

Abstract:

Zoos and aquariums are unique facilities that combine applied sciences, conservation and education while housing a wide variety of organisms and offering exciting opportunities for visitors to explore biodiversity. Cougar Mountain Zoological Park (CMZ) offers many educational programs and events for a wide variety of children and parents included. The ZOO2U online videos, Animal Close Encounters, School-related field trips, Guided Tours and the Living Classroom educational experiences are only a few of the available programs offered at Cougar Mountain Zoo. The daily miniature lectures that are offered from open until close, are one of the most used educational resources for visitors of the zoo. Through a collaboration with Cougar Mountain Zoo, Gersh Academy for Students on the Autism Spectrum and other local schools in Washington, this project examined the current educational programs and observed interactions between visitors, staff, and the animals that call CMZ their home. This study took place in Issaquah, Washington at the 11- acre (4.5 ha) non-profit zoological park that is adjacent to an experienced academy for individuals on the autism spectrum on Cougar Mountain. Through previous research, active observations and collections of qualitative and quantitative data, an evaluative report was delivered to this organization and used to justify the expansion of programming and research to the local government. **(213 words)**