creating a kind of diaphoric metaphor. The viewer will take in two disparate suggestions (animal/poem) and participate in an active creation of meaning.

Two Thoughts, Two Lines
Excerpt from interview transcript, suburban Atlanta family visiting Central Park Zoo, Oct. 11, 2004:

Mother: “Remember you read a poem?”
Son: “In the zoo?”
Mother: “Yeah, we said, ‘Who wrote that?’”
Son: “If it was the end of the world, the last tree on Earth to survive one last minute…”
Mother: “…You’d want to plant a tree.”
Son: “That’s how I feel about it. One last life to say goodbye to all your fellow…”
Mother: (addressing interviewer) “It just was touching. It made it more intimate. I do think. So I loved the poetry…. and it’s good for the kids. They don’t tell right away, but it goes in their brain and stays there. It’s a seed. It plants a seed. You don’t know when it’s going to sprout.”

We learned from our evaluations that brevity was most important.

In placing the poems, make use of iconic spaces. For instance, in Central Park, where the visitor is surrounded by towering buildings and trees, we placed the following excerpt from W. H. Auden’s sequence “Woods”: This great society is going smash; / They cannot fool us with how fast they go, / How much they cost each other and the gods. / A culture is no better than its woods. Many people contacted us to discover more about these lines. One of those people was the environmental minister of Iceland, who had no idea that Auden had not only spent significant time in, as well as written about, Iceland, but also that Auden considered it his iconic landscape.

Cultivate a range of tones. Political Animals: Public Art in American Zoos and Aquariums, by Jesse Donahue and Erik Trump, describes the Central Park installation this way: ...the poems capture not just a diversity of time, style, and eccentricity, but also a diversity of sentiment. Some are playfully ironic (Gertrude Stein’s “My Little Dog”), others solemn (W. S. Merwin’s “On the last day of the world / I would want to plant a tree”). Some take a “scientific” approach (Richard’s piece on penguins), others mystical (the Inuit translation). No single attitude toward animals emerges.
Allow yourself, as curator, to be surprised and to make mistakes. Know that whatever you do, someone else would do it differently, and they would like to let you know. Honor your vision once you have shaped it. The Central Park Zoo installation was selected for all ages, but some members of focus groups thought poetry should only be for children. Keeping to our original vision, we selected a few additional poems by children's poets who had worked in service to the natural world. These poems and poets turned out to be preexisting cultural icons to many visitors, and the familiarity of the poems exhibited in a new context created a sense of recognition and excitement for both children and adults.

This is a collaboration in which scientists, poets, and librarians honor the life of the planet, the animals, science, and poetry. They honor the conservationists who care passionately about the earth and the sustainability and quality of life upon it. To collaborate well, conversation is important. Scientists, librarians, poets—walk, visit the animals in as many hours and seasons as possible. Break bread together.

We had one rule in our collaboration: we don’t want our visitors to leave dumber than when they arrived. We selected poems that were factually correct.

Evening Star who gathers everything / Shining dawn scattered / You bring the sheep and the goats, / You bring the child back to its mother.
—Sappho, Fragment 47, translated by Diane Rayor

Select poems from across centuries and continents to demonstrate the depth and breadth of the human relationship with the physical world. And select poems that resonate in that particular location. In Central Park we selected work of poets like Marianne Moore, who spent a great deal of time at the Central Park Zoo, and we engaged in a kind of call and response with other poetry installations in New York City. For instance, poems by Walt Whitman and Frank O’Hara join metaphorical arms on the gates at Battery Park City and do a kind of pas de deux in the red panda pavilion at the zoo. One of the ideas we repeated throughout the Central Park installation was our shared familial life with the planet: Evening Star who gathers everything / Shining dawn scattered— / You bring the sheep and the goats, / You bring the child back to its mother (by Sappho, born circa 630 B.C. in Greece, translated by Diane Rayor). We also selected poems that showed our shared animal life, such as the Inuit poem, “Magic Words.”

I am I because my little dog knows me.
—Gertrude Stein, from The Geographical History of America
In the very earliest time,
when both people and animals lived on earth,
a person could become an animal if he wanted to
and an animal could become a human being.
Sometimes they were people
and sometimes animals
and there was no difference.
All spoke the same language.
That was the time when words were like magic.
The human mind had mysterious powers.
A word spoken by chance
might have strange consequences.
It would suddenly come alive
and what people wanted to happen could happen—all you had to do was say it.
Nobody could explain this:
That’s just the way it was.
—Translated from the Inuit by Edward Field

Magic Words
after Nalungiaq

In the very earliest time,
when both people and animals lived on earth,
a person could become an animal if he wanted to
and an animal could become a human being.
Sometimes they were people
and sometimes animals
and there was no difference.
All spoke the same language.
That was the time when words were like magic.
The human mind had mysterious powers.
A word spoken by chance
might have strange consequences.
It would suddenly come alive
and what people wanted to happen could happen—all you had to do was say it.
Nobody could explain this:
That’s just the way it was.

—Translated from the Inuit by Edward Field
Sidebar: Some Essential Details

Poems in Translation

When you use poems in translation, review a number of translations to find the best. Always credit both poet and translator. Ideally, poems should appear in their native languages as well as in translation; however, in some cases you may have difficulty locating the original passage, translator, or the font for a native language. Try to be impeccable about this, but accept that it may not always be possible.

Permissions and Credits

All poetry selections must be made well in advance of production. The permissions process can take up to three months. Working backward from the date selected for the opening of the installation, allow time for design, production, and installation, and set a deadline with your team for final approval of a complete selection of poems for installation.

You will also need to determine, together with the other members of the team, what special permissions might be desired (media, on-site, ephemeral, product) beyond what will otherwise be requested. The standard letter for this project requests permission for the installation; additionally it says: the lines could be printed in an accompanying free brochure about the poetry signs at the Zoo, and we would be happy to reprint a credit line to your institution in the brochure. We also request permission for other publicity uses of the sign for this program and related zoo and library programs.

Information needed by the permissions’ specialist includes: the poem and title of the poem; the poet’s name, birth, and death dates, and country of origin; and your source (title, publisher, copyright, edition, and page number). Most poets are happy to contribute their work with the understanding that they are supporting a non-profit group that works for the health and sustainability of the planet; however, sometimes it is necessary for the poet-in-residence to engage in correspondence with the creator of the poem, the publisher, or the literary executor.

Line Breaks, Punctuation, and Proofreading

Do not guess at line breaks and punctuation; always verify text from the original source. If lines must be run together, line breaks still must be indicated. Two lines are separated this way / . Two stanzas are separated like this //.

Expect errors in fabrication. In addition to careful proofreading by members of the staff, be sure you have the opportunity to proofread the poems before fabrication, and before and after installation.

Oscar Wilde said: A poet can survive everything but a misprint.
Design Strategies for Poetry in Zoos

Introduction

The installations created for the Language of Conservation project were aimed at insinuating metaphors into the visitors’ experience in order to provoke a more conservation-minded synthesis of what is being presented in the animal exhibitions. This chapter provides an overview of the design principles that guided decision making and examples of how these principles were implemented. It covers some of the basic concepts that inform contemporary zoo design, and some strategies that emerged as successful in the experiments reported in this publication.

Background

Poetry installation at zoos falls under the broad category of “environmental graphic design” because it cuts across three related design professions—graphic design, landscape design, and architecture. The principles presented below summarize what have emerged as best practices by the author and his colleagues working in zoos, but this overview does not attempt to represent the entire field of environmental graphic design nor the emerging trends in retail design that continue to advance thinking in the field.

Reading in the Zoo

Zoos, like all museums, are criticized for not being sufficiently educational, in part because observational research demonstrates that few people are seen reading signs. However, interview research contradicts these observational studies. Researchers studying sign reading behavior at zoos discovered that regular visitors recall signs they have read during previous outings and that some visitors intercepted by surveyors for the study of poetry installations at the Central Park Zoo were able to recall sign wording, even if they were not witnessed reading the sign at the time of the interview.

At the same time, zoos are parks. People read while walking, and they walk in groups and use signs and information as a supplement to
Successful environmental graphic design fits seamlessly into the architectural surroundings, as if the building surface has a voice.

Successful environmental graphic design fits seamlessly into the architectural surroundings, as if the building surface has a voice. Good design does not draw attention to itself; rather, it recedes into the background, so that the content it seeks to convey can take the foreground. Like good industrial design, a successful environmental graphic design is minimal to the point that it is forgettable, while the content remains with the reader as if it sprang from inside their own mind.

The Voice of the Environment

We recommend that designers think of a poetry installation as if it is the voice of the building or surface on which it will be found. Poetry should integrate with existing design elements and features (see Figures). Figure 1 depicts a test design for an installation in which the setting of the poetry, the backrest, allows the bench to further blend with its surroundings. In Figure 2, stair risers provide an unexpected home for a poem. Notice that the use of paint color helps to blend the sign with the surroundings and integrates the staircase into its surroundings. Each of these Figures illustrates how the integration of the poem into the environment, whether natural or manufactured, supports the nuanced, but clearly perceptible, presentation of content.

Graphic Considerations

Poetry embedded into wall surfaces speaks to an institution's values and beliefs. Carved letters invoke historical architecture that used poetry to articulate the philosophy that guided an organization, such as a library's espousal of the right of all individuals to have access to knowledge, or the postal service's commitment to serve the public good. In our time, too, when poems are selected that speak to beliefs that are intrinsic to the mission of an institution, embedding the words into the fabric of the building links the institution to the words.

Another strategy is to blend the color of the sign surface with the color and texture of its surroundings (see Fig. 3). The installation depicted in Figure 3 might have been more successful had it included a background texture using subtle leaf patterns to blend even more closely with the foliage and if the entire surface had been covered by the sign. This strategy allows the reader to focus on the words, rather than the edges and limits. Figure 4 illustrates the consequences of focusing on design over text; the designers attempted to blend the surface with the pavers, but did not succeed. Here the contrast draws the reader's eyes away from the text to the edge. Textured surfaces, however, are problematic for readers with low vision or those who have difficulty reading. ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) guidelines generally recommend a minimum of 70% contrast between letter and background, and many institutions recommend that a textured sign surface should allow no more than 5% color and shade variation under the letters.

Successful installations will interpret and integrate with what the reader can see directly beyond the edge of the sign. Figure 5 depicts a successful example of this principle. In that installation, the eye is not drawn to the edge of the sign, but to the view beyond, as if the wall is speaking about itself, the trees, and the buildings in the distance.

Textual Considerations

The poem itself is the most important part of the installation, and should have the most contrast and largest font in the installation. The author's name should be smaller or have less contrast (see Fig. 1). The goal is not to teach the names of the poets, but to let the words seep into the consciousness of the reader.

When translations are used, it is preferable to place the original and the translation side by side or in close proximity to one another, possibly even with the original slightly larger in size than the translation so readers are aware of which should be perceived as the most true to the original work (see Fig. 4). The translation should never appear as if it is above the original, because placement implies hierarchy and might suggest that the translated version was the original intention of the poet (see Fig. 6).
It is now common knowledge that “right reading” signs in an outdoor setting are most comprehensible when the text is bright and the background dark. As noted earlier, seventy percent contrast has emerged as a standard that meets ADA guidelines and is most easily perceived as legible by most readers. There are specific DOT (Department of Transportation)-authorized fonts that increase readability, but management of color, surface, and reflection are the main tools for ensuring readability.

Type scale is also an important consideration. Where possible, type size can be made to feel monumental (see Figs. 1, 3, 7 and 8). In the evaluation of the installation depicted in Figure 3, observers did not detect anyone reading the sign, and visitors interviewed as they left the zoo did not claim to have read this sign; however, these interview participants recalled the words and sentiment of this poem when they described the signs they liked in the zoo.

In reference to text length, empirical research into label design has produced some rules of thumb to ensure the maximum readability for the highest number of visitors.

- Text of fewer than 35 words invites a higher number of readers than longer signs (see Figs. 1 and 2 in particular).
- Bullet phrases are scanned and more quickly understood than sentences.
- Most visitors to museums fail to read beyond 150 words on a sign.

Testing

To prepare for installations of simple signs like the one illustrated in Figure 3, it is recommended that designers create a temporary paper sign before completing the design to assess the impact of the work. Ask people who have not seen the work before to walk past the sign and read anything they see—without stopping. If they can read the entire sign without stopping, the optimal scale and length will have been confirmed.

Durability

Testing readability is important for these signs, but durability is also critical. For example, Figure 2 depicts an installation that is subjected to unanticipated wear and tear, as shoes commonly leave black streaks. In this case, while the variegated background helps the sign blend into the surroundings, dark brown would support that goal while also mitigating the effects of the shoe prints.

In Figure 10, the designers experimented with size by using sidewalk chalk to determine the correct scale. Visitors were careful to walk around the chalk at the beginning of the day, but it did not survive. Permanent installations can be made using the vinyl asphalt adhesive materials used for sidewalk crossing signs. This specialty item can be cut by sign companies, like other vinyl lettering, but requires proper priming and adhesive application to ensure durability.

Maintaining Design Integrity During Production

The management of design through production requires a great deal of attention from all involved in the project. Design fonts should be delivered to the production company that is going to manufacture the words; it is not uncommon for the production company to use their own version of the font specified, which can lead to problems. There are often many versions of the same font; some traditional fonts are produced by more than one font software supplier and in some cases have been updated to work more efficiently with sign production software. These substitutions will not necessarily retain all the attributes of the design. They can lead to minor mistakes in word length, spacing, line length, line breaks, character relationships, or symbols. Obviously, line breaks represent the most significant departure from a poet’s intent, but the other variations embedded in the design files all have implications for the final installation. Production staff familiar with making highway signs are often very willing to take the initiative to add unexpected line breaks, punctuation, or capitalization if they are not given explicit instructions about the design intent. To ensure the poetry manufacture meets the original design intent, proofreading is best done four times: before and after manufacture, and then again before installation and after.
Figures:

Figure 1, Wildlife Conservation Society, Central Park Zoo. For this test, the designer imagined creating a bench with monumental letters. Notice the subtle type for the author’s name.

Figure 2, Audubon Zoo, New Orleans. This innovative approach integrates the sign into a stairway and makes the reading part of the interpretation of what is seen as the visitor walks up the stairs.

Figure 3, Wildlife Conservation Society, Central Park Zoo. Here the designer used green to blend with the foliage and stretched the sign to cover the surface from edge to edge. The length of this work makes it easy to read while walking.

Figure 4, Wildlife Conservation Society, Central Park Zoo. This temporary installation used “floor graphics,” a vinyl adhesive, to test the layout before commissioning a permanent carving in slate.
Figure 5, Wildlife Conservation Society, Central Park Zoo. Here the designers demonstrate the power of juxtaposition. This work is about 4’ high and demonstrates the salience of words contemplated as part of a larger whole. Again, the scale is monumental.

Figure 6, Chicago Zoological Society, Brookfield Zoo. This installation demonstrates the presentation of a poem in English and in its original language. This presentation ensures that the translation is easily available to the reader without seeming to give it primacy.

Figure 7, Little Rock Zoo. Note how the designers used this installation to let the building speak, articulating the mission of the zoo itself, by drawing the edge of the image to cover the entire surface.

Figure 8, Chicago Zoological Society, Brookfield Zoo. The monumental scale of the lettering and its prominent placement allow this installation to encapsulate the message of the project and interpret how to see the exhibition beyond.
Figure 11, Milwaukee County Zoo. The designers spread this long Navajo Indian poem along the rafters of a covered boardwalk. Note how the rhythm of the poem is emphasized by the placement of the lines of the poem and how the natural rhythm of walking reinforces and embodies the poem’s own rhythm.

Figure 10, Wildlife Conservation Society, Central Park Zoo. The presentation of this Wendell Berry poem was intended to integrate the poetry into the walkway experience. In this example, the poem was spray-painted with a stencil but more durable installations can be achieved with adhesive road sign materials.

Figure 12, Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens. This innovative overhead installation demonstrates both the challenge and the opportunity created by backlighting.
Key References Regarding the Principles Guiding Museum Label Design:


Smithsonian Institution (2000). Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design. www.si.edu/Accessibility/SGAED
The single question posed most frequently to all of those who have been involved in the *Language of Conservation* is, “How can I bring this project to my zoo?” or “my library; my botanical garden; my nature preserve or bike path; how can I bring this project to my city?” The entirety of this volume is intended to answer that question, but for those who are inclined to brevity, what follows is a capsule discussion of the issues involved in designing a successful project.

**What is the first step in getting this kind of project off the ground?**

The first step is to engage others in your community with the ideas behind the project, especially other stakeholders in your institution. We have discovered that the photographs of the installations, together with readable versions of the poems used, and a brief synopsis of the results achieved are effective tools in gathering support for the project.

