NURTURING A LOVE OF NATURE

BY MATT VILLANO

ENGAGING DIVERSE AUDIENCES AND CONNECTING TO COMMUNITIES THROUGH NATURE PLAY
was just a harmless corn snake, but to one particular grandmother on a recent and special family day at the Denver Zoo in Denver, Colo., it might as well have been a pit viper.

The fifty-something woman said she wasn’t a fan of snakes. She said she’d never touched one in her life. Yet when her four-year-old granddaughter insisted that she touch the reptile, then extended two fingers to show her how, the woman swallowed her fear and let the child take her hand for a caress.

“It was different from what I expected,” the grandmother exclaimed with relief as she reached for a squirt of hand sanitizer from one of the volunteer animal handlers.

Her granddaughter, face shaded by a pink visor, simply smiled.

This scene was the culmination of a year-long Denver Zoo program with students from Clayton Early Learning, a Denver-area preschool. The program, dubbed Nurturing Scientists through Nature Play, aims to give underserved families hands-on exposure to animals and to introduce city kids to the wonders of nature. In 2017 alone, the program has served just under 100 kids and their families. It is funded in part by one of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ Nature Play Begins at Your Zoo & Aquarium grants.

Several of the AZA grants fund efforts like this one to engage minority and other disadvantaged populations and help them build comfort and confidence to explore the outside world. Many of these innovative programs involve important community partners such as libraries, Headstart, and after-school program providers.

“Zoos and aquariums have this unique opportunity to meet our mission of conservation by inspiring the next generation of environmental stewards,” said Amy Rutherford, director of professional development and education for AZA. “Nature play presents an opportunity for our members to provide a different entry point and a different opportunity to connect with parts of the community they may not be serving currently.”

**Reaching Early Learners**

The Denver Zoo is one of a handful of grant recipients to focus on early learners. Angela Barber, the Zoo’s director of learning experiences, said the Zoo worked closely with Clayton Early Learners to build the program to meet the needs of their teachers and educational goals.
Over the course of the 2016-2017 school year, the program comprised eight different classes—four at the preschool sites and four at the Zoo. At every class, Denver Zoo staffers bring live animal ambassadors with which kids can interact. The same educators lead kids through a more conceptual curriculum, too—utilizing words such as “observe” and “predict” to help develop a foundation of scientific thinking.

“It’s never too early to nurture a science identity,” Barber said. She adds that educators also strive to teach participants that they don’t need piles of money to experience nature. “Another one of our messages is that nature is everywhere, and that you don’t have to hike up a mountain or pay to travel to a giant park to appreciate trees and animals and other wonderful things that are living their lives right beside us.”

The North Carolina Aquarium on Roanoke Island, N.C., also has a toddler-specific initiative: the Aquatots program designed to introduce local kids and their families to nature through music-oriented play.

The Aquarium spent some of the $10,000 grant it received in 2016 to create a Percussion Play Area in an outdoor corner of the facility, setting out pots and pans and other items on which children can make noises. A few times a week, Marine Science Educator, Paul Mazzei, heads out with an instrument and teaches kids a science-based song that he has written or found online. Then everyone sings together.

“Kids get so into the singing and banging [pots], they don’t even realize they’re learning,” said Mazzei.

Out and About
Other member organizations have received grants for nature play programs that leverage open space outside the zoo or aquarium grounds.

Take the Tracy Aviary in Salt Lake City, Utah, for example. Here, one of the most popular components of the Nature in the City initiative is called Stream Exploration, and, as the name suggests, it most commonly gets members of local minority or low-income communities out to a local park or open space to get their hands and feet wet.

Michelle Mileham, director of education at the Tracy Aviary, said the half-day curriculum comprises structured lessons about water quality and ecosystems, as well as unstructured time for kids just to interact with the streams and rivers however they see fit.

“Even something as simple as reaching into a cold and running stream is scary for kids and scary for adults to let kids do,” she said, noting that hands-on activities with critters such as leeches and scuds (freshwater shrimp) always generates some drama among the kid set. “Often these programs start out slow and after an hour or so, kids are ankle deep having the time of their lives.”

The Florida Aquarium in Tampa, Fla., also leverages natural assets of its community through its eight-month Nature Players program that incorporates City and County Parks along with playgrounds. Introducing low-income families to wonderful places to experience together what they may otherwise never consider visiting on their own, opens their eyes to the possibilities of exploration and discovery. While many of the locations in the program are free to visit, families simply aren’t aware of them or lack the confidence to engage in unstructured nature play.
“The families that come—many of them had never camped before, some were single-parent families,” said Kathy Osborne, Kidcare coordinator. “Lack of knowledge and lack of experience were barriers, but by having all the materials and kind people to share techniques, our families overcame those barriers pretty quickly.”

For the Love of the Hunt

Last—but certainly not least—is the nature play program at the Sequoia Park Zoo in Eureka, Calif. The Zoo has built one part of its Nature Play Begins initiatives around an environment-friendly scavenger hunt that also incorporates bartering.

The instructional part of the program is easy—Zoo volunteers teach kids about the ins and outs of gentle collecting, and how to be responsible stewards of the environment. Beyond that, all of the kids receive a list of items they need to collect (redwood cones, exoskeletons, etc.), and a “Nature box” in which they can put the items once they’ve got them. Kate Baldwin, zoo activities coordinator, said kids then can redeem certain items for points, and use these points to “spend” on items such as antler sheds, porcupine quills and more.

A second part of the Sequoia Park Zoo program is a group called the Family Nature Club, and it seeks to pull together low-income, homeless, and underserved people in the community and provide services and opportunities for them to get more involved. Sometimes this might mean activities such as extra-curricular art classes and zoo trips. Other times it means yoga classes in which “poses” are designed to mimic animal movement and get participants pretending to be hedgehogs and seals.

“Our program allows people from all over our community to come and enjoy the Zoo for free—a savings of $32 for a family of four,” said Baldwin. “For a family that’s homeless, that’s the difference between eating and not eating at night. It’s a huge burden we’re able to remove.”

As of press time, Sequoia Park Zoo had recorded 114 participants for this year’s Family Nature Club, logging a total of 171 program hours. These numbers, along with stories from other member zoos and aquariums who have received grants through Nature Play Begins at Your Zoo & Aquarium, show that simply offering this sort of programming can make a huge difference for everyone involved.

Just ask the grandmother from Denver.

Thanks to the Nature Play Begins at Your Zoo & Aquarium grant we received last year, we’ve been able to provide transformative experiences for almost 100 participants who rarely ventured beyond their own four-block community boundary,” said Debbi Stone, vice president of education at the Florida Aquarium.

A nature play program at the North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro, N.C., goes one step further.

This program, dubbed Nature Rocks, includes a hiking and camping component geared toward underserved children and their families, as well as kids in a popular after-school class at a local church. The initiative is progressive, meaning that participants build up their hiking and camping endurance gradually, first with experiences on Zoo land, then with experiences on land off-site but still owned by the Zoo, and finally with experiences on land that’s owned by someone else.

Volunteers from the Zoo make sure the overnights are fun by encouraging pond-dipping, using animal ambassadors, and bringing telescopes that enable visitors to look up into the sky.

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The Association of Zoos and Aquariums has given $950,000 in grants through the Nature Play program. This begins at Your Zoo & Aquarium program.

All told, this means the organization will end up investing approximately $1 MILLION in nature play grants in four years. Recipients get either $5,000 or $10,000. To this point, the AZA has awarded 142 different grants to about 92 different facilities across the U.S. and abroad.