

Habitat or humbug?

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When the 2 millionth visitor walked through the gates of Melbourne Zoo last month, a sigh of relief could be heard among the popping champagne corks. The milestone underscored the significant turnaround in the zoo's fortunes over the past five years, following falling visitor numbers, poor staff morale and a faltering vision.

"We were adrift," says former Zoos Victoria chairman Andrew Fairley of the organisation he headed from 2007 until May this year. "We had a toxic culture and we did not know why we existed. We were mouthing off about being responsible for conservation, but really it was all about entertainment."

Staff dissatisfaction with the zoo's direction had spilled over into several leaked front-page media stories in early 2008, alleging abuse and neglect of animals, including an incident in which a trainer repeatedly stabbed an elephant with a sharp metal spike and another where zoo animals were transported to Fairley's Toorak home for a cocktail party.

"It was a baptism of fire," says Fairley, adding that the role had been pitched to him as low profile. He also had to deal with a staff survey showing employee engagement of well under 60 per cent, and a new corporate plan that barely mentioned sustainability.

Five years on, the figures paint a very different picture. The most recent staff survey shows employee engagement at 93 per cent. Visitor numbers across the three zoos (Zoos Victoria manages Melbourne Zoo, Werribee Open Range Zoo and Healesville Sanctuary) have risen from 1.58 million a year to more than 2 million.

In the same period, Friends of the Zoo membership has more than doubled to 150,000, and operating revenue has increased 40 per cent to \$47 million. And the revamped Zoos Foundation, launched at Fairley's infamous cocktail party, has raised \$11.5 million for the "Safe Haven" appeal to improve animal enclosures.

Underpinning the financial success story is a revised raison d'etre. Put simply, the zoo has found its mojo. In an environment in which worldwide debate rages over the ethics of putting wild animals on display at all, Zoos Victoria argues that its three zoos are, in fact, no longer zoos. Instead they are a "conservation organisation based at zoos", a cumbersome phrase that translates into the pithy slogan: "Fighting Extinction".

The new approach hits visitors just a few metres inside the gates of the 150-year-old Melbourne Zoo. On one side of the main path is a huge banner proclaiming "Five Ways You Can Fight Extinction". On the other side another banner has a photo of an orang-utan and the slogan "Don't Palm Us Off". Down towards the giraffe enclosure is a picture of "Zooperman", the zooperhero fighting extinction.

Next to the orang-utans, whose wild habitats in Malaysia and Indonesia are being destroyed by palm oil plantations, are shelves of common "zoopermarket" items and an electronic scanner for visitors to find out which items use sustainable palm oil (Cheezels, no; Tim Tams, yes). And on rubbish bins, photos of seals accompany the slogan "Seal The Loop", urging visitors to recycle plastic bags.

The "fighting extinction" mantra extends beyond the zoo walls. When Werribee Open Range Zoo unveiled its baby white rhino, Pepper, in June, the zoo's vet homed in on conservation issues straight away. "Obviously she's important from a conservation perspective," the vet told interviewers. "Being a southern white rhinoceros, they're critically endangered."

"A united vision of conservation is in our DNA; it's integrated, it's not separate," says Jenny Gray, the CEO of Zoos Victoria. Although zoos around the world have adopted conservation as a key aim over the past 30 years, Gray says the predominant model is to make money from displaying animals to the public, then use the profits for conservation work. A second model, adopted at progressive zoos over the past decade or so, is to set up a separate conservation division alongside the zoo and run the two under one umbrella group. The third model, which Gray claims as a world first for Zoos Victoria, is full integration of conservation objectives into everything the zoo does.

An example? Gray says that when Melbourne Zoo's maned wolf died a couple of years ago, he was not replaced. The zoo now has four strict categories for its animal collection, and the maned wolf didn't fit into any of them. The categories are "recovery" (endangered species being bred then released in the wild); "ark" (endangered species being bred and held until there is a safe wilderness to release them into); "ambassador" (animals that are the public face of a conservation campaign, such as gorillas and mobile phone recycling); and "enabling" (popular animals that help attract visitors to the zoo, such as meerkats).

Gray says that when Honey, Melbourne Zoo's solitary brown bear, dies, the zoo is unlikely to replace her. "We'd be more likely to look at an Asian sun bear, a species that works with our conservation message about forests," Gray says.

Here's another example. When the zoo catering contract came up for renewal in 2010, the winning tenderer based their whole pitch around sustainability and conservation. And, over the past three years, far more indigenous plants have been used in landscaping at Melbourne Zoo.