In order to sustain excitement while the work goes forward, shared involvement in the project is essential. A working group should be identified to perform the majority of the work involved; however, information about the project should be shared widely from the earliest stages of inception through its conclusion. As many people as feasible should be engaged in providing responses and feedback, especially those who are most closely involved in the regular activities of the zoo and its education or outreach programs.

**Is an institutional partner always a good idea?**

Collaboration with another institution offers rich rewards: deeper penetration into the community; a broader, richer community dialogue; the opportunity to leverage the investment of time and capital to meet multiple goals; and the development of a wider coalition, with all of the attendant rewards these results suggest. However, successful collaborations demand time and effort to understand another’s point of view and find innovative resolutions to any challenges that are presented. Collaborations among unlike institutions require wide-ranging conversation to discover areas of synergy as well as potential pitfalls, with the under-
standing that some aspects of what each institution takes for granted will come as a surprise to its partner. Careful planning will help to eliminate some of these trouble spots, but often partners will come away from a planning session frustrated by dialog that seems to go around in circles, unaware that the difficulty is rooted in disparate premises. Identifying those assumptions and finding a way past them that meets the needs of both institutions is essential for success.

**What sort of budget will be needed?**

Funds will be needed to support the design, fabrication, and installation of the signage itself, the work of the poet-in-residence (not a minor item—this work requires broad expertise and the dedication of a significant amount of time); a permissions specialist, if you decide to engage one; potentially fees for the permissions themselves; artist fees for any public programs your project includes; printed materials; publicity; and staff time for all of the institutional partners involved.

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**What is involved in selecting a poet-in-residence?**

The selection of a poet to work with is among the most critical decisions you will have to make. There are poets living and working in every community in the country, but you will need to work with one who is deeply committed to issues of conservation and to your project, broadly knowledgeable of the vast range of literary traditions this project draws upon, open to engaging with the zoo and understanding its needs and concerns, devoted to engaging with the staff in a collaborative process, and possessing a personality and working style that fits well with those in your community. In addition, selecting a poet who has a national reputation will help to bring wider recognition to your project and may help to ease your permissions process, encouraging faith in your efforts.

**How should the project be managed?**

The majority of the work will fall to a relatively small group of individuals who are responsible for bringing the project forward. The make-up of that group will depend on the culture of your own institution and the enthusiasm of the individuals within it. Included in this group could be staff persons representing Interpretive Language; Education and Outreach; Design; and Facilities. These individuals will work most closely with the poet-in-residence, and represent the project to the other members of your staff and to the public. One member of this group should manage the scheduling and coordination of the project as a whole.

**What else should one be aware of in determining the overall parameters of the project?**

The overall design of your project will depend on a number of additional considerations:

- **Location and density of signage**—How many signs, over how large an area? Indications are that the denser the signage, the more powerful its impact. The Chicago Zoological Society, for example, decided to install its poetry in only one section of the zoo, Great Bear Wilderness, believing that the same number of signs distributed throughout the entirety of the zoo would have diminished the impact of the installation.

- **Materials**—In selecting materials for the signage, it is necessary to weigh permanency with effectiveness. Low-cost materials can be used to maximize the number of signs, but...
rarely will they provide signage that is long-lasting. A strategy used effectively in New Orleans was to select low-cost materials for some of the signs, but to invest deeply in others, the fountain pictured on p. 48, for example.

Are there any issues concerned regarding copyright?

It is essential to request permission of the publishers, and/or authors, or literary executors for the use of the poems you select. The permissions process will take several months. In some cases a fee may be assessed, but fees are often waived for non-profit and educational uses. Generally it is best to request permission from the publisher with a letter that describes your project and its goals, as well as the specific poem, or portion of the poem, you wish to use. It is important to phrase your request to cover all of your needs, including possible use of the poem in a brochure about the project. Permission for any merchandising efforts you are contemplating should be requested separately and with a focus on the educational value of the effort.

An exception to the rule would be poems that are in the public domain, which generally refers to poems that were published prior to 1923. This exception, however, does not apply to poems in translation, unless the translation is in the public domain as well.

Copyright law can be complicated. In some cases, it may be a challenge to locate the person needed to provide permission. For our projects we delegated this work to a specialist (see “Project Consultants” in the Appendix).

If for no other reason than that it is the courteous thing to do, when it comes to permissions, we recommend meticulous care to ensure that all permissions are in place in advance of the use of poetry in any installation or publication.

How is a timeline for this kind of project developed?

The process of developing a timeline most often begins with a target date for the opening of the installation. The target date may be determined by funding parameters, by publicity goals, or by visitation trends. Beginning with that date, work backwards, allowing months for fabrication and installation (during which time publicity efforts can go forward); allow three months for permissions (during which time design of the signage can proceed); and six months for the site-specific selection of poems. Project planning, selection of a poet-in-residence, and team building should be substantially complete before then.

This exercise will demonstrate whether or not your target date is too ambitious. You can then consider changing the target date or resolving the difficulty in another way, such as beginning to seek permissions as soon as you have a small group of poems you’re sure of, then building the rest of the collection around those few.

Audubon Zoo, New Orleans

“this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire”

—Shakespeare, from Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2

What is the most effective way to get publicity for the project?

The opening of the installation is a natural opportunity for publicity. You can make the most of it by rolling it out over several days: plan a press conference at which public figures in your community are invited
to address the goals of the project; the poet-in-residence or zoo director can lead a tour of the installation at this gathering of the press; plan special events for individual constituencies such as educators; and plan public events such as a reading by the poet-in-residence. Including a local public library as a principal partner can help enormously by engaging its constituency.

But publicity for the project should neither begin nor end there. Through the use of social media and your blog you can build expectation and involvement in your community. Once the installation opens, possibilities are endless. Some of the strategies used by the zoos participating in the Language of Conservation included providing materials in print and on-line such as maps of the installations and brochures about the project, activity booklets for youngsters, even tee-shirts and other merchandise featuring the poems for which permissions had been obtained.

What about public events and other programming initiatives?

The Language of Conservation included an extensive program series presented by partnering libraries, co-sponsored by the zoos. Public programs broaden dialogue within the community by providing opportunities for engagement and interaction.

Conservation-related events can be arts or humanities centered and they can be offered to audiences of all ages. Public programs will also help to spread the word about your project. For more information about programming in public libraries, please see the Poetry in the Branches Sourcebook, available from Poets House.
In a time of unprecedented challenge to the health of the planet, the lives of the creatures it supports, and the viability of a way of thought that pits human welfare over and against these lives, the Language of Conservation is a project that is rooted in uncommon forms of collaboration: between art and science, between museum (i.e., zoo) and library, and between individuals within each of these. The leadership team itself represents an unusual grouping, comprised of a leading biologist, Dr. Dan Wharton; architect, psychologist, and evaluator Dr. John Fraser; poet, scholar, and teacher Sandra Alcosser; and arts administrator and poet Lee Briccetti and her team.

As a working group, the members of the leadership team were already well-known to each other, having collaborated previously on the pilot project at New York City’s Central Park Zoo. That project demonstrated some compelling results: exit interviews documented an 85% retention of the poetry among zoo visitors and a 21% uptick in comments reflecting an awareness of the self in relation to the natural world. Those results, together with the deep trust that emerged among the collaborators, suggested that the nature of the collaboration itself—built on a relationship between peers, each an authority in their own field, working across disciplines to achieve a common goal—was an essential factor in the success of the project.

The five-city replication project was built on the premise that that sort of collaboration was essential to achieve unreserved buy-in among all partners—and to ensure that the poems selected reflected the values of the zoo (both those that are universal among zoos and those that are particular to each zoo); and that the programs offered by the library were fully integrated into the project.
Building the City Teams

The cities invited to participate were selected because of the potential for strong collaborative relationships between the zoo and the library. Four of the libraries had successfully participated in Poets House’s Poetry in the Branches, a capacity building project that helped them develop in-depth poetry programs and expanded poetry collections. Among the zoos, each institution had a commitment to arts programming as part of their conservation mission.

The leaders of the institutions in each city knew of one another but few had actually worked together before. All agreed to join in the original grant proposal on the basis of established trust, most indicating that the proposed project offered a rare opportunity to build new bridges of cooperation within their communities.

To develop the partnerships, the project leadership first outlined the roles, responsibilities, and financial obligations of each partnering institution and confirmed these relationships in a contract with Poets House. The project leadership also worked individually with each partnering institution to ensure that expectations were clear in regard to their role and what they might expect to emerge from the project.

Once these contracts were confirmed and the community-based partnerships were in place, Sandra Alcosser, who acted as coordinator of the poets, worked directly with each institution to understand their concerns, working styles, and aspirations for the project in order to select a poet-in-residence who possessed the personality, skills, and beliefs to promise a good fit, as well as a national reputation as a poet and deep commitment to the cause of conservation. Potential matches were then ratified by the participating poets, zoos, and libraries.

Shared Vision

The experience of the project leadership team in developing the first installations at the Central Park Zoo helped clarify the need for clear lines of communication between all partners based on mutual appreciation for one another’s radically different expertise, a mutual sense of trust, and a shared vision for the final outcome.

In the pilot project, however, everyone lived in the same city. In the five-city replication, face-to-face meetings with the poet-in-residence were limited to a “kick-off” symposium, which brought all partners together for an intensive initiation into the project, followed by several relatively brief visits over the course of three years. This was among the most serious challenges to the development of a shared vision for the project. The kick-off symposium offered our single best opportunity to meet that challenge.

The goals of that first 2-day meeting were to introduce partners to one another and to the members of the project leadership; to lay the groundwork within each city team for strong, positive working relationships that could be sustained across distance and across discipline; to provide an experience with poetry that would inspire commitment to the project; to provide professionals from all three disciplines with a deeper understanding of the mission and working styles of the others; to inform partners fully about the process and outcomes achieved in the pilot project; to provide detailed information regarding lines of communication, timelines and deadlines, reporting, and all of the other mechanisms that had been developed to manage the project over the next three years; and to develop a shared investment in the project between city teams, so that each had the sense of participating in something larger and potentially more powerful than anything that could happen in a single city.
The Kick-off Symposium

The symposium was held in New Orleans, one of the participating cities. The sessions alternated between readings by the poets, presentations by leadership, and shared presentations on the overarching goals of each institution and their disciplines. The program was structured to take advantage of emerging synergies and discussion was encouraged throughout the course of an intensive two-day meeting.

Tip sheets, based on best practices developed in the Central Park Zoo experiment, had been prepared by the leadership team to provide guidance for each aspect of the work ahead: selecting poems; designing signage; and developing poetry- and conservation-related collections, displays, and programs in the public library setting. Versions of some of these tip sheets can be found in the “Replication” section of this volume. Presentations by members of the leadership team, supported by the tip sheets, ensured that each city team came away from the symposium with the knowledge they would need to develop a successful project.

Also provided at the symposium was an integrated schedule that would allow members of each discipline and each institution to understand the activities of the others and of the leadership team, so that the efforts of all could come together seamlessly. Goals for installation dates were coordinated to support media efforts by Poets House and goals for library-supported poetry programs were established to help build a community conversation about conservation issues.

Activities were designed to encourage each community to find a process that was appropriate to the culture of its member institutions and to the skills and working styles of its individuals; presumably such a process would naturally engage the potential for innovation. The leadership team sought to advance the theory behind the Language of Conservation by enlisting the efforts of the five cities to test its principles, each in its own way.

Lastly, shared meals and social time encouraged cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional conversations that helped to shape a project language and ethic and build a sense of trust and reciprocity among all participants.

Ongoing Project Management

Following the symposium, an online wiki was created to support collaborative discussions across groups and to share resources. Though the site became a useful filing cabinet for photographs and book title recommendations, the effort underscored for all involved how essential personal interaction is in maintaining strong communication.

During the following years of the project, Poets House continued in the role of project manager, checking in with each of the teams regularly, coordinating travel, responding to questions as they came up or passing them on to other members of the leadership team, working with all members to develop a book list for library collections, managing the permissions process, developing a speakers’ bureau for the final set of public programs that were offered in the libraries, and coordinating national publicity for the project.

Collaboration

As the project progressed, various challenges to collaboration were experienced in each of the cities. The disparity between the core mission of the two kinds of institution was expressed in disparate approaches to funding (and, therefore, attitudes about the provision of free services); disparate approaches to publicity (libraries requiring a significantly longer lead time for publicity that is generally handled on a system-wide basis); and disparate approaches to audiences (with libraries generally catering to smaller audiences, providing in-depth access to a broader range of information). Each city team was encouraged to discover its own solutions to these challenges.

The project leadership recognized that bringing together two traditionally separate cultural institutions with different discourses, missions, and methods of working required substantive investment in developing a shared language and encouragement to take liberties in the creation of unique relationships, suitable to their own communities, and capable of being sustained through a sense of trust and reciprocity.
The ultimate success of the Language of Conservation depended not only on the work done individually by participating libraries, zoos, and poets-in-residence, but also on how the institutions were able to partner with one another. Since many of these institutions had not worked together previously, there was a lot of excitement about the possibility of collaboration as the project got underway. In the words of Bettye Fowler Kerns, Associate Director of the Central Arkansas Library System, “The Language of Conservation project finally gave us a chance to get together and do something.”

Given the intense political debate about global warming and other threats to the environment, zoos and public libraries are natural partners in the creation of programs that provide information and initiate dialogue about these issues. Both share as core to their missions the role of educating the public, whether through providing free access to information of all kinds or by informing visitors about the lives of the animals and threats to species viability.

The role of the libraries in the Language of Conservation was twofold: to provide access to collections that were rich in both poetry and conservation-related materials, including the books from which zoo installations were drawn, and to provide a space for public dialog through conservation-related poetry programming. These functions worked together with the zoo installations to provide reciprocal and reinforcing elements in each community.

Much of the programming that was offered was based on a Speakers Bureau of readings and talks by nationally recognized poets, organized by Poets House. These included presentations by each of the poets-in-residence designed for cities other than the one in which they had worked, as well as such poets as Annie Finch, Camille Dungy, and John Felstiner. A standing room only audience braved a malfunctioning air conditioning system in New Orleans to attend “Indigenous and Endangered: An Evening of Louisiana Poetry” with Louisiana Poet Laureate Darrell Bourque and others. Naomi Shihab Nye visited Jacksonville and Red Hawk mesmerized audiences in Little Rock. In addition, each library arranged programs tailored to local audiences, many of them designed collaboratively in partnership with the zoo.
But navigating the cultural differences between the public library world and zoos proved difficult for some partnering organizations. Libraries are free for all, while zoos depend on paid admissions to support them. Accustomed to large crowds motivated by an interest in animals, zoos can draw audiences with relatively spontaneous programs, while libraries have to do more publicity and planning to bring together those with shared interests. Expectations regarding audience size differ accordingly. Dealing with staff changes, particularly during the economic downturn, can also present significant challenges. However, a commitment to work together paid dividends for both institutions.

Building a deep sense of mutual regard is essential in establishing a partnership that can overcome differences as they become apparent. The first step is getting to know one another as organizations and as individuals. Even before meeting, many Language of Conservation partners examined one another’s website and traded publicity materials. Following a first meeting off-site, staff from each institution visited the other, toured one another’s facilities, and learned about one another’s programs and services. Often lunch meetings followed, over which prospective partners considered ways they could support one another’s programs and manage joint publicity.

Ultimately, libraries and zoos developed a range of strategies to encourage patrons to visit both institutions, from designing joint publicity and materials to collaborating on programs. Brookfield’s adult book discussion groups gathered to learn more about the project and chose conservation-related titles to read to youngsters making gym shoe gardens, which would later be planted at the zoo. Some other examples of collaboration included:

- All Jacksonville Public Library cardholders received discounted admission to the zoo.
- Staff from the Milwaukee County Zoo and the Zoological Society of Milwaukee provided live animal programs for 316 children during the summer at thirteen branches of the Milwaukee Public Library.
- The Milwaukee County Zoo also created and printed bookmarks with the catchphrase “See the animals and poetry at the Zoo; Read about the animals and poetry at the Library,” with five images from the collection of animal prints in the library’s Krug Rare Books Room. The bookmarks were distributed at both the library and the zoo.
- Central Arkansas Library featured zoo activities in their “Make a Splash” summer reading program and held the finale of the program at the zoo. They also offered free passes to the zoo for children in the summer reading program to ensure equitable access to the finale event.
- The Chicago Zoological Society collaborated with Riverside Public Library to sponsor a poetry contest on project-related themes in which eighty-eight children participated, and designed poetry installations for display in the youth services area of the Riverside Library.
- A number of libraries featured programs presented by zoo personnel. Andre Copeland, for example, head of Interpretive Programs at the Brookfield Zoo, discussed North America’s iconic animal with twenty library visitors during his “Bison Paving the Way” presentation.
- Some zoos presented programs organized by library staff as well. In New Orleans, for instance, after tours of the installation conducted by poet-in-residence Mark Doty, librarians Missy Abbott and her colleagues from the Latter Library organized readings of many of the poems featured in the installations.
- All libraries and zoos worked together on the press conferences announcing the opening of the installations and co-sponsored opening day celebrations.
- All libraries purchased the books of the poets whose work was incorporated in the zoo installations and developed book displays in support of the project, while zoo staff advised on nature and conservation titles to be added to library collections.
- And so much more, including co-sponsorship of poetry bookmark design contests based on the installations at the zoo, co-production of activity booklets for youngsters, and collaboration on related community conservation and revitalization projects.

