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Development of a Strategic Conservation Education Plan for the Department of National Zoological Gardens, Dehiwala

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Abstract

Dehiwala National Zoo, one of Asia's oldest zoos, houses a remarkable collection of indigenous and exotic fauna. It aims to inspire animal conservation through educational initiatives but faces challenges in raising visitors' awareness due to outdated educational strategies. The study aimed to assess current awareness levels among visitors, examined the zoo's strategic efforts, and prepared a strategic plan for conservation education in the zoo to enhance visitors' awareness and inspire behavioral changes. Literature review, semi-structured visitor survey with ten questions administered to 72 visitors (general public, school children, undergraduates, and professionals in zoology), and focus group discussions were conducted to assess visitors' awareness on conservation and perceptions of the zoo. In-person discussions with zoo employees provided insights into existing educational strategies and efforts and resource availability. SWOT analysis was conducted to identify the zoo's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Major weaknesses identified in the SWOT analysis: insufficient employee awareness, poor marketing strategies, and limited use of digital technology have been addressed in the prepared strategic plan. The visitor survey evaluated attributes such as visitors' perceptions on zoos' roles in conservation, awareness of breeding and reintroduction efforts, and interest in conservation programmes. Statistical analysis of visitor survey responses, including confidence intervals and hypothesis testing, revealed that professionals exhibited the highest awareness (100%) of animal breeding, reintroduction, and endangered species conservation projects. Other groups demonstrated comparatively lower awareness on current conservation projects. However, all groups expressed high satisfaction with the zoo's conservation efforts. The survey results emphasized the crucial requirement to continuously improve and expand conservation programmes. Children predominantly favored leaving animals in the wild, while 80% of professionals strongly valued zoos' educational and scientific roles. These perceptions underline the importance of tailoring educational content to different visitor groups. Surveys reveal positive feedback across categories suggested that effective conservation education fosters positive behavioral intentions. The strategic conservation education plan align with five key strategic goals for implementation/ enhancement within the National Zoological Gardens, Dehiwala, with each goal outlined corresponding activities: improving and developing educational materials, enhancing systems for gathering and sharing scientific findings, intensifying employee training, expanding educational programmes for students, and increasing awareness and outreach programmes for the general public. These targeted actions aim to address the identified gaps and foster greater conservation awareness and responsibility among visitors. This study underscores the necessity of implementing these strategic goals to redefine the zoo's role as a conservation leader and enhance its educational impact on diverse visitor groups.

Keywords: *Strategic conservation education plan, Visitors' awareness, Conservation, Zoo*