The main focus of the conservation strategy, however, is 20 local species teetering on the brink of extinction. The list includes the eastern barred bandicoot, the helmeted honeyeater, the Lord Howe Island stick insect, Leadbeater's possum and the Tasmanian devil. At present, the zoo is breeding 14 of the 20 species, and will release some of these animals into the wild. Late last month, for example, 16 zoo-bred eastern barred bandicoots were set free at a park in Greenvale.

"Success for us does not look like animals in a zoo, success is animals in the wild," says Gray, but adds that some species, such as the Lord Howe Island stick insect, have no safe place to go right now. These "ark" animals are bred as an insurance population at the zoo, to ensure they don't die out altogether.

The ambitious strategy was developed after zoo researchers and other scientists tried - and failed - to save the Christmas Island pipistrelle bat from dying out in 2009. On Gray's iPad is a sad recording of the last surviving bat's call, the only one picked up from 500 monitors placed around Christmas Island in August 2009. After a few days, on August 26, the call ceased and Gray says that date marks the first extinction of an Australian mammal in 60 years.

It's an experience that has affected Gray deeply. The zoo asked scientists which Victorian animals were heading for extinction over the next five to 10 years, and the scientists came up with 16 species. (The other four are non-Victorian animals that the zoo was already working on). The resulting captive breeding program, costing about \$2.5 million a year, forms the basis of the zoo's oft-repeated promise that "no Victorian terrestrial vertebrate species will go extinct on our watch".

It's a promise that drives David Hancocks wild. The international zoo consultant and former director of the Werribee Open Range Zoo says the zoo's focus on 20 threatened native species is an excellent strategy and CEO Gray has a much stronger and more dedicated commitment to what she says than most other zoo managers.

What upsets him, however, is the tendency for zoos - including Zoos Victoria - to try to hog the limelight in the fight against extinction. "Almost all meaningful wildlife conservation programs are government based, and the role played by zoos in these programs is typically only a technical function," he says. "But zoos involved in such programs immediately claim the high ground, stand on their very public soap box and declare that they are the ones who are saving wild species."

Hancocks is also deeply suspicious of any zoo that preaches conservation while still keeping large animals such as elephants, tigers and giraffes in small spaces.

"When modern zoos began early in the 19th century, their aim was to show exotic animals to the public and that was sufficient for the day," he says. "Now, the view is that if you are going to put wild animals in captivity, you have to have a very good reason for doing it."

If that reason is to attract visitors to the zoo and convert them into conservationists, then, argues Hancocks, the logic is faulty. Another organisation, such as Melbourne Museum, could just as easily draw attention to the plight of endangered species. "If you have giraffes and elephants because otherwise people won't come, you're really doing no more than zoos in the 19th century," he says.

Gray is realistic about the fact that no one - apart from naturalist David Attenborough - goes to the zoo to see Lord Howe Island stick insects. Or possums, even if they are endangered Leadbeater's ones. But she says the zoo offers two unique capabilities: the skills and resources to handle and breed animals in captivity, and 2 million people each year walking through the gates and absorbing the multiple messages about how they can make a difference.

While some critics suggest those messages are just "greenwashing", Gray counters that the zoo measures the effectiveness of all its conservation campaigns. The "Wipe for Wildlife" initiative, for example, using "Crapman" to urge consumers to switch to recycled toilet paper, had a 30 per cent switch-over rate three months after people had visited the zoo. The "Don't Palm Us Off" campaign has attracted 167,000 signatures for a petition urging legislation for palm oil disclosure on product labels.

The sometimes contradictory aims of entertainment and conservation are evident from a quick chat with five year 9 students on a recent excursion to Melbourne Zoo. All five were confident that the zoo's main message was "fighting extinction" and one student also said we should try to use less palm oil. They felt that there was still a place for zoos in the 21st century, even though it was better to see animals in their natural habitat if possible. And their favourite animals? Tigers, elephants, seals and orang-utans.

And there lies the rub. The most popular animals tend to be bigger and need more space than most urban zoos can provide.

Even Melbourne Zoo's \$15 million elephant trail, opened 10 years ago, is not big enough, according to Hancocks. He's even more scathing of the barren giraffe enclosure. These animals, he argues, should all be at Werribee Open Range Zoo.

"Melbourne Zoo is doing good things, it has more enthusiasm and vigour than almost any other zoo, but there needs to be a revolution," Hancocks says. "My main concern rests on giving animals the best quality of life. As long as [Zoos Victoria] have elephants, giraffes and zebras at Melbourne Zoo instead of Werribee [Open Range Zoo], then they're putting commercialism first, not welfare."

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This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/habitat-or-humbug-20130716-2q253.html>