The project has created deep and lasting collaborative bonds between the participating libraries and zoos, inspiring libraries to want to continue to work on conservation issues and inspiring both zoos and libraries to work together and with other community partners on local conservation-related projects.
Creating a Community of Practice: Zoo, Library, and Poet Collaborations

Introduction

The Language of Conservation project was conceived from the outset as a project that would be driven by collaboration of the partners at the five replication sites, with broad guidance from the leadership team. As previously described, project implementation was completed within each city by a three-part partnership among a zoo, a library, and a poet-in-residence who was not local to the city, but was selected for her or his expertise with the environmental conservation poetry canon. Creating successful collaborations within each city was envisioned as a strength of the project because it would allow partners to leverage their particular expertise to accomplish shared goals. Creating new collaborations can also present challenges, however, as individuals and institutions mediate competing agendas, priorities, and cultures to create a smooth working relationship.

To develop understanding of how this collaboration process worked, the Institute for Learning Innovation (ILI) undertook an evaluation to document the process, to look for evidence of impact on its partners, and to provide lessons learned for institutions that seek to create similar partnerships. This evaluation incorporated periodic reflections by partners during the project and in-depth telephone interviews with stakeholders near its conclusion. From the documentation and partner reflection about the process undertaken by the cities, we have gained a better understanding of the benefits, challenges, and strategies for creating successful partnerships in a project such as the Language of Conservation. Here we present the key themes, lessons, and strategies revealed by this project for creating and negotiating strong partnerships, as well as related information from evaluation of similar collaborative projects, providing guidance on creating communities of practice within a similar collaborative effort.

As for us: We must uncenter our minds from ourselves; We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident As the rock and ocean that we were made from.

—Robinson Jeffers, from “Carmel Point”
Shared Vision and Participatory Process

Data indicated that much of the project’s success was related to the initial development of a shared vision of the project’s goals, purpose, and opportunities. This occurred in several ways, but it grew from a foundation established by partner sites at the project’s Kick-off Symposium, at which zoo staff, library staff, and poets-in-residence spent several days becoming familiar with the project’s vision, collectively developed the unique goals and expectations for their city, and built personal and working relationships. The symposium created a strong feeling of community and commitment to the project among those who attended, and was an important starting point for the project at each new site. As implementation continued, this common purpose helped ground each project and partnership, even in times of difficulty.

In addition to its role in establishing shared vision and goals, this in-depth, kick-off experience added value by supporting city team-building. One valuable attribute of this experience was that it provided an extended period of sustained off-site time, which allowed individuals to focus on the project and develop a better understanding of one another’s goals, working styles, and approaches to problem-solving. Participants reported that the event created a strong bond within city teams and a sense of camaraderie that enabled the project to begin on firm ground. Participants also indicated the importance of having the poets involved, which instilled an understanding of each poet’s personal background, working concerns, and views on the project and conservation.

As the individual city projects progressed, it proved to be critical that the spirit of shared vision and participation was maintained and integrated into the process. While each city followed its own path for implementation, a common successful strategy that emerged across many sites was a strong participatory and iterative process that involved key stakeholders representing all partners—zoo, library, and poet-in-residence. This was clearly demonstrated in the lengthy process of poetry identification, review, and selection for inclusion in zoo exhibits. In these cases, when cities established iterative and collaborative processes that fostered respectful dialogue among poet, zoo staff, and (in some cases) library staff, the result was stronger networks and greater satisfaction with the exhibition products. Partners who engaged in participatory processes and wide-reaching zoo-library collaborations also expressed strong commitment to ongoing community partnerships, collaborations, and extensions of the vision and goals of the Language of Conservation project.

Employing a participatory process within and across institutions seemed to foster and support institutional and staff buy-in to the project as a whole. Establishing buy-in emerged as an important task for advancing the project, particularly among zoo partners, who found that the concept of using poetry in zoos was challenging for most staff to imagine. Looking across the sites, those cases where institution representatives created an inclusive and participatory process that involved staff at all levels within the institution were most effective at generating true buy-in and commitment to the project. Less participatory strategies, such as internal presentations about the project or poetry selection processes that were left to the poet, with the zoo and library partners pursuing independent tasks, were generally less effective at achieving buy-in and commitment. Key to this participatory strategy was the leadership of a single staff member or small group of staff within an institution (zoo and/or library) who not only took the role of project manager, but also served as a project advocate within the institution. In this role, he/she proactively generated support and advanced the initiative with staff and leadership. This was not a role explicitly named in the project design but one that emerged naturally in each site by individuals who believed strongly in the purpose and the goals of the project and felt a commitment to see it succeed. The importance of a person taking on this role of project “champion” has been noted in the literature as key to success in a multi-institutional partnership (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Linden, 2002).

What might a successful participatory process look like? One example came from Jacksonville, where the zoo established a cross-institutional committee structure to guide the poetry selection process. The process began with an initial site visit by the poet-in-residence to the zoo and community that included many discussions of opportunities, placement options, and themes for installations. After the visit, the poet-in-residence spent a great deal of time developing a first selection of poetry options. Led by the project leader at Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, a review committee was established which included representatives from a wide range of departments and job types within the zoo, as well as representatives from the library. Sub-groups of the committee reviewed portions of the list of poems provided by the poet, gave feedback and input on the ideas, and invested substantial time in an iterative process between poet and committee to refine and hone the list and the exhibition strategies to reach a final selection and installation plan. This cross-institutional approach of active staff engagement with the poet and the process was highly beneficial for the success of the partnership in Jacksonville.
Institutional Culture and Philosophy: Striking a Balance

While the commitment to a shared vision set a common ground for this collaborative project, the collaboration also brought together institutions with different missions, structures, cultures, and approaches to their daily work. Bridging disparate cultures can be a challenge to negotiate, but institutions that seek to develop these types of collaborations must address such differences. The challenges faced and the solutions partners used to address them demonstrated that each institution and partnership required locally-based solutions compatible with the partnering institutions’ cultures and values. Some specific differences reported by project partners included philosophy about access and finances, institutional timelines, processes for program planning, decision-making protocols, and the differing expectations of audiences in each venue. In all cases, the partners invested time in identifying the source of the underlying difference and finding a mutually agreeable solution that would meet the needs of both institutions in pursuit of the larger project goal without undermining their respective institutional missions.

One notable example of a potentially insoluble conflict that was amicably resolved surfaced during the planning stages of the Little Rock partnership. Although both the library and zoo were enthusiastic and shared a strong commitment to the project’s goals, they discovered a practical barrier in program planning when they reached the topic of admission fees. At their core, each institution had a firm position about the role of admission fees. The regional public library system placed a strong value on free admission and open access to any and all programs they offered, whether at the library, the zoo, or elsewhere in the community. This value related to the principles central to the role of libraries and access to information in society. In contrast, the zoo operated under a city-mandated fee-for-service system in which revenue generated from gate admissions was essential to their financial viability. From the zoo’s perspective, when Language of Conservation events were held within the zoo, it would not be financially possible to provide free admission to all guests, as this would undermine their financial model and contravene the requirements of their city funding. These conflicting mandates, central to each institution’s operating model, appeared to present an insurmountable barrier. However, the team engaged in a difficult process to resolve this conflict, convening meetings of project participants and communicating throughout their organizational hierarchies in order to ultimately develop a compromise solution for specific planned programs. The final resolution found the library underwriting admission to the zoo on days of Language of Conservation events in order to ensure free admission and equitable access for all community members without contravening the zoo’s city-mandated financial system.

The need to achieve balance with institutional cultures was not limited to work between zoos and libraries. Poets-in-residence were similarly tasked with understanding the culture of the communities where they were to work, the tone and tenor of community issues, and the nature of zoo visitors and library users in their partner cities. Since none of the poets-in-residence lived in the partner communities, this became one of the first tasks that poets tackled as they met, visited, and began a working relationship with their partner cities. Across all cities, partners attributed their success, in part, to the effective matching of a poet’s personality and work style with the priorities and values of the community partners. Further, poets’ investment of time and effort to learn about, understand, and respond to the specific culture, needs, and audiences in order to develop their work was central to perceived success by partners.

Zoo and library partners often mentioned that the poets exceeded their expectations, and were thoughtful, dedicated, and willing to invest the time required to develop a good understanding of the local culture. These efforts were frequently viewed by library and zoo partners as essential to the ultimate success of the exhibitions and programs. It was this behavior that helped to build a sense of trust that extended through the entire process, beginning with the Kick-off Symposium and each poet’s first site visit to the zoo and community. Frequently, the site visit included not only tours of the zoo exhibits and grounds, but in-depth discussions and brainstorming about potential installations, visits to the library, team-building activities with project partners, and shared experiences around the local community. Each of these experiences helped the poet to gain more knowledge about the spirit and priorities of the local culture. They also helped to increase the level of trust within the team, which was reinforced by the subsequent ongoing communication surrounding poetry selection, institutional involvement, and, frequently, a participatory process for installation and live programs.

The management of differences in institutional cultures and philosophies is perhaps the most critical component in determining the success of collaborative effort. Experiences with this and other collaborative projects (e.g., Heimlich & Yocco, 2009) suggest that when these differences arise, successful resolution can usually be attributed to an immediate and well-considered process to acknowledge the differences and identify solutions that will allow all partners to capitalize on the
strengths they bring to the project without compromise to their missions. In the world of university-museum partnerships and university-museum-K–12 partnerships, ILLI has found that time and process are often sources of institutional culture clash. While some institutional cultures are comfortable starting projects that are theoretical in nature and have a degree of ambiguity and processes that slowly unfold or are refined over years, other types of institutions expect pre-defined outcomes, applied solutions, and shorter turnaround times to deliver programming. In situations that involve these two types of institutional cultures, the partners who are comfortable with ambiguity may make certain assumptions that don’t hold true for partner institutions that feel a greater need for specificity early in the process. As with the Language of Conservation sites, attention should be paid to these cultural differences, the conflicts should be articulated, and solutions pursued as early in the process as possible.

Clarity of Roles, Responsibilities, and Benefits

Other attributes of the project that emerged as influential in the success of the collaborations were the details regarding institutions’ and individuals’ roles, responsibilities, and benefits within the partnership. The reflections of the partners in the project suggest that creating conditions in which the details and administrative mechanisms for these collaborations are abundantly clear is fundamental to a robust partnership and smooth, effective process. One challenge faced in this project was that some partners observed that the project design created a perceived imbalance between zoo and library, with the majority of the immediate, tangible activity happening around the zoo, poet, and exhibit creation. Library staff often felt their role was to support the zoo portion of the project and that their programs were not considered part of the core program. Partners reflected that being more explicit about the role, responsibilities, and benefits of library partners from the outset could increase their engagement and strengthen the project relationship. The literature on partnerships in non-profit organizations asserts that the degree of involvement in collaborations can range widely, from basic cooperation to full-fledged partnership, and research has recommended that collaborations articulate at the outset what level of involvement is expected from each partner for a successful effort (King, 1998; Mattesich, Murray-Close, & Monsey, 2001). Reflecting on this concern, the project leadership felt that future collaborations might benefit by shifting schedule and program activities for the libraries to be more active earlier in the process or acknowledging the imbalance more explicitly within the project’s design in order to align expectations of the library staff with the overall goals.

The variety of organizational structures and decision-making processes across all institutions (even those of the same type) provided another key lesson. Each implementation plan developed a unique set of roles and responsibilities that were crafted at the community level to suit the institutions and the personalities of the individuals charged with managing the collaborations. The vast differences illustrated by the many institutional partners in this project made it clear that there is no single “collaboration recipe” to recommend for future groups. Rather, collaborations need to be adaptable and responsive to each organization that undertakes such an effort. While the desire for structure and guidelines about responsibilities was clear, any project seeking to replicate this effort will need to balance the need for clarity with flexibility and a willingness to customize a project’s process and to the community.

Communication: Clear, Consistent, and Frequent

Finally, how communications occurred among the partners was a central factor that emerged across the full range of strengths and challenges experienced by the partners in these collaborations. One important attribute reported by the five partnership cities was the development of strong and positive rapport and communication among zoo, library, and poet-in-residence. Nearly all of the partner cities described this as a central factor that led to their success. Each stressed the importance of building systems for working together and arriving at a mutual understanding in order to create a positive, collaborative working relationship.

The role of communication proved to be particularly important as partners worked through unanticipated challenges. The need for clear, consistent, and frequent communication among all partners was essential for preventing and addressing challenges as they emerged and for continually strengthening working relationships. In many cases, review of the challenges (both small and large) revealed that a period of non-communication by one or more partners—whether the poet, zoo, or library—seemed to be at the root of the problem. When there was a lapse in communication, updates, or responsiveness, uncertainty about the project or commitment could emerge in the absence of other information. To redress this difficulty, groups often chose to institute a regular communication strategy, whether through standing meetings or scheduled appointments, so all partners could track how the project was progressing, even if the progress slowed for a period. These regular check-
in points became useful opportunities to inform a partner about project status and to surface concerns about potential conflicting short-term priorities that could divert attention away from the project. While the communication challenges that did emerge in this project were generally addressed, the findings underscore that any multi-party collaboration must invest in a detailed and regular communication effort that, while respecting the time of the partners, ensures that any progress, no matter how small, is reported in order to ensure the project continues to move toward a successful outcome.

**Conclusion**

The processes and experiences of the *Language of Conservation* project demonstrate that collaborations among libraries, zoos, and experts from outside of both fields can produce a project that is greater than the sum of its individual parts. The greatest value was found to flow to those institutions that worked to integrate the project across the organization and that encouraged participation by many members of the staff, and where open dialogue among the partners helped to build a shared understanding. Through this integration and sharing, the partners were able to leverage their individual strengths and unique perspectives to make a collectively created product that is stronger than that which any individual might have achieved working in isolation. Shared control ensured that the project met local needs and concerns, but did not undermine the scholarship at the core of the zoo installations or library programming. Beyond the achievements and products generated by the project as a whole, these collaborations also resulted in positive, longer-term impacts on partners’ commitment to community networks. Evaluation results showed that the project was seen as a success by the collaborators within the city partnerships, with each feeling that goals were achieved and individual agendas were met. Zoo and library partners described concrete ways that they intend to build on the networks created through the project and how they are now sharing expertise and resources (beyond the scope of this project). Several partners even described concrete plans for future collaborations. It is hoped that the lessons learned from the *Language of Conservation* will continue to grow into ongoing, stronger networks within the five participating cities, and will serve as an example for other collaborative efforts in the future.

**References**


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Future Trends: Zoos, Libraries, and Specialty Collections

Introduction

As purveyors of reliable information and significant contributors to America’s culture, museums and libraries have, arguably, garnered a great deal of trust. However, ideas about how culture is shaped and where information is discovered and debated have changed radically as 21st century media has made the virtual a real part of everyday life. As a result of this media shift, libraries have come to direct the majority of their efforts on access to knowledge rather than replicating collections, and museums have come to recognize that they perform an important role in facilitating information synthesis for their users. Both offer public value by archiving materials that are considered important to the culture, even those collections that include the genetic material of species facing extinction.

In 2009, the Institute of Museum and Library Services published a challenging discussion guide (Pastore, 2009) based on a convening at the National Academies that sought to consider the Future of Museums and Libraries. The author of this chapter participated in the discussions that led to that publication. The ideas presented in this paper are built on the discussions held during those meetings, the findings discussed in the IMLS Guide, and the ways those premises have been expanded through efforts of the Language of Conservation project. The Language of Conservation project may have challenged the current, if shifting, place of libraries and museums in our culture. The IMLS Guide suggests that libraries and museums “work with their communities in defining their relationships with the publics they serve and chart a course for success… Museums and libraries can do this by continuing to work with one another and

My child, then put aside your fear: / Unbar the door and walk outside! / The real tiger waits you there; / His golden eyes shall be your guide.
—A. D. Hope, from “Tiger”
Through discussion of four of the main themes discussed in the IMLS Guide, this chapter examines how the Language of Conservation project provides both inspiration and a vehicle for re-envisioning the public value created by libraries, museums, and other cultural institutions in collaboration.

The four themes are:

- Changing Definitions & Roles of Museums and Libraries
- Shifts in Power & Authority
- Museums & Libraries as the “Third Place”
- New Models & Structures for Collaboration

### Changing Definitions & Roles of Museums and Libraries

*Humanities at the Zoo*

Contemporary zoos have emerged as museums of conscience, devoted to a shared global mission to become the voice and advocates for a new age of environmental conservation. They seek to use their vast audience to engender new social norms of behavior that will support more sustainable choices by the general public. The IMLS Guide included a discussion of how museums can address, and reconcile, the needs of local communities and the emerging and evolving world of global knowledge.

Zoos have been ahead of this curve, largely because of their involvement in two critical conservation movements that have taken place at a global scale: international cooperation on the development of zoo and aquarium breeding programs were designed to ensure the viability of zoo and aquarium populations for the foreseeable future, and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species effectively banned the extraction of species from the wild. As proponents of the protection of endangered species, zoo collaborations have moved well beyond the issue of species breeding to recognize a shared global mission to promote sustainability and environmental conservation. Zoos have tried to promote this abstract concept of more sustainable individual behavior that can benefit wildlife survival, for better or worse, as a keystone in their science learning goals. Indeed, unlike other museum types, zoos have aggressively pursued collaborations and shared tactics so thoroughly that they operate more like franchises than individual institutions.

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*So heavy / is the long-necked, long-bodied heron, / always it is a surprise / when her smoke-colored wings // open / and she turns / from the thick water, / from the black sticks // of the summer pond, / and slowly / rises into the air / and is gone.*

—Mary Oliver, from “Heron Rises from the Dark, Summer Pond.”

So heavy / is the long-necked, long-bodied heron, / always it is a surprise / when her smoke-colored wings // open / and she turns / from the thick water, / from the black sticks // of the summer pond, / and slowly / rises into the air / and is gone.

—Mary Oliver, from “Heron Rises from the Dark, Summer Pond.”

in concert with the many voices and worldviews of the publics they serve, creating new partnerships and practices that place these institutions as vital centers of community life.” Today, libraries and museums have the opportunity to redefine themselves, to embrace knowledge as a community asset, and to recognize their expansive and dynamic contribution to public value when they work in concert rather than isolation.
Given their shared international mission, the challenge for zoos is to bring this collaborative spirit and practice home to their local communities, supporting this general effort among their community peer cultural institutions in the process. Herein lies the opportunity for humanities institutions such as Poets House. Cultural institutions devoted to supporting discourse and cultural exploration have long histories of support. From experimental dance and theater to poetry reading in public places, these institutions have worked tirelessly to engage the public. But engaging with museums of another kind—a key part of the mechanism of this project—is a new effort, still in the experimental stage. From our first experiments at the Central Park Zoo in 2005, the collaborators on this publication took the first tentative steps toward imagining how to find an entry point for poetry in the zoo. But we determined that faint-hearted small signs and readings were not sufficient to test the power of metaphor to transform a place and the experience of that place. We recognized that to truly enact the model of zoos as humanities institutions, we would need to colonize the visitor experience, to lay seeds throughout the park that could spark the imagination and change visitors’ conversation. To this end, we asked that the buildings and other spaces themselves be given a voice, that nooks and crannies become interpretive experiences, and that the poet-scholars be empowered to support, enhance, create, and provoke visitors’ emotional experiences as part of the overall gestalt of the visit rather than a stand-alone exhibition.

**Knowledge Work**

Librarians and their primary supporters understand that their institutions seek to connect users to knowledge, to help users develop skills for enhancing their life experience. While this may be common discourse among the library community and their frequent users, the perceptions from outside the library community have not necessarily kept pace with the actual direction these institutions have taken. Museum professionals, like the general public, may not be fully aware of the transformations happening within libraries, nor of the assets available to the library professionals who help them achieve their knowledge goals. Attending to such issues is part of the paradigm shift that museums and libraries are starting to explore, and this project represents a first step toward understanding the synergies between these two historically different groups.

There are, however, mission conflicts between institutional types that emerged in this project that may offer some insight into what the future holds for community cultural institutions. One underlying cause may be the historical distinction made between libraries and their museum counterparts. Political discourse over the past 40 years has placed museums such as zoos in the category of “paid attraction,” increasingly transferring the burden of support to philanthropy and user fees, on the assumption that entertainment dollars can support this aspect of culture. In contrast, libraries have remained immune from the assumptions that underpin the critiques leveled at fee-for-service public sector operations. Library missions generally assume that free access is essential to their work, even while their public funding dwindles. Many libraries have turned to secondary revenue streams including event rental and food services, but retain their core principle that programs and access to knowledge must remain free for their users. Although libraries may face fierce opposition to their determination to continue to provide free access, all but a few museums have lost the battles for the funding necessary to support free access. Both may promote access to knowledge, but the operating assumptions of these two cultural institution types diverged long ago. As they consider their shared goals and synergies, the political/economic narrative that links user fees to knowledge access will require direct attention by museums and libraries alike. More importantly, if knowledge and cultural engagement are at the heart of both institutions, then future museums and libraries will need to confront, head-on, the economic argument that restricts access to those at the upper end of the income pyramid in America.

This project sought to demonstrate that zoos and libraries share a common vision regarding access to knowledge that can overcome their historical separation. While zoos have an instrumental goal of instilling conservation values in their users and libraries’ goals are centered on helping users understand the principles of authenticity and authority in information, these institutions share a common cultural goal. This project suggests that efforts to break down the assumptions that divide these two fields of cultural work can create greater public value as users move freely between the information offered through the collaboration. The future of zoos and libraries lies, in part, in identifying and nurturing what they share as facilitators of knowledge production and engagement—overcoming, rather than contrasting, how their facilities achieve these outcomes.
**Shifts in Power & Authority**

The IMLS discussion guide acknowledged that traditional power structures related to transmission of knowledge from the institution to the user have dissolved over the past few decades. As discussed above, collaboration often brings together institutions with different structures, cultures, and approaches to their daily work, and these diversions in practice can present challenges to the sense of authority each institution maintains that may no longer be relevant to their users. It is now commonly understood that both libraries and museums, including zoos, represent places where knowledge is shared 1) among users and 2) in both directions between institution and users. This project extended this understanding by suggesting that knowledge is also built at a community level when users engage in this dialogue at more than one institution, and that this knowledge construction is enhanced when two cultural institution types pursue similar (though not necessarily identical) questions in concert. Also, this project suggests that the free exchange of professional skills and knowledge between two historically separate institutions can create an enhanced knowledge world in the community.

The *Language of Conservation* programs held at libraries and the installations and programs at zoos were not intended for comparison. Rather, this project proposed that there are synergies for users experiencing how power and authority can be reflected in multiple institutions. In providing users the opportunity to explore a theme across institutions, these programs also brought the question of authority both to the individual users (who, it is assumed, hold the ultimate authority over their own learning) and to the community itself. Indeed, the findings from these studies may only have touched the surface of what is possible when cultural institutions share efforts at surfacing information, engaging in a dialogue with other institutions about how each negotiates and promotes access to information.

**Museums & Libraries as the “Third Place”**

Another theme pursued in this project as an expansion of the IMLS Guide on the future of libraries and museums is the concept that museums represent a “third place”—a safe zone for the pursuit of knowledge by many members of a community, a place where discussions can arise, and a common concourse for sharing perspectives can be encouraged. This project challenges the assumption that individual museums or libraries alone are a “third place,” suggesting instead that these cultural institutions together represent a more common “third place.” That is, many scholars and practitioners have used one facility—museum or library or other cultural institution—as their reference for venues for social exchange of information, but we suggest with this project that the suite of cultural institutions frequented by users from various backgrounds and for various reasons can represent a community’s third place, a migratory and place-based forum that manifests during events and seasonal programs in different buildings or institutions to pursue knowledge exchange on a common topic. This migratory community conversation can challenge our assumptions about the solidities or brand distinctions between types of cultural institutions, whether library, zoo, or other type of museum, and can inform or remind us that all cultural institutions in a community are participants in civic discourse, making up a third place comprised of many (both diverse and unified), where opinions and ideas can be debated, discussed, and shaped.

**New Models & Structures for Collaboration**

The IMLS Guide asserts, “New models and structures for collaboration among museums and libraries and other organizations can work to develop effective solutions to the economic, social, and environmental challenges of the 21st century.” The *Language of Conservation* experiment suggests a new model for learning in communities that recognizes and, indeed, values the interdependence of cultural institutions in each other’s fate and future. We proposed that poets and storytellers bring together historically divergent institutions to pursue advancement of an idea within a community and to catalyze a community conversation. By sharing authority with a provocateur, or provocateurs, in our case poets from outside of a community who have devoted their lives to describing conditions around the grand challenges of our time, the community develops new knowledge. The collaborative structure of this project suggests that each community has its own knowledge tradition and that each institution within that community holds a unique perspective on that tradition. We suggest that in sharing authority across institutions and introducing a catalyst, the community/city itself became the unit of study in this project, and that thinking as a city–culture can offer new perspectives on what the future of museums and libraries may hold.

**Conclusion**

In the face of a challenging economic climate, libraries and museums have the opportunity to redefine themselves, to embrace the pursuit of knowledge as a collaborative cultural effort, and to recognize their unique contribution to the discourses at play. The *Language of Conservation* project provides exciting insights into the larger discussion surrounding
the future of these and other invaluable cultural institutions. The project sought to expand thinking, not only about conservation messaging, but, more, about how free-choice learning is not an individual pursuit, nor the purview of a brand of museum or library, but rather an emergent cultural community movement, resident in a multiplicity of venues. And as knowledge sharing migrates into new media formats in homes and institutions, these venues will become more entwined and boundaries between them less apparent and even unnecessary. This project demonstrates that working together, museums and libraries can overcome economic deprivation and can support vibrant democratic debate that will define how the country hopes to respond to the immense challenges it faces.

References
Introduction

The Language of Conservation is an experiment with three goals: to determine how humanities programming can expand or alter the experience of zoo-going; to determine how conservation poetry programs resonate with library users; and to challenge how new museum/library collaborations alter thinking in the cultural community. Irrespective of the popularity of these programs, the learning that is at the center of this experiment challenges traditional assumptions about what zoo experiences can do, uncovers assumptions that have limited collaborations in the past, and finds new options for extending library programs beyond their walls and into communities that may not necessarily be reached through traditional avenues.

To undertake evaluation, it is important to recognize that the outcomes of any collaboration must meet the missions of both collaborators. Evaluation is not new to libraries or zoos. Both have sought to measure their achievements; however, these achievements are characterized in different ways. Both institutions have moral structures in which they work and aspirations for their users that look different when placed side by side. Zoos seek to engender a conservation ethic in society, to impact attitudes and behavior in order to help people to live sustainably with the nature on which people depend. Libraries seek to support the advancement of knowledge in society, to provision thinkers with reliable and trustworthy resources, and to help build a better society by supporting the equitable exchange of ideas and movement of information throughout their communities. To undertake evaluation, it is important to recognize that the outcomes of any collaboration must meet the missions...
of both collaborators. In this case, these were broadly that the libraries’ missions and the zoos’ missions were enhanced in new ways that benefited both user groups and the organizations with whom they interacted.

During project conception, project developers often imagine a number of ways in which a project will contribute value to individuals and communities served by the project. Evaluation helps institutions and staff articulate those anticipated values and impacts and then measure the degree and the nature of those impacts in the final implementation. Evaluation provides evidence and documentation of the project’s achievements. It provides resources and tools that can demonstrate the relevance of the project and its activities to internal and external stakeholders.

Beyond outcomes, evaluation can also help support and improve practice within an institution. Evaluation provides a project with information on the experiences, learning, and responses of those who experience a program. Understanding these user perspectives through careful evaluation can allow an institution to better understand its constituents and use that information to make data-driven decisions about how best to serve their audiences and achieve the greatest impact in the areas of interest. In line with this, evaluation can provide a great deal of insight to increase and broaden understanding of audience.

Background

In thinking about evaluation in the context of the Language of Conservation project, it is important to understand the genesis of the project. As noted in earlier chapters, the project set out to test whether results of an initial experiment to install conservation-themed poetry at the Wildlife Conservation Society’s Central Park Zoo could be replicated in other communities. After the first Language of Conservation project was successfully completed, questions were raised about whether this model was transferrable to other cities around the country or if it represented an anomaly of the New York City environment. Five partner cities signed on for this challenge, believing that the Language of Conservation could “play in Peoria” or, rather, in Brookfield, Jacksonville, Little Rock, Milwaukee, and New Orleans.

As the project was an effort to replicate the Central Park Zoo model, the questions guiding evaluation in the Language of Conservation also focused on measuring the project’s success against the results established in the initial experiment. The overarching question was, By replicating the original evaluation, would the results of visitor outcomes be the same or different in these five cities as was found at Central Park Zoo? The evaluation was also expanded to assess the degree to which the project achieved its outcomes for zoo visitors and library program attendees and to document the collaborative process that took place within each city.

Although we leave the results of the summative evaluation to the next chapter, this background provides the context for understanding the role of evaluation in the Language of Conservation project and its potential role in other, similar projects. In order to document achievement of its replication goals, evaluation was essential. Beyond that, as the project’s collaborators developed their ever-increasing commitment to the project, the collaboration, and the benefits they sought to bring to their patrons and communities, they became invested and interested in seeing evidence of this public impact. Efforts to understand project impact were of practical and strategic value to zoo and library partners. We feel that evaluation serves many important purposes in this type of project; in this essay, we present an overview of steps and processes for thinking about evaluation of such a replication project.

This process of defining audiences and outcomes is valuable because it allows a team to ensure that everyone is clear about the purpose of the project and that outcomes are integrated into the thinking, planning, and overall project design.

What to Evaluate? Defining Goals and Outcomes

A critical first step in determining what to evaluate is carefully articulating the goals and outcomes that the project sets out to achieve. The standards for success need to be clearly established before they can be evaluated. Not only is this step critical to evaluation, it is also an important step for the development of the project as a whole, particularly in a cross-institutional collaboration such as the Language of Conservation. As described in earlier chapters, one of the most essential and valuable parts of this project for collaborators was the opportunity at the outset for all partners to establish a common vision of the project, its goals, and what they could achieve. This step allowed project teams to feel grounded in a shared understanding of the big picture of what the project sought to achieve (its goals), as well as establishing the concrete, measurable outcomes that would result for public audiences.

Outcomes (also called impacts) are “benefits to people; specifically, achievements or changes in skill, knowledge, attitude, behavior, condition, or life status” (IMLS, 2016). Outcomes are achieved by the audience(s) targeted by a program. These audiences may be public (e.g.,
zoo visitors, program attendees, library users, community members) or they may be professional (e.g., zoo staff, library staff, institutional leadership). Clarifying the specific audience(s) that will be impacted is an important step when defining the project outcomes. This process of defining audiences and outcomes is valuable because it allows a team to ensure that everyone is clear about the purpose of the project and that outcomes are integrated into the thinking, planning, and overall project design. There are numerous online resources to guide and support a project team in defining goals, audiences, and outcomes—a few of which are listed in the resource list following this chapter.

In this national replication project, the Language of Conservation project leaders sought to achieve the following outcomes with public and professional audiences:

After experiencing Language of Conservation installations in zoos, zoo visitors will demonstrate:

- increased conservation thinking, language, and connection to self.
- positive attitudes toward poetry use in the zoo.
- increased perception of poetry as accessible.

After experiencing Language of Conservation programming in libraries, library users will:

- show interest in exploring poetry and library resources.
- appreciate conservation thinking and its connection to their lives.

After participating in the collaborative Language of Conservation project, library and zoo partners will demonstrate:

- increased awareness of the programmatic potential of collaboration and sharing resources and expertise.
- increased commitment to partnering with other cultural institutions to build audiences and serve communities.
- new design ideas and approaches, and a commitment to including techniques such as poetry installations in future exhibits and programs.

These examples are somewhat broad as outcome statements; this was intentional in that the evaluation sought to examine overarching, rather than site-specific, project outcomes. However, as we review the exhibits and programs at the five partner institutions, it is clear that individual cities developed independent, community-based perspectives on these overarching goals. As other institutions seek to replicate this project in other cities, we would encourage them to articulate a site-specific set of outcomes and evaluation strategy, targeted to community-based interests and goals, with the above statements providing a starting point for that process.

Formative Evaluation

Evaluating the achievement of outcomes is a primary purpose of summative evaluation, discussed in more detail in the next section. However, there is another phase of evaluation that zoos (in particular) in this type of project might consider: formative evaluation. Formative studies test a mock-up, prototype, or pilot version of the final product to gather data to aid decision-making about final implementation. Frequently this type of study focuses on usability, comprehension, and/or achievement of specific learning goals. Within such a project as the Language of Conservation, formative evaluation may have greatest value for zoos and poets as they make decisions about placement and design for poetry displays. In the experience of the Central Park Zoo and several partners within the replication project, it was useful to create paper mock-ups of designed poetry signs (at full-scale) and place them in the intended locations. This allowed for evaluation from professional and/or visitor perspectives. The design and zoo staff can make a professional assessment about both readability (i.e., color contrast, font size, sight lines) and overall aesthetic appearance (i.e., blending in or standing out from the exhibit or environment). These professional perspectives can be supplemented, if appropriate, by evaluation in which visitors look at or interact with the mock-up displays and provide feedback on readability, placement, or design, depending on the questions of greatest concern to the team.

In exhibit development in zoos, aquariums, and museums, formative evaluation is often used to test readability and visitor comprehension of interpretive copy. It is worth noting that such a strategy should be used with care in a project such as the Language of Conservation. By its nature, poetry selection has a different purpose and communication role than traditional interpretive signage, which changes the goal and scope of any formative evaluation as well. In the model and replication of this project, no formative studies of visitor comprehension of poetry were used. Rather, the project team made a conscious decision to let the collabora-
tion between poet-in-residence and zoo staff make decisions about the final poetry selection, with these two partners considering issues of artistic merit and accuracy of information. Goals for visitors were not about “comprehension” but about affective connection when experienced in context. In these cases, a choice was made to gather visitor feedback only to address questions of readability and visibility of design choices.

Summative Evaluation: How Do You Know if it Worked? Defining Indicators of Success

When the project is completed, the role of summative evaluation is to measure the achievement of the project’s stated outcomes. This can include understanding visitors’ overall response to the poetry program, and their satisfaction with the experience, and determining which poems were most noticed or memorable. This phase should address the project leadership team’s key questions about how the project worked in its final implementation. As emphasized earlier, when documenting the success of a project, it is important to examine it against the goals and outcomes set at the start of the project’s development. Another tool to guide this process is identifying indicators of success that are linked to the project outcomes. Essentially, outcomes are the results or change a project sought to create for its audiences, and indicators are the specific attributes or qualities you measure to provide evidence that those intended results occurred. As with outcomes, it is often advisable to establish indicators at the outset of the project. The question to consider is: If we achieve outcome X, what evidence will we see that it has occurred in members of the audience?

As an example from the Language of Conservation replication project, one outcome was “Zoo visitors will demonstrate positive attitudes toward poetry use in the zoo.” For that outcome, indicators identified at the start of the project included:

- # and % of visitors who report seeing and reading any of the poetry in the zoo.
- # and % of visitors who have read any poetry report enjoying the poetry.
- # and % of visitors who have read any poetry report that the poetry enhanced or added to their visit in some way.

Outcomes-based evaluation planning resources can help guide the process of defining indicators and planning what evidence will best demonstrate the success of the project.

Methods for Measurement: Examples from the Language of Conservation

Many different methods can be used to measure achievement of outcomes, each for different purposes and with different strengths and weaknesses. Often, using multiple methods can provide a complementary balance and offer the most robust answers to evaluation questions. To begin thinking about evaluating a project such as this, we provide a brief review of the methods used and the rationales for the evaluation of zoo exhibits in the Language of Conservation project. The two methods used were 1) an open-ended, structured interview with visiting groups, and 2) a closed-ended questionnaire for individual visitors; all were administered at the exit of the zoo, after visitors had the opportunity to fully experience the zoo and poetry.

We chose to use open-ended interviews to allow visitors to express their experiences, thoughts, and memories of the zoo visit in their own words. One of the outcomes of the project focused on the visitors’ language used to describe their thinking, and how that language might have changed after the poetry was installed. The interview was the method used by Condon (2005) in the model project’s evaluation, and we sought to replicate her study and results. This interview was broken into two major components: 1) addressing the overall zoo experience and conservation themes; and 2) questions focused specifically on the poetry. The questionnaire-based method was added as a new element in the 2009-2010 study in an effort to provide an additional, standardized measure of visitors’ responses to conservation themes and poetry in the zoo. This questionnaire contained a series of Likert-type scales (e.g., Strongly Agree; Agree; Undecided; Disagree; Strongly Disagree) that correspond to the framework of five Conservation Thinking Categories established in the 2005 study; it also contained closed-ended questions about visitors’ feelings about the poetry and whether it added to their visit. These methods—interviews about the zoo experience, interviews about the poetry, and questionnaires measuring conservation thinking and poetry response—were meant to complement one another to answer the guiding evaluation questions for the project.

Following is a summary of the results of these studies, outlining how qualitative data were coded into a conceptual framework of Conservation Thinking Categories, so that evaluators could determine changes...
that occurred in the patterns and rates of conservation thinking within these conceptual categories. This rigorous coding process allowed us to quantitatively analyze qualitative data, while preserving and benefiting from the richness of visitors’ language to describe their zoo experience. Additionally, we present the results of the questionnaire data, and evidence of changes in perception of the zoo based upon these standardized measures. We hope these results and descriptions of our evaluation process will provide useful examples and spark thinking about relevant outcomes and indicators for a project such as the Language of Conservation.

References


Outcomes-Based Evaluation

Resource List


Outcomes Achieved through the *Language of Conservation*: Evaluation Results

**Introduction**

An important aspect of the *Language of Conservation* project was its design as a replication project. Poets House and its zoo, library, and poet partners from around the country sought to test whether the model developed in the original partnership between Poets House and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) at the Central Park Zoo could be successfully replicated in other cities and library-zoo partnerships. To that end, the project was strongly guided by the experience, documentation, and evaluation that were undertaken in the original *Language of Conservation* project. As described elsewhere in this volume, a primary activity that took place was the careful selection, design, and placement of poetry excerpts throughout exhibits and grounds of the five zoo partners. It was anticipated that these exhibits would result in positive outcomes for zoo visitors who encountered the poetry, including increased conservation thinking and a positive response to poetry and its relevance to the zoo experience. Specifically, the outcomes defined for this audience were:

After experiencing *Language of Conservation* installations in zoos, zoo visitors will:

- Show positive attitudes toward poetry use in the zoo.
- Demonstrate increased conservation thinking, language, and connection to one’s self.
- Demonstrate increased perception of poetry as accessible.

To address whether these outcomes were achieved, the evaluation team conducted summative interviews with zoo visitors, guided by several core questions:

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*Milwaukee County Zoo*

This fall you will taste carrots / you planted, you thinned, you mulched, / you weeded and watered. / You don’t know yet how sweet / they will taste, how yours. / This earth is yours as you love it.

—Marge Piercy, from “Digging in”
• To what extent was the poetry seen or read by zoo visitors overall?
  o Which poems or installations were most recalled by visitors?

• Did visitors show positive, negative, or neutral attitudes toward the use of poetry in zoos? Why?

• Was there an overall increase in conservation thinking after poetry was installed?
  o Were there differences between specific categories of conservation thinking?

• Were there changes in visitors’ perceptions of poetry after poetry was installed?
• Were there differences across the five sites?

The evaluation was designed in large part as a replication study, seeking to understand the results of the partner cities’ installations in comparable ways to the evaluation of Central Park Zoo’s efforts. As a result, evaluation and measurement of outcomes used similar guiding questions, methods, and conceptual frameworks as those used in the Central Park Zoo evaluation.

**Methods**

The replication study used procedures and instruments as close as possible to the original *Language of Conservation* study at the Central Park Zoo (Condon, 2005; Fraser, Condon and Gruber, 2007). Some modifications were made when deemed extremely necessary and caution was taken to assure that study integrity was maintained. The replication study employed the method that was deemed most useful in the prior study: open-ended structured exit interviews conducted in two conditions (before and after poetry was installed in the zoo). In addition, evaluators developed a self-administered questionnaire to measure similar outcomes, with questions based upon the concepts uncovered in the original qualitative study. These two methods were selected strategically to provide robust and complementary data. The open-ended structured interview was selected to directly replicate Condon’s method, and to allow visitors to express in their own language the ideas, concepts, and themes that were part of their overall zoo experience. The questionnaire was added to this approach as a standardized measure of the identified outcomes from the original study.

Data were collected in two phases: prior to poetry installation (Summer/Fall 2009) and after poetry installation (Summer/Fall 2010). Efforts were made to collect data at each zoo during periods of typically high visitation (i.e., summer for Midwestern venues; fall for Southern venues). Interviews and questionnaires were collected at the exit, to allow visitors the full opportunity to have experienced the zoo and poetry. Evaluation targeted the general visitor and visitors were randomly selected to participate. Visitors included in the study could be visiting alone or in groups, with or without children. However, in order to effectively facilitate a group interview, groups eligible to participate were limited to six people. Additionally, at least one person in the group had to be an adult (appearing to be 18 or older) and only adults were invited to complete the self-administered questionnaire. Children (17 and younger) could be a part of the group for interviews. At Brookfield Zoo, a pre-screening question was used during post-installation interviews to ensure that respondents had visited the Great Bear Wilderness exhibit, the only location within the zoo in which poetry was installed. Refusals to participate were noted on a refusal log.
Open-ended Face-to-face Structured Interview

A total of 152 groups completed interviews during the pre-installation phase (approximately 30 per institution), with an overall refusal rate of 54%. During the post-installation phase, approximately 30 groups per zoo completed the full interview. In order to obtain a larger sample focused on feedback about the poetry installations specifically, researchers conducted an additional set of brief interviews that addressed only the poetry-related questions with approximately 15 groups per institution. In total, 228 groups completed interviews during post-installation, with an overall refusal rate of 60%.

As a structured interview, questions were asked sequentially, without being rephrased. Clarifying questions were used when necessary. Interviewers did not mention that the interviews were about the poetry installations in the zoos until the end of the interview. The interview guide adhered closely to the instrument developed by the Central Park Zoo evaluators, using open-ended questions and prompts to elicit visitor conversation about what they thought, discussed, and experienced during their zoo visit. Post-installation, questions were added to directly assess their experience with the poetry and their opinions about it and its influence on their zoo experience.

In order to quantify the conservation thinking exhibited by visitors, Central Park Zoo evaluators developed coding categories based on five categories of conservation thinking identified by project partners as likely to be impacted by the inclusion of poetry. To apply the conceptual framework developed in the earlier project, we further developed these conservation-thinking categories and created a detailed coding rubric that operationalized them in terms of the responses heard in interviews (see Table 1). Our coding process allowed for some quantitative analysis of the interview data using a similar overall approach to the original study, but we chose to increase the detail of the coding system and to use a different statistical approach for assessing significance (i.e., to compare pre/post number of references rather than examine percent increase/decrease). As a result, while the results here are considered in contrast to the original results found at Central Park Zoo, the necessary variation in coding and analysis approach preclude a direct comparison.

Table 1. Conservation-thinking categories and code descriptions: Comparison of the two studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Human Benefit from Wildlife</td>
<td>Sub-Code: survival</td>
<td>Descriptions of different ways humans benefit from wildlife (e.g., provision of shelter, clothing, medicines) or related to health of planet for human benefit (e.g., healthy habitats keep the air clean).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Benefit from Wildlife - awe and wonder</td>
<td>Sub-Code: awe and wonder</td>
<td>Expressions of awe or wonder about animals irrelevant to either physical characteristics or behaviors, landscapes, or nature in general (e.g., diversity of life, art of creation); includes evidence of visitor questions or curiosities provoked by zoo visit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Benefit Wildlife - Sub-Code: emotional affinity</td>
<td></td>
<td>Direct expressions of affinity (e.g., I love giraffes); empathy (understanding or feeling the emotions/experience of animals); interest in seeing animals in the wild; or concerns about the animals' health or well being in the zoo. Human-like traits assigned to animals (anthropomorphism).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoo Staff Cares About Animals and Wants Everyone To Care</td>
<td>Zoo Staff Cares About Animals and Wants Everyone To Care</td>
<td>Descriptions of ways zoo staff provide care for zoo animals including attention to health, diet, care, and living area. Ways zoo helps animals in the wild, including zoo participation in conservation, preservation, captive breeding, and education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans as Part of Nature/ Ecosystems</td>
<td>Humans as Part of Nature/ Ecosystems</td>
<td>Descriptions of the ways living things are connected to one another. Includes concepts such as interconnectedness (i.e., physical or scientific), interdependency (spatial), and interdependence (moral).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Impact on Threats to Nature</td>
<td>Human Impact on Threats to Nature</td>
<td>Awareness of threats facing nature such as habitat destruction, poaching, and hunting. Includes words such as endangered and extinct. Also included are statements that express indignation or outrage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humans as Wildlife Stewards</td>
<td>Humans as Wildlife Stewards</td>
<td>Awareness or concern about conservation, management, or protection of wild animals and/or habitats. Descriptions of actions that should be taken (e.g., maintaining, managing, protecting, helping) as well as who should be taking action (e.g., me, we, they).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Closeness to Humans</td>
<td>Descriptions of the similarities between humans and animals (primarily plants); includes a physical similarity or a behavioral similarity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Intrinsic Value of Nature</td>
<td>Statements expressing the intrinsic value of nature/animals, includes statements about animals rights. These comments do not go on to suggest specific conservation actions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>No Human Interference</td>
<td>No efforts should be made to manage or control nature - Animals will be fine as long as humans don't interfere.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Closed-ended Self-administered Questionnaire

A total of 221 individuals completed questionnaires during the pre-installation phase (approximately 45 per institution), with an overall refusal rate of 51%. During the post-installation phase, 356 individuals completed questionnaires (approximately 70 per institution), with an overall refusal rate of 50%.

A large part of the questionnaire was a series of scales developed to measure the five categories of conservation thinking from the original project (see Table 1). One scale was created for each category, with items developed based upon the category definitions from the 2005 report. Results consist of the average scores given to a series of items rated on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicated “didn’t think about this at all,” and 7 indicated “thought about this a great deal.” The scale development process included expert review for construct and face validity, pilot testing for reliability with zoo visitors, and final revision of the items. In addition, the questionnaire included measures of connectedness with nature, using the Inclusion of Nature in Self (INS) scale (Schultz, 2002); attitudes toward poetry generally; attitudes toward poetry use in the zoo; environmental concern and behaviors; and demographic characteristics. Data were analyzed quantitatively, including examination of distribution of responses and central tendency. Statistical comparisons were made between pre and post data, where appropriate (ANOVA).

Typically, between 70% and 95% of visitors sampled reported that they did recall seeing poetry during their visit.

Results

Use and Recall of Poetry Installations

Consistent with the findings from the original study at the Central Park Zoo, not all participants identified the installations as poetry, instead offering information that confirmed their awareness of the installations and their content. The exit interviews and questionnaires showed a high rate of recall of the poetry by visitors at all five partner zoos (see Table 2). Typically, between 70% and 95% of visitors sampled reported that they did recall seeing poetry during their visit. The one exception was among the interviews at Brookfield Zoo, where 60% of respondents recalled seeing the poetry; however, results of the exit questionnaires were much higher at 80%. These rates tend to be similar to or higher than the usage rates that were found in the Central Park Zoo study, where 70% of visitors recalled seeing poetry.

Table 2. Visitor recall of poetry and specific poems from interviews (I) and questionnaires (Q), by zoo

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Brookfield</th>
<th>Jacksonville</th>
<th>Little Rock</th>
<th>Milwaukee</th>
<th>New Orleans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Q</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Q</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Q</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recalled seeing poetry</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified a specific poem or location*</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentage is only of those who did recall seeing poetry.

In addition, of those who recalled seeing poetry installations, a large number were also able to identify one or more specific poems or locations that they recalled (ranging from 82% to 92% of those who had seen poetry). These rates were on par or slightly higher than what was found in the Central Park Zoo study. Visitors also tended to recall a fairly wide variety of the poems on display at each zoo, although these varied more between zoos, ranging between 23% of all poems (at Brookfield) and 58% of all poems (at Jacksonville) (see Table 3). When examining which poems and locations visitors were able to recall specifically, it was evident that several factors seemed to increase visitor recall of specific poems:

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Milwaukee County Zoo

Give me the splendid silent sun with all his beams full-dazzling...
—Walt Whitman, from “Give Me the Splendid Silent Sun”
• Placement and Design: Across the zoos, a strong factor that played into visitor recall seemed to be the placement and/or design of the poetry installations. In instances where zoos had used unconventional placement techniques, visitors often recalled those poems. This was particularly true for overhead placement of signs in rafters or beams of a pathway or gazebo (as in Little Rock, Milwaukee, and New Orleans), which were not only unconventional, but required movement to read in full. Other unconventional placements or designs, such as on the sidewalk (at Brookfield), a rope shaped into the words (Little Rock), or carved into a large boulder in two languages (New Orleans) also were successful at catching a large proportion of visitors’ attention. This echoed a finding from Central Park Zoo, where visitors expressed appreciation for novel placement of poetry (including on rafters, benches, and stairs).

• Connection with Place: Recall of poetry at the Audubon Zoo, in New Orleans, suggested a different reason for recalling poetry, which was a specific poem’s connection with the region. Two of the poems most frequently recalled were by Langston Hughes and were about the Mississippi River and the levees. While multiple factors likely came into play with recall of these poems (they were both in somewhat unconventional locations and were from a well-known American author), several visitors mentioned the connection of these works to the New Orleans area, particularly “Mississippi Levee.”

• Brevity, Memorability, and Rhyme: Another factor that played into visitor recall at one zoo was of the poem “Snake,” by Charles Ghinga, at the Jacksonville Zoo. This poem is brief and has a strong meter and a simple four-line rhyme scheme: “Snakes are clever, / Snakes are fast, / If you see one / Let it pass.” As a result of this feature (as well as its playful design and installation), visitors were able not only to recall seeing this poem, but some were able to fully recite it. This was particularly accessible for family visitors and children. Brevity and memorability were also cited in the Central Park Zoo study as key factors for visitor memory.

These findings suggest some factors in exhibition design and selection of poetry and excerpts that may promote a larger number of visitors to take notice of an individual poem. That is not to say, however, that these strategies are the only ones that should be used in replicating a project such as this. The findings showed that a broad range of poems and installations were recalled by visitors, representing the full diversity of installation strategies.

The findings showed that a broad range of poems and installations were recalled by visitors, representing the full diversity of installation strategies.
Across the five zoos, visitors articulated that the poetry added to their zoo visit experience in three key ways, all of which related to the overall project goals. Most strongly, between 24% and 40% of visitors (depending on the zoo) noted that the poems related to or made them think about conservation themes and ideas. Second, between 19% and 42% of visitors felt that the poetry added something novel to zoo signage, noting the difference in tone, language, and approach of the poetry to typical fact- and information-based signage. Finally, between 13% and 38% of visitors noted that the poetry changed the quality of their zoo experience in some way, prompting a slower, thoughtful, or more reflective experience. These ratings and positive sentiments were extremely consistent across the five zoos, suggesting that poetry may be perceived as a positive addition in many contexts and communities.

In addition, interviews and anecdotal reports from zoo staff highlighted that a smaller subset of individuals expressed these sentiments in very strong terms, stronger than the majority of respondents, feeling that the poetry was an extremely valuable addition to their zoo experience. This indicated that while the poetry was generally positive for many visitors, it provided even greater or unique benefit and depth for some individuals. Some example comments from visitors:

“I think it does emphasize the interaction and the interrelationship that people have with animals and with wildlife.”

“I did see the Thoreau quote at the bear exhibit. ...Yeah, it makes you stop and think. And I think it's—you need to have more than just information, other people's reflections and thoughts on the animals. You know, it made me think a little bit differently, too. ...Just maybe the statistics and so on [in traditional zoo exhibits]...I hadn't seen anything like that before here. I don't think. Where I walked into an exhibit and there was a—kind of an introduction to it, something artistic like that. I thought that was nice. Rather than just, you know, a picture of the animal and an arrow.” (Male, Adult, Brookfield Zoo)

“I guess seeing those gives me, it processes in my brain, because I know that I appreciate the language of it. And it probably makes me think, you know, maybe even a little more out loud. Like, ‘Oh, I didn’t think of that before that way’ or just new ways of looking at things.” (Male, Adult, Milwaukee County Zoo)

Table 3. Percent and frequency of all poems on display that visitors specifically identified in interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of poems recalled</th>
<th>Broolfield</th>
<th>Jacksonville</th>
<th>Little Rock</th>
<th>Milwaukee</th>
<th>New Orleans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Percent of visitors who indicated strongly positive attitudes about poetry in the zoo in questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of visitors rating strong agreement (5 or 7)</th>
<th>Broofield</th>
<th>Jacksonville</th>
<th>Little Rock</th>
<th>Milwaukee</th>
<th>New Orleans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The poetry I read was appropriate to be in the Zoo.</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The poetry I read was relevant to what the Zoo is about.</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The poetry I read was easy to understand.</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I enjoyed reading the poetry around the Zoo.</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt the poetry added something positive to my zoo visit today.</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“I think it does emphasize the interaction and the interrelationship that people have with animals and with wildlife. That you’re seeing the impact it’s had on different cultures because you can see that they’re coming from Native American; from, you know, some well-known American authors; from, I can’t even remember all the different sources, but that … the natural world, animals, and people are all woven together in a web that interacts.” (Female, Adult, Milwaukee County Zoo)

**Conservation Thinking and Language**

A major question of the evaluation was to determine the degree to which the poetry installations influenced visitors’ conservation thinking and language, looking both at the explicit connections visitors made between the poetry and conservation ideas and looking for evidence of an overall shift in visitors’ conversations or thinking (unrelated to the poetry) from pre- to post-installation.

**Explicit Connections between Poetry and Conservation**

At most of the zoos in this project, half of visitor groups who read poetry during their visit explicitly indicated that they had drawn connections between the poetry they read and themes of conservation and the natural world. The two exceptions were zoos where nearly half (42%) or one-third of visitors made this connection. When describing the nature of the connections made, visitors across the zoos tended to talk about three themes consistently: human responsibility to act as wildlife stewards, human benefit from wildlife, and human interconnectedness with nature. These results were similar to the Central Park Zoo study, in which Condon reported that “visitors commented that the poetry ‘brought it [conservation] out,’ expressed what the zoo is trying to do, made them think, think differently, or see things from a different perspective…” (2005, p. 3).

**Humans as Wildlife Stewards**

A monkey is weaving
a thread of insatiable lusts
on the margins of morning:
he topples a pollen-fall,
startles the violet-flight
of the butterfly…

—Pablo Neruda, from “Some Beasts”
Ben Belitt, translator

“With the butterfly [poem], you need to take care of the air… and with the levee [poem], you need to take care of the water supply….” (Female, Adult, Audubon Zoo)

**Human Benefit from Wildlife**

And now I am holding that stillness
to give it back to you, because the truth is
so much of the world is broken
and I want to be part of its healing.

—Alison Hawthorne Deming, from “In Spring: Drift Creek”

“I think the one that was the healing, you know. And it made me think of Anne Frank, that one particularly, when she would stare out at the big oak tree. And it makes me appreciate both the beauty of nature and how it can be healing and therapeutic.” (Female, Adult, Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens)

**Interconnectedness with Nature**

Atom from atom yawns as far
As moon from earth, as star from star.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, from “Nature”
"It says ‘From afar,’ and then it says, ‘As moon from earth, as star from star,’ and that made me think about what the meaning was... It made me think that we are all—you know, we’re all things. We’re not any different.” (Child, Little Rock Zoo)

**Implicit Change in Conservation Thinking**

The other approach used to assess connections was to look for evidence of change, from pre- to post-installation, in the types of conservation themes that emerged in visitors’ conversations about their zoo visits and in their ratings of things they thought about during a visit. On the whole, there were relatively few statistically significant changes found in the ways visitors talked about their zoo experience or rated the ideas they thought about during their visit, when measured numerically as opposed to as a percentage of comments. Overall, visitors commented very frequently on several of the five key themes, most notably: Human Responsibility as Wildlife Stewards; Human Impact on Wildlife; and Human Benefit from Wildlife (primarily psychological/personal benefits). These themes seem to be very strong in the general zoo experience and were reiterated in comments specifically related to the poetry, but were not observed to increase or decrease substantially from the high levels that existed prior to poetry installation at most of the zoos.

When looking at the questionnaire data, most zoos showed no significant changes in ratings of conservation thinking measures. Two zoos showed changes in some factors—Brookfield Zoo showed increase in ratings in three areas and Audubon Zoo showed increases in two areas. Among questionnaire respondents, significant increases in ratings were found in three of the five conservation categories: Human Benefit from Wildlife (both zoos), Human Impact on Wildlife (Brookfield), and Human Responsibility as Wildlife Stewards (Brookfield), and Humans as a Part of Nature (Audubon). Additionally, one of these categories (Human Benefit from Wildlife) also showed a significant increase in the frequency of comments made by groups after poetry installation (Brookfield), which was primarily attributable to an increase in comments related to emotional affinity for animals.

Using the Inclusion of Nature in Self (INS) scale (Schultz, 2002), we sought to assess whether the poetry installations might have influenced the degree to which individuals viewed themselves as interconnected with nature. Findings showed that across the five zoos, visitors saw themselves toward the middle of the INS scale, and that there were no significant changes following installation of the poetry.

These findings show some similarities and some apparent contrasts with the conclusions from the original study. In that study, it was reported that there was a 21% increase in overall number of conservation comments and increases between 36% and 48% in the categories of Wildlife Stewardship, Human Impact on Wildlife, and Humans as Part of Nature. In the present study, similar levels of pre-to-post percentage change were found to those reported for the Central Park Zoo. However, the statistical analysis used in the present study to compare pre and post comments found minimal evidence of those differences being statistically significant. It is important to acknowledge that some methodological factors may be at play here, including the further development of the codebook that was completed for this study, as well as the difference in approach for part of the analysis. When looking at the percentage measures developed for the original Central Park Zoo, the results appear to be similar.

**Attitude toward Poetry**

Finally, this evaluation explored the additional question of whether the installation resulted in any change in visitors’ overall attitudes toward poetry, irrespective of the poetry installations within the zoo. Questionnaire responses at most zoos indicated there was little change in visitors’ attitudes about poetry, with average ratings showing a neutral attitude (most ratings were between 2.5 and the 3.0 neutral midpoint) in both pre and post. At only one zoo, Audubon Zoo (New Orleans), was there a significant increase in attitudes toward poetry, with average ratings increasing from a slightly negative 2.44 to a more neutral 2.90. This result suggests that the mere presence of poems and poem excerpts in exhibits does not, on its own, have an impact on more generalized personal feelings about poetry. Given that findings also showed many visitors did not identify the installations specifically as “poems,” but often as “quotes” or “sayings,” this finding is not surprising. When looking at these attitudes in concert with visitors’ perceptions that it was appropriate and relevant for poetry to be included in the zoo, it suggests that visitors may be welcoming to poetry in an applied context (i.e., related to interpreting the zoo and conservation), while being less comfortable with it as an abstract subject area.
Conclusions

This evaluation indicates that the Language of Conservation project was successful in achieving several of its intended goals, primarily by enhancing the experience of zoo visitors, who saw and enjoyed the poetry and felt it added something positive and novel to their visit. In addition, those who read the poetry often drew associations between what they saw and themes related to conservation, human responsibility, and human interconnectedness with nature, explicitly understanding the message that the poetry was trying to communicate. The widespread recall of the poetry by visitors, combined with the strongly positive response to the installations and strategy of using poetry in the zoo, were some of the most compelling outcomes of the project.

Although the explicit measures of conservation connections were strong, the implicit connections—in other words, the overall tone, conversation, and thinking about a zoo visit—did not show the same level of change as was shown in the previous study. This was partly because many of the conservation themes were already strong in visitors’ minds and conversations about the zoo before poetry was installed. The poetry, in many ways, seemed to underscore conversations that were already taking place. This look at implicit changes through such an open and wide-ranging interview reflected the complex social, cognitive, and physical experience of any zoo (or museum) visit. Taken together, it can be concluded that poetry provided an enhancement to the overall zoo experience for most visitors, complementing, but not overwhelming, the experiences and messages that are already core to the institution.

References


When despair for the world grows in me / and I wake in the night at the least sound / in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be, / I go and lie down where the wood drake / rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. / I go and lie down where the wood drake / rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds. / I come into the peace of wild things / who do not tax their lives with forethought / of grief. I come into the presence of still water. / And I feel above me the day-blind stars / waiting with their light. For a time / I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

—Wendell Berry, “The Peace of Wild Things”


Section V

NOTES ON NATURE POETRY
Poets Respond to the Canon of Nature Poetry

When the green woods laugh with the voice of joy, / And the dimpling stream runs laughing by; / When the air does laugh with our merry wit, / And the green hill laughs with the noise of it; // …Come live & be merry, and join with me, / To sing the sweet chorus of "Ha, Ha, He!"

—William Blake, from "Laughing Song"
What if poets received a call to truly fulfill the dream of a canon that could stop hearts, change minds, and inspire global responsibility? After all, as a social scientist wrote to me, the dark smithy of the soul needs to find a voice, to give those who are seriously depressed about witnessing the 6th great extinction a small wisp of hair to grab on to, some language to help us say what we all feel.

If scientists sent us that call to action, how would we respond?

Since 2004 I have gathered writing from around the world for scientists, interpretative specialists, and millions of readers—from Medieval riddles, to the tales of the Wolof People transcribed by Senegalese poet Birago Diop, to the elephant ballets and sea lion observations of Modernist Marianne Moore—writing that celebrates the sacredness between species. These poems, spanning centuries and cultures, were selected to inspire visitors to imagine a sustainable future for all life on earth. They explore the place of animals in cultural imagination, as those animals, a source of respect, wonder, and meaning, are threatened with disappearance from the earth.

When we first envisioned the Language of Conservation, it was as an installation of conservation poetry, but branching laterally I imagined we might, not unlike the Wildlife Conservation Society, one of our first sponsors, send out roots that would bring back nutrients from around the earth to feed a radical new canon. I envisioned that we might collaborate with wildlife biologists at WCS field stations in fifty-two countries, scientists working on the ground to make discoveries that help establish and protect the sustainability of important wildlife corridors as well as the tribes and species within them. I am still hopeful that that might occur within my lifetime.

Recognizing that our primary goal was to find, within a short period of time, poems that could feed a shifting community of millions of visitors each year, I determined that we could still stimulate lateral growth
by engaging nationally and internationally known poets and translators who worked in service to the natural world. Representing the *Language of Conservation*, I invited them to help us shape a bibliography that could be shared with libraries and their patrons. To provide focus for this gathering of books, we invited poets and editors Chris Merrill and Frank Stewart, because of their work with international communities, to speak to their idea of a canon, and, because of the breadth of her writing across traditions of poetry, we invited Annie Finch. I am deeply grateful to Jonathan Blunk for his discussion of our uniquely American understanding of nature in poetry and to Alison Hawthorne Deming, one of our poets-in-residence, for bringing to the fore Camille Dungy’s extraordinary anthology, *Black Nature*.

Lee Briccetti of Poets House and Dr. Wharton, then at the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), envisioned that a collaboration between science and poetry might enhance wildlife exhibits at the Central Park Zoo in New York City. Through the Central Park Zoo project, Dr. John Fraser of WCS and his team of researchers discovered that the use of poetry in installations made zoo visitors dramatically more aware of the impact humans have on ecosystems.

Poetry calls into question what it means to be human; it expands the imagination of a culture and suggests ways to become more humane and more deeply engaged with the world. Zoos and aquariums represent some of the most popular cultural institutions in cities across the United States, attracting millions of visitors each year. During recent decades, zoos have become one of the most important forces in environmental education, conservation of biodiversity, animal welfare, and global sustainability. Combining the expertise of the science and education communities with the deep conversations and relationships Poets House has woven between poets and readers in libraries and other public spaces in the U.S., we were able to collaborate joyously and form animated partnerships between zoological centers and libraries, to respond to the clarion call of those scientists who ask us to help human visitors imagine a sustainable future for all cultures and wildlife on earth.

Poetry calls into question what it means to be human: it expands the imagination of a culture and suggests ways to become more humane and more deeply engaged with the world.

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Jonathan Blunk
Poet, Biographer

**Where We Must Look for Help: Nature and Poetry**

_The crow, the crow, the spider-colored crow, The crow shall find new mud to walk upon._

—Robert Bly, from “Where We Must Look for Help”

From the beginning, the craft of poetry in North America has been concerned with recognizing and articulating both the intimacy and distance that exist between the human and natural worlds. Of course, this is not the province of poetry alone. Melville and Thoreau were engaged in this same imperative: to come to terms with—or find words for—our particular place in nature. Our literary inheritance is in large part a product of two disparate views of this relationship: a thoughtful and forward-looking appreciation of our responsibility as caretakers of the environment, exemplified by the beliefs of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, in contrast with the single-minded arrogance and exploitation that come from a faith in human reason as the highest good, which enabled the depredations of the Industrial Revolution and modern capitalism.

When Melville set sail from Nantucket and when Thoreau first heard the encroachment of the railroad upon the silence at Walden pond—indeed, when Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman were examining nature in their own distinctive ways—this fundamental disparity already lay at the core of our literature. For millennia, language arts have turned to nature as the source for metaphor and imagery—nature has always been the ground of our understanding and the ultimate point of reference. In Western culture, the separation of the human sphere from the natural world after the Enlightenment cast nature as something alien and apart, a danger to be subjugated or a resource to profit from. In the United States, this division became part of our history and experience, as evidenced by phrases such as “the taming of the West.”

But the past seventy years have brought a profound change. The reality of atomic devastation and the escalating threat to the environment posed by human indifference have altered the way we think about
nature and how we gauge our personal sense of obligation to preserve a
global future. It is now possible to point to a time before and a time after
these inescapable truths; we no longer have the luxury of ignoring our
stewardship of the planet and the variety of life upon it.

The Language of Conservation, as a community-based collaboration
between poets, libraries, and zoos, sets out a vital agenda, namely to
help individuals grasp the necessity of preserving the gifts of our natu-
ral world through a sense of personal responsibility. Over the past few
generations, poets all over the globe have recognized the urgency of ar-
ticulating this understanding and become increasingly committed to ef-
flecting change in the way that matters most—within the conscious-
ness and through the will of individuals.

Turning to the generation of 1960—poets whose mature work ac-
knowledges the unmistakable reality of an environment under threat—we
can see how this imperative has informed lifetimes of passionate writing.
It is no coincidence that the work of Rachel Carson first gained world-
wide notice at this time. Gary Snyder—inspired by the example of Ken-
neth Rexroth, the ancient traditions of Chinese and Japanese poetry,
and Native American beliefs—deserves praise for building his art and
life on principles of environmental stewardship at the local level. An
essential recent addition to his life’s work is the documentary film and
companion publication, The Etiquette of Freedom, which present his com-
pelling dedication to nature. In similar ways, Wendell Berry, William
Stafford, Annie Dillard, Robert Francis, and Denise Levertov each offer
important examples in their lives and their art for anyone determined to
maintain a conscious devotion to the environment.

Many other poets of the generation of 1960, including James
Wright and Robert Bly, have discovered their personal artistic visions in
relation to the natural world. As a young teenager in Ohio, Wright be-
came transfixed when he first read a poem by William Blake disparaging
the filthy 18th-century Thames in contrast to the imagined utopia repre-
sented by the Ohio River. That poem ends with Blake’s surprising belief
that “the Ohio shall wash his stains from me.” Instead, from the banks of
the Ohio in his hometown of Martins Ferry, Wright witnessed the stark
reality of a river horribly polluted by factories and human commerce.
Though surrounded by the devastation of strip mines and ruined lives,
Wright came to grasp the necessity of centering his art upon southern
Ohio and her people. By embracing his native place, Wright achieved his
mature poetic voice. The Branch Will Not Break, published in 1963, became
one of the decade’s most influential collections of poetry. The sequence
is animated by Wright’s rediscovery of joy in nature and studded with
closely observed moments of epiphany and rejuvenation.

In 1949, Robert Bly, then an undergraduate student of Archibald
MacLeish, brought a burlap sack into a Harvard classroom and let
loose a wild barn owl. Bly admitted that his desperate attempt to force
something real into the discussions of poetry among his teacher and
classmates—John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O’Hara among
them—had been prompted by their preoccupation with urban life and
reportage about the War to the exclusion of anything remotely related
to the natural world. A dozen years later, Bly published his first book of
poems, Silence in the Snowy Fields, indelibly capturing the prairies of western
Minnesota.

From a long career of political, social, and environmental engage-
ment, one of Bly’s most important books is News of the Universe: Poems of
Twofold Consciousness, an anthology first published by The Sierra Club in
1980. The collection includes a sequence of introductory essays by Bly
that help set in historical context the overlap of poetry and ecology from
the 18th century to the present. There is perhaps no better place to be-
gin trying to comprehend the shared terrain of poetry and the natural
world. Featuring translations from many eras and diverse cultures, with
a broad range of American and global poets, the anthology remains a
landmark resource.

One essential aspect of the Language of Conservation is the implicit ac-
nowledgment that change must be fostered at the level of local commu-
nities. When we think of poets in North America who have placed this
recognition at the heart of their work, there always exists an unmistak-
able love for a particular environment. Consider the New England of
Robert Frost and Hayden Carruth; the California coastline of Robinson
Jeffers and Robert Hass; the Michigan woods of Theodore Roethke and
Jim Harrison; Elizabeth Bishop’s Nova Scotia and Brazil, or Derek Wal-
cott’s St. Lucia—each of these poets inhabit specific, known worlds of
nature that nourish their art.

The depth of knowledge individual poets bring to their work is a
product of intense focus upon a precise geography—the flora and fauna
that inspire their words. This particularity matters. As readers, we thrive
on richness of imagery and sharply drawn details, and in this resides
the potential for poetry to alter our understanding of who we are. John
Haines’ evocations of the Alaskan wilderness and W. S. Merwin’s devo-
tion to the islands of Hawaii make clear that the clarity of regional po-
etic visions offer models for engaging more completely and consciously
with the particular places where we make our lives. The once dismissive
term “regional poetry” can no longer be used to limit a writer’s craft or
ambition. Rather, it must be understood as one of the most important elements in the accomplishment of the art.

The Language of Conservation project is an expression of hope, one that points a way forward and encourages an understanding of how ecological custodianship begins with individuals and with deeply personal shifts in consciousness and perspective. This is where we must look for help: at the most intimate level of individual awareness. Only when such private commitments achieve a critical mass of unified public vision can the very real threats to existence begin to recede. Poetry is uniquely effective at creating the conditions for such crucial reflection, making possible subtle yet profound changes in perception. As a community-based example of collaboration and local initiative, the Language of Conservation provides a positive, inspiring model for the work that lies before us.

Annie Finch
Poet, Scholar

Notes on the Canon of Nature Poetry

It was English Romanticism that set the tone for what many readers in the U.S. now think of as “nature poetry”: a solitary poet moved by an experience in nature to reflect on the human condition. Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” (written in mourning for his beloved brother) and Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind” remain powerful poems in this genre. Contemporary romantic poems such as Mary Oliver’s “Wild Geese” still reach readers using the same basic approach. A more meditative kind of Romantic poem, such as Robert Frost’s “Birches” or “Spring Pools,” Lorna Dee Cervantes’ “Emplumada,” or Wendell Berry’s “The Peace of Wild Things,” appeal more to thought; in all such poems, nature gains value in relation to the insights and emotions it provides for the lone human being, the poet.

Simultaneously with Romantic nature poetry, another strand of nature poetry developed, which can be called Sentimentism. Sentimentalist nature poems use an opposite approach from Romantic nature poems. Rather than being based in nature and drawing a human emotion from it, they are based in a human emotion and use natural images to express it. Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “I shall go back again to the bleak shore,” Sara Teasdale’s “Water Lilies,” and Langston Hughes’ “I’ve Known Rivers” are explicit about the emotion they are expressing; in a poem such as Lorine Niedecker’s “I Rose from Marsh Mud” or Pattianne Rogers’ “The Hummingbird: A Seduction,” the emotion is more implied. In all of these Sentimentalist nature poems, just as in Romantic nature poems, the natural imagery is the foundation of the poem.

In a third strand of nature poetry, the human part of the story is completely enveloped in natural imagery, expressed only in the push and mood of the language. This type of poem can be called the Mystical nature poem. Mystical nature poems can be calm and objective in tone, such as Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Moose,” Gary Snyder’s “Mountains and Rivers Without End,” or the tradition of haiku by Japanese poets such as

Treat Earth well / It was not given you by your parents / It was loaned to you by your children.
—Kenyan Proverb

The potential of nature poetry for the new ecological era that is now upon us has barely begun to be explored.
Basho and Issa which influenced him. They can be narrative, as in Earle Birney’s “Bushed.” Or they can be more passionate and lyrical, such as Joy Harjo’s “She Had Some Horses” or Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “The Windhover” or “Binsey Poplars.” An experimental vein of poetry can use partial or fractured syntax to imply the mystical, pre-rational power of nature, such as Lorine Niedecker’s poems or those of Jonathan Skinner.

The potential of nature poetry for the new ecological era that is now upon us has barely begun to be explored. Some new avenues that especially excite me are “place nature poetry”—a poetry that connects us with the nature of every place we are, including urban as well as “natural” places, such as Tim Seibles’ “Fearless”; “socially conscious nature poetry,” which uses the wholeness of nature as a reference point to raise awareness of humanity being out of balance, as in Jean Toomer’s Cane; and “channeling nature poetry,” which gives voices back to the natural creatures we have forgotten how to hear, as in Joanna Macy and John Seed’s “Towards a Council of All Beings.” My own work has explored the power of “ritual nature poetry,” poems that enact a spiritual connection with nature and can be spoken aloud or shared in a group to commemorate the equinoxes, solstices, and other moments in the wheel of the turning year. All of these newer kinds of nature poetry could be grouped together as “Transformative Nature Poetry.” Transformative nature poetry invites us to learn deeply from nature in a new way: not learning about ourselves by way of nature as in Romantic and Sentimentalist nature poetry; not losing ourselves in the experience of nature as in Mystical nature poetry; but finding ourselves again as humans within nature, both in community and as individuals, and in the process discovering ourselves transformed into living, after all, in a compassionate, aware, and sustainable relation of respectful interaction with our greatest teacher, our most necessary sustenance, and our strongest inspiration.

Alison Hawthorne Deming
Poet-in-Residence, Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens

A Brief Comment on “The Nature Canon”

The “nature canon,” if one exists in contemporary poetry, has been too narrowly defined for my tastes. The foundational poets are well known: W. S. Merwin, Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver, Pat-tiann Rogers... with a respectful dabbling into Native American poetry and oral tradition—and certainly adding in the other poets involved in this project. Chris Merrill’s anthology The Forgotten Language represents a wonderful widening of the field. And a new generation of experimentalists has shaken things up: Jonathan Skinner, Juliana Spahr, and Forrest Gander, to name just three. But this remains a disturbingly monochromatic “canon” for an era during which multi-ancestral influences have, in general, changed the face of American literature. For me, the most exciting development in recent years is Camille Dungy’s magnificent anthology Black Nature, a historical compendium of works by African-American poets that changes forever the notion that “nature writing” is the province of the white privileged class. I think this is the beginning of a great opening in this field during which we redefine this “canon” so that it reflects a much richer range of cultural experience and aesthetic vision.
The Canon of Nature Poetry in the Twenty-first Century: A Perspective from the Mid-Pacific

In two recent issues of *Manoa: A Pacific Journal of International Writing*, Barry Lopez and I collected international literature about “reconciliation” among the human and non-human ecologies. We began by printing a speech to the United Nations in 2000 by Oren Lyons—Onondaga Faith Keeper, Turtle Clan. “Leaders of the world, I bring you a most urgent message,” Lyons began. “The ice is melting in the north!” At the end of his brief and powerful appeal, Lyons concluded by saying, “There can be no peace as long as we wage war upon Our Mother, the Earth. Responsible and courageous actions must be taken to realign ourselves with the great laws of nature. We must meet this crisis now, while we still have time. . . As we speak, the ice continues to melt in the north.”

I have no definition for the term Nature poetry and would balk at conceiving of a list comprising anything like a canon for the future. But if I am pressed, I imagine such a list would include writing that displayed four aspects, among others: the sense of urgency articulated by Oren Lyons; an earth-centric empathy; an ethical imagination profound enough to visualize what now seems impossible: coherence or consilience (to use E. O. Wilson’s term) among diverse epistemologies; and a map or set of directions for a destiny more hopeful than the one we now face. As poetry, the writing on my list would have to touch the part of us unclouded by too much of the rational thinking that has made a sad mess of the world, too much subjectivity, too much objectivity, too much mental tourism from the safety of a particular worldview. I would hope the poets on my list would not be there merely because they love animals, but because they are concerned with the painful business of keeping alive the integrity and dignity of all the entangled ecologies of the planet.

Because I’ve been asked to think about international poetry, I will mention just a few poets outside the U.S. that might fit my hypothetical list—and who may, because of geography or language, not be on anyone else’s list on this occasion.

In Taiwan, Liu Kexiang (b. 1957) is a prolific poet and advocate for awareness of the biosphere, large and small. In over 40 books, including children’s books, guidebooks, maps, scientific essays, novels, and poetry, Liu has had an enormous effect in his home country.

Let the nutcracker’s cry awaken death
Let the stone tiger gnaw at the flesh
Let the winter night bury the soul

Another Taiwanese poet, Walis Norgan (b. 1961), an aboriginal of the Atayal mountain tribe, writes from an indigenous perspective, and is among dozens of other poets of the first rank from Taiwan. As soon as a list begins, sadly too many writers are left off. Where are Chen Li, Yang Mu, and others I am embarrassed not to have named?

In southern Sichuan Province, the minority Yi people have maintained, so far, a relative autonomy within the Chinese system. The poet Aku Wuwu (b. 1964), of the Nuosu branch of the Yi, writes in both his native language and in Chinese. Aku is grounded in a shamanistic culture, and, as a thoughtful protector of the endangered epistemology, place, and language of the Nuosu, understands his troubling position in regard to Chinese minority policies and globalization in general.

In Tibet, we should know the poets Dhondup Gyal, Lhagyal Tshering, Dpa’Dar, Ju Kalzang, and Meizhuo.

In French Polynesia, the indigenous poet Louise Peltzer is a subtle and compassionate thinker and keeper of the mythic roots and meanings of the Tahitian language. Her prolific works should be better known internationally.

And if there’s any room left in the short space I’ve been allotted, I would add to our hypothetical list three poets from Canada. From the far West, Robert Bringhurst and Jan Zwicky, and from the far East, Don McKay. Critically acknowledged in Canada, they should be on anyone’s North American list of seriously engaged “nature poets.”

When you think intensely and beautifully, something happens. That something is called poetry. If you think that way and speak at the same time, poetry gets in your mouth. If people hear you, it gets in their ears. If you think that way and write at the same time, then poetry gets written. But poetry exists in any case. The question is only: are you going to take part, and if so, how?

—Robert Bringhurst, *The Tree of Meaning: Thirteen Talks*

A language is a sort of lifeform, like a discontinuous animal or a symbiotic plant. Dead, it is like the intricate test of a sea urchin or the...
lifeless shell of a crab. Alive, it is a working form of intelligence, a part of the intellectual gene pool which has taken on specified, localized form. It is not, as many of my colleagues in the literature business like to say, the mother of poetry. Poetry has nothing essential to do with language. Language just happens to be the traditional means—but hardly the only available means—by which poetry is touched, in which it is temporarily captured, and through which it is served (or, as we all know, sometimes disserved).

But if poetry has nothing quintessential to do with language, what does it have to do with? It has to do, for one thing, with the other forms of attention. When I say that colonial American culture seems to me insentient, this is what I have in mind. For all the scientists, poets, scholars, and trained observers of all kinds, all the professional attention-payers we have in western society, attention is precisely what seems to be absent from our daily lives. “Breathe through your feet” is a gentler, more informative, less self-centered, and less frustrated form of the well-known adjuration, “Pay attention.” It doesn’t mean pay attention to me; it just means pay attention.

I find sustenance now for that archaic sense of integrity more among naturalists than among poets, more in broken country than in social order, more with marmots and great blue herons than with human beings. I hope that my poems, like those of the Presocratics—and like the tales of Walter McGregor of the Qaiahllanas, and the great poem of Lucretius—are not about human beings exclusively, but about the world, and about the painful business of loving and living with the world. Breathing through the feet, while the colonial culture keeps tearing the air with its hands.

But speech is in its origins a set of social gestures, and a man who turns his back upon his fellows severs himself from the wellsprings of language.…

—Robert Bringhurst, Pieces of Map, Pieces of Music

Christopher Merrill
Poet, Project Advisor

The Canon of Nature Writing?

A canon of nature writing is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine, for the simple reason that nature in its multiplicity defies systems of organization, short of Linnaean taxonomy, that cannot account for its variety. Exclusion has been the watchword of canon-making since the time of the Church Fathers; and if recent scholarly battles to expand the literary canon have fostered a larger understanding of what constitutes an authentic representation of our walk in the sun it is also true that the Book of Nature is too vast and intricate for anyone to read in its entirety, its volumes ranging from aboriginal chants to literature in a multitude of languages to the latest scientific treatise; the words for the earth that quicken the spirit overflow every imaginable container. How to assemble a collection of texts judged to be masterpieces, poems and fictions and essays distinguished by their enduring literary value and their attention to the fate of the earth?

One way is to start small. Gather writings from a given place—every ecosystem demands its own canon—spells and charms, stories and studies, verses and visions, which articulate some aspect of the whole and fire the senses. To pay attention to one place, to give voice to its flora and fauna, may inspire new regard for all the things of the earth.

Another way is to adopt the methodology that the Polish Nobel laureate Czeslaw Milosz devised for Unattainable Earth, a book that includes his own poems and a variety of other texts—translations of poems by Walt Whitman and D. H. Lawrence, prose inscriptions by Charles Baudelaire and Paul Valéry, letters from friends, meditations on religious and philosophical matters. He notes that in addition to writing poems in one period of his life he also “lived among people, was feeling, thinking, getting acquainted with others’ thoughts, and tried to capture the surrounding world by any means, including the act of the poem, but not only.” He asks:

Why not include in one book, along with my own poems, poems by others, notes in prose, quotations from various sources and even fragments of letters from friends if all these pieces serve one purpose: my attempt to approach the inexpressible sense of being?
Why not do the same for nature writing? Ask poets concerned with the degradation of the natural world to compile their own versions of Unattainable Earth. Here is what might go into mine: an e-mail from a friend on the island of Paros providing me with the Greek names of the local olives; reflections on John Ashbery’s ability to render the jumble of perceptions common to an urban landscape through the juxtaposition of overheard bits of conversation and images from the street; and verses from Saint-John Perse’s Winds, which I reread not long ago on a hike up Strawberry Canyon, in Berkeley, in the translation of Hugh Chisholm:

These were very great winds over all the faces of this world,
Very great winds rejoicing over the world, having neither eyrie nor resting place,
Having neither care nor caution, and leaving us, in their wake,
Men of straw in the year of straw…. Ah, yes, very great winds over all the faces of the living!

And more: poems, and passages from essays, and lines from writers through the ages, in as many literary traditions as I can discover, all in the service of the unattainable earth.
The Language of Conservation Book Lists

The “canon” of nature poetry is perhaps better described as a wide prairie, an open sky, or an expanse of ocean stretching with promise toward the horizon. Poetic work about nature stretches across time, and across national and cultural or ethnic boundaries. Whenever and wherever poets have written, they have explored the connections between humanity and the natural world.

These book lists offers a small sampling of this rich and varied work. Developed by Poets House to assist librarians with collection development, most of the works are readily available for purchase, although some more difficult to find titles have been included because of their historical importance.

Beginning with a list of the poets and their work used in Language of Conservation installations at the five zoos across the country, we have attempted to offer to librarians, educators, and poetry lovers an overview of the field. Works that appeal to young readers are noted by asterisks.

Sources for the Zoo Installations

Corresponding sites are noted as follows: BK (Brookfield Zoo), JX (Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens), LR (Little Rock Zoo), MW (Milwaukee County Zoo), and NO (Audubon Society - New Orleans).


Field, Barron. “Kangaroo, Kangaroo!” *Field’s First Fruits of Australian Poetry*. Sydney Australia: Edwards and Shaw, 1819. MW


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Hashin. [“No sky at all; / no earth at all / and still / the snowflakes fall...”], translated by Harold G. Henderson. *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Basho to Shiki*. Garden City NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1958. MW


Jackson, Helen Hunt. “October’s Bright Blue Weather.” *Poems*. Boston MA: Roberts Brothers, 1892. MW


Shiki, Masaoka. [“The autumn wind: / for me there are no gods; / there are no Buddhas”], translated by Harold G. Henderson. *An Introduction to Haiku: An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Basho to Shiki*. Garden City NY: Doubleday/Anchor, 1958. **MW**


Poetry Collections

Asterisks (**) denote titles for younger readers.


erCollins, 2008.


Teen, 2005.


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Oliver, Mary. *New and Selected Poems, Volume Two.* Boston MA: Beacon Press,

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Pack, Robert and Jay Parini, editors. *Poems for a Small Planet: A Bread Loaf


2004.


Prelutsky, Jack, Peter Sis, illustrator. **Scranimals.* New York NY: Har-

perTrophy, 2006.

Riordan, Maurice and John Burnside, editors. *Wild Reckoning: An Anthology

Provoked by Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring.* London UK: Calouste Gulbenkian


Rios, Alberto. *The Dangerous Shirt: Poems.* Townsend WA: Copper Canyon


Rios, Alberto. *The Theater of Night: Poems.* Townsend WA: Copper Canyon


Roehl, Renee, and Kelly Chadwick, editors. *Decomposition: Fungi-Inspired


Rogers, Pattiann. *Firekeeper: Selected Poems.* Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed

Editions, 2005.

Rothenberg, Jerome, editor. *Technicians of the Sacred: A Range of Poetries from

Africa, America, Asia, Europe and Oceania, Second edition, Revised and


Schlegel, Rob. *The Lesser Fields.* Ft. Collins CO: Center for Literary Pub-

lishing, 2009.

Shvarts, Elena. *Birdsong on the Seabed.* Northumberland UK: Bloodaxe


Sidman, Joyce and Beth Krommes, illustrator. **Butterfly Eyes and Other


Sierra, Judy, and Jose Aruego and Dewey Ariane, illustrators. **Antarctic


Sierra, Judy and Barney Saltzberg, illustrator. **There’s a Zoo in Room 22.


Singer, Marilyn and Meilo So, illustrator. **Footprints on the Roof: Poems


Snyder, Gary. *Mountains and Rivers Without End.* Washington DC: Counter-

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1993.


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**Nonfiction**


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Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens*
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* Dennis Pate, Director & CEO of Omaha’s Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium was Executive Director of the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens at the start of this project.

Chicago Zoological Society, Brookfield Zoo
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Andre Copeland, Interpretive Programs Manager
Casey Schulke, Interpretive Programs Coordinator
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Poets House is a national poetry library and literary center that invites poets and the public to step into the living tradition of poetry. Our literary programs and resources document the wealth and diversity of poetry, cultivate a wider audience for the art, and stimulate public dialogue on issues of poetry in culture. Founded in 1985 by the late U.S. Poet Laureate Stanley Kunitz and arts administrator Elizabeth Kray, Poets House now serves millions of readers and writers of poetry each year.

Chicago
Managed by the Chicago Zoological Society, the Brookfield Zoo opened in 1934; among its historical firsts are indoor multispecies exhibits, zoo nutrition residencies, methods for animal husbandry, and medical care that includes successful brain surgery for a gorilla. The zoo currently sees nearly two million visitors each year.

Brookfield Zoo partnered with two public libraries for this project: The Riverside Public Library, which has served the people of the historic community of Riverside, Illinois since the Great Depression; and Brookfield Public Library, whose mission is to create a cultural, educational, and informational center for the community.

New Orleans
One of the country’s top-ranked zoos, the Audubon Zoo offers an exotic mix of animals from around the globe, engaging natural habitats, lush gardens and resting spots, the mystical Louisiana swamp and hands-on animal encounters. With innovative natural habitat exhibits and an animal collection ranging from the unique white alligators to the extraordinary white tigers, the Audubon Zoo has become one of the Gulf South’s favorite family gathering spots.

The New Orleans Public Library is the premier cultural institution that celebrates and preserves the collective memory and living history of New Orleans, Louisiana, and the world. The library leads the recovery and the economic redevelopment of the New Orleans community, fosters the future aspirations of every individual, and protects the intellectual freedom and democratic dreams of all.
Little Rock
The Little Rock Zoo has long been one of Arkansas’ great treasures. It all began modestly in 1926, with just two animals—an abandoned timber wolf and a circus-trained brown bear. Today, the zoo has grown to include more than 725 animals representing 200+ species, many on the endangered list. The zoo itself has become one of the state’s greatest educational and conservation resources.

The Central Arkansas Library System serves residents of Pulaski and Perry County with free access to information, entertainment and a place to meet. It has eleven branches and a main library campus that includes a bookstore, an art gallery, and the Arkansas Studies Institute, which houses a research collection of Arkansas history materials and graduate classes for students attending the Clinton School of Public Service.

Jacksonville
Founded in 1914, the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens fosters understanding of the interaction of people, wildlife, and their environment by creating experiences that engage visitors, providing innovative educational opportunities, and instilling passion in the next generation as responsible stewards of the future. Its exhibits feature over 1,500 rare and exotic animals and 1,000 varieties of plants.

The Jacksonville Public Library’s vision statement is simple and encompassing: “Start Here. Go Anywhere!” It serves a diverse usership through a network of twenty regional, community and neighborhood branch libraries, a Talking Books Library for Disabled Customers, an active adult literacy program, and a Main Library which is the largest in the state. It was designed by Robert A.M. Stern and is both playful and monumental by turns, furthering the library’s mission to connect people with ideas that enlighten, inspire, enrich, and delight.

Milwaukee
The Milwaukee County Zoo is a serene home to more than 1,800 mammals, birds, fish, amphibians, and reptiles with more than 350 species represented. However, the Zoo has become more than that to visitors. It is a site for workshops, holiday celebrations, summer concerts, and food festivals. Recognized as one of the country’s finest zoological attractions, the Milwaukee County Zoo serves as a resource to educate, entertain, and inspire.

After 130 years, the Milwaukee Public Library continues to play a critical role in the community. The historic Central Library and twelve neighborhood branches provide services to a diverse population of over 600,000. The library offers a full range of services with an emphasis on early literacy, youth services, outreach, jobs, economic development, adult literacy, and lifelong learning. The Wisconsin Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped operates out of the Central Library. With the help of the Foundation and Friends, MPL offers special programs such as the award-winning early literacy program, Books2Go, adult computer training, and financial literacy programs.
 Contributors

SANDRA ALCOSER
Co-Principal Investigator (Poets) / Brookfield Poet-in-Residence
Sandra Alcosser shares thirty acres in the Bitterroot Mountains of Montana with a dwindling population of bear, moose, elk, and mountain lion. Except by Nature, selected by Eamon Grennan for the National Poetry Series, received numerous national awards including the James Laughlin from the Academy of American Poets. James Tate selected A Fish to Feed All Hunger for the Associated Writing Programs Series in Poetry. She is Professor of Creative Writing at San Diego State University. The recipient of two NEA Individual Artist Fellowships, she served as Montana’s first poet laureate. She has also served as poet-in-residence at Glacier National Park and, working with Poets House and the Wildlife Conservation Society, she was poet-in-residence at Central Park Zoo, the project on which the Language of Conservation is based.

JONATHAN BLUNK
Jonathan Blunk is writing the authorized biography of the poet James Wright. He co-edited Wright’s selected letters, A Wild Perfection. An essay on Jean Valentine’s poetry is included in This-World Company, the recent collection of critical writing devoted to her work. His poems, essays, and interviews have appeared in various journals and magazines.

LEE BRICCETTI
Lead Principal Investigator (Libraries)
Lee Briccetti has been the Executive Director of Poets House since 1989. Under her leadership, the annual Poets House Showcase and Poetry in the Branches were developed and became signature programs of Poets House. She brings significant development expertise to the organization and has completed Poets House’s capital construction and fundraising campaign, which has brought Poets House to a new home on the banks of the Hudson River in lower Manhattan, with a 60-year lease. Her work has been heralded as building Poets House to be one of the most imaginative institutions in the country.

JOSEPH BRUCHAC
Little Rock Poet-in-Residence
Joseph Bruchac lives in the Adirondack foothills town of Greenfield Center, New York, in the same house where his maternal grandparents raised him. Much of his writing draws on that land and his Abenaki ancestry. His lifelong interest in the natural world has been a frequent focus in his writing, especially the best-selling Keepers of the Earth series he co-authored. He has edited a number of highly praised anthologies of contemporary poetry, including Songs from this Earth on Turtle’s Back and Breaking Silence (winner of an American Book Award) and authored more than 120 books for adults and children. His honors include a Rockefeller Humanities fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Writing Fellowship for Poetry, the Hope S. Dean Award for Notable Achievement in Children’s Literature and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas.

ALISON HAWTHORNE DEMING
Jacksonville Poet-in-Residence
Alison Hawthorne Deming was born and grew up in Connecticut. She is the author of Science and Other Poems, selected by Gerald Stern for the Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets, and three additional poetry books: The Monarchs: A Poem Sequence, Genius Loci, and the forthcoming Rope. She has published three nonfiction books, Temporary Homelands, The Edges of the Civilized World, and Writing the Sacred Into The Real. She is the editor of Poetry of the American West: A Columbia Anthology and coeditor of The Colors of Nature: Essays on Culture, Identity, and the Natural World. Deming received a Stegner Fellowship from Stanford University and is a Professor in Creative Writing at the University of Arizona.

MARK DOTY
New Orleans Poet-in-Residence
Mark Doty’s Fire to Fire: New and Selected Poems won the National Book Award for Poetry in 2008. He is the author of seven previous books of poems and four volumes of nonfiction prose, including Dog Years, a meditation on the bond between animals and human beings, and on the pleasures and sorrows of living with dogs. He has worked with gay and lesbian youth at risk of homelessness and with senior gay and lesbian citizens in New York City, and has taught poetry at many colleges and universities as well as in community programs around the country. He lives in New York City and is a professor of English at Rutgers University.

ANNIE FINCH
Annie Finch is the author of several poetry collections, including Calendars and Eve. Two volumes of prose, A Poet’s Craft and A Poet’s Ear, appeared in 2010 from the University of Michigan Press. She directs the Stone-coast MFA Program at the University of Southern Maine, where she is also Professor of English.
JOHN FRASER, Ph.D. AIA
Co-Principal Investigator (Exhibition Design and Research/Evaluation)
John Fraser Ph.D. AIA is a conservation psychologist, architect and educator currently serving as President & CEO of the New Knowledge Organization Ltd., an entrepreneurial think tank dedicated to the study of how society comes to terms with the grand challenges of our time. Dr. Fraser holds adjunct faculty positions at Hunter College CUNY and Columbia University, is an Earth Institute Research Scientist at Columbia University, holds the California Academy of Sciences appointment as Associate Editor - Operations for *Curator: the Museum Journal* and is a Fellow of the Wildlife Conservation Society. Dr. Fraser was the Director IIL-NY from 2008 through 2011.

REGINALD HARRIS
Reginald Harris, the Poetry in the Branches Coordinator and Information Technology Director at Poets House, came to his present position after 20 years’ experience at the Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore, Maryland. For the past decade he has also worked extensively with literary-based non-profits as a technology consultant and website manager. His first book of poetry, *Ten Tongues*, was a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award and the ForeWord Book of the Year.

MARRSA HOWARD
Marsha Howard became the Poetry in The Branches Coordinator at Poets House following a 35-year career as a librarian and administrator at The New York Public Library. In her years at Poets House she worked on several initiatives linking poets and libraries, the last of which was *The Language of Conservation*.

ERIN JOHNSON
Erin Johnson is an artist and scientific illustrator living and working in Hollywood, CA. Specializing in molecular and cellular animation she uses the cutting edge technology of the entertainment industry to bring science to life. Johnson has worked as a research associate undertaking research and evaluation in informal settings at the Wildlife Conservation Society, the John G. Shedd Aquarium, and worked for the Institute for Learning Innovation’s New York office during the *Language of Conservation* project.

CHRISTOPHER MERRILL
Christopher Merrill has published four collections of poetry, including *Brilliant Water* and *Watch Fire*. He directs the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

W. S. MERWIN
W. S. Merwin has twice received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry: in 1971 for *The Carrier of Ladders* and in 2009 for *The Shadow of Sirius*. His other collections of poetry include *The Lice*, *The Vixen*, and *Migrations: New & Selected Poems*. Also a well-regarded essayist and translator, in 2010 Merwin was appointed the Library of Congress’s seventeenth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry. He lives and works in Hawaii.

JANE PRESTON
Managing Director, Poets House
Jane Preston has overseen the day-to-day operations of Poets House since 1990. Her early career in New York state libraries and her experience in owning and operating her own businesses bring to Poets House years of financial acumen and managerial expertise that have helped build a thriving organization.

PATTIANN ROGERS
Milwaukee Poet-in-Residence
Pattiann Rogers is a poet who has published 15 books, most recently *The Grand Array, Writings on Nature, Science, and Spirit* (Trinity U. Press, 2010), *Summer’s Company* (Brooding Heron Press, 2009), and *Wayfare* (Penguin, 2008). Rogers is the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts Grants, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and a Literary Award from the Lannan Foundation, five Pushcart prizes, and other awards. She has taught as a visiting professor at various universities, including the Universities of Texas, Arkansas, and Montana, and Washington University. She is the mother of two sons and has three grandsons. She lives with her husband, a retired geophysicist, in Colorado.

MARSHA L. SEMMEL
Director of Strategic Partnerships, Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)
Marsha L. Semmel joined IMLS in 2003 as director for strategic partnerships. Beginning in 2006, she also served as deputy director for the Office of Museum Services, managing the agency’s portfolio of grant programs for museums of all types. Ms. Semmel also oversees and coordinates IMLS partnerships with other federal agencies, foundations,
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