



International Association of
Avian Trainers and Educators

POSITION STATEMENT

Educational Messaging

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BACKGROUND

IAATE members, and others, working in educational programming are in a critically important position for affecting people's behavior to advance environmental stewardship and the preservation of wildlife and wild places. The unique resources in ambassador animal program members' staff, exhibits, and living collections, combined with the opportunity to interact with a large number of people each year, can foster caring attitudes and conservation action.

Ambassador animal programs deliver educational messages through a variety of means including:

- **In-person On/Off-site Programming** such as presentations/shows, academic programs, public programs, interpretation, events, workshops, and media appearances.
- **Virtual programming** such as presentations, shows, workshops, webinars, and classes available online via online technology (ex: Zoom) or available via download.

Birds serve as captivating ambassadors for the natural world. Their beauty, diversity, and remarkable behaviors offer a unique opportunity to educate and inspire audiences of all ages. This position statement outlines key principles for crafting educational messages about birds that are both informative and engaging.

POSITION

While recognizing each institution has a unique mission appropriate to their facility, IAATE recommends educational programming utilizing live birds shares the following goals:

To increase awareness of the natural world, foster caring attitudes, and promote behaviors that support a healthy, sustainable environment.

To support these goals, IAATE believes educational messaging should promote:

- scientific accuracy and professionalism.
- species-appropriate behavior.
- multi-sensory learning.
- engaging and inspirational programming.
- taking an audience-centric approach.
- mindfulness to audience attention span and pacing of the program.
- using appropriate entertainment to advance learning.
- the use of storytelling to engage audience members and deliver information.
- bird welfare as the highest priority in education programs.

By adhering to these principles, educational messages about birds can go beyond simple facts and figures to ignite a passion for the natural world and inspire people toward active stewardship of birds and all species with which we share the planet.

MESSAGE EVALUATION

IAATE recommends ongoing evaluation of educational messaging to assess its success in achieving goals.

IAATE members should consider it a priority to provide solid evidence supporting the contention that incorporating live birds as animal ambassadors in programming accomplishes our educational goals. One way to measure potential attitude and behavioral change is through surveys given to audience members pre and post program. By measuring program outcomes, members can ensure their programs are truly effective vehicles for teaching and inspiring conservation action. Increasing collective evaluation efforts will benefit both the avian profession and individual institutions.

SUPPORT FOR POSITION

Scientific Accuracy and Professionalism: Bird education programs and materials should be grounded in current scientific research and adhere to established professional standards for interpretation and education. This ensures the information presented is accurate, and reliable.

Species-Appropriate Behavior: Programs should create opportunities for birds to engage in natural behaviors, such as flying, foraging, preening, and vocalizing. Witnessing these behaviors fosters a deeper understanding of birds' ecological behaviors and creates a more enriching experience for both the animal and the audience (Learmonth, M.J. et al, 2021).

Multi-Sensory Learning: Effective education appeals to diverse learning styles. Programs should incorporate visual aids, interactive activities, and opportunities for close observation (following safety guidelines). This might include incorporating sounds of bird calls, handling feathers (sanitized), or building bird feeders to encourage audience participation. Studies suggest that multi-sensory learning strengthens connections in the brain for better recall (Shams, 2008). Multi-sensor learning also strives to make education accessible to audiences of all abilities.

Engagement and Inspiration: Facts alone rarely create lasting impact. Educational messages should be presented in a way that sparks curiosity, ignites a sense of wonder, and fosters a connection with birds. Storytelling, interactive activities, and demonstrations of birds' intelligence and adaptations can be powerful tools in achieving this goal. Stories over plain facts evoke emotions and inspire a

sense of wonder about the natural world (Mertins & Bauer, 2017). According to Ham (1992), “topics are not inherently interesting or boring...there are only people who make them that way.” Thus, making a topic interesting has a lot to do with the way we choose to present it. Engaging guests with questions at educational programs can extend attention spans and increase connectivity and knowledge. When facilitators prompted participants with questions the programs were especially successful at eliciting questions and guiding the topics of the questions, fueling deeper curiosity (Rank, 2021).

Audience-Centered Approach: Effective communication is about getting your message across. Specifically, it involves capturing your audience's attention, ensuring your audience understands the idea you are trying to convey, and encouraging your audience to do something with that information, such as remember it, apply it, or take action (Doumont, 2010). A message is not just information; rather, it is the interpretation of the information. Understanding the audience's age, background, and prior knowledge is crucial. Tailoring messages and activities to different age groups and learning styles promotes comprehension and maximizes engagement.

Attention Span and Pacing: Lectures exceeding audience attention spans are counterproductive. However, there is currently no data to support the 10-, 15-, or 18-minute attention span hypotheses (Bradbury, 2017). Attention span is more reliant on how engaging or entertaining a presentation is rather than a set time limit. Information should be presented in concise but effective ways interspersed with opportunities for engagement, interaction, and observation of bird behaviors. One way to gauge the effectiveness of the various elements of a program is to evaluate the attention span of the audience. An effective tool for evaluating audience attention span is the Show Evaluation Form developed at Natural Encounters, Inc. (Martin, S., 2012).

Entertainment as a Learning Tool: Edutainment, a blend of education and entertainment, has revolutionized the way we capture audience attention spans by making learning engaging and enjoyable. “Entertainment” does not mean knee-slapping jokes or exploitative carnival tricks. Entertainment comes in many forms, such as the species-appropriate behavior of a bird, a close encounter with a fascinating animal, and the skillful performance of a charismatic presenter, to mention a few. Entertainment can also be created by dramatic elements, such as conflict and resolution, anticipation, intrigue and surprise. If we can make learning enjoyable, people are more likely to retain the information they are being taught. Edutainment excels at grabbing the learners’ attention leading to better retention of information (Hamilton, 2023) (Zipagan, n.d.). Verifiable knowledge is a strong predictor of pro-environmental attitudes and behavior (Ienna, 2022).

Witnessing birds engage in natural behaviors can be inherently captivating and provide a vehicle for educational messaging. When a charismatic presenter delivers information in engaging, accessible, and entertaining ways, the stage is set for audiences to be empowered to take conservation action. By focusing on the fascinating ways birds live, survive, and interact with their environment, we can inspire a deeper appreciation for their role in the natural world.

Promote bird welfare as the highest priority: First and foremost, animals deserve humane treatment. Any show that prioritizes spectacle or profit over the well-being of the animals involved is unethical. Secondly, ensuring the animals are comfortable and cared for is essential for their health and safety. Stressful conditions can lead to physical and mental problems, which can impact their performance and even their lives. Finally, a show that prioritizes animal welfare will be more appealing to audiences who are increasingly concerned about ethical treatment of animals. By demonstrating a commitment to animal welfare, organizers can build a positive reputation and attract a wider audience. To promote animal welfare, IAATE promotes the most positive, least intrusive, effective training methods (IAATE, 2023).

ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR POSITION

- The AZA (Association of Zoos & Aquariums) states zoos and aquariums are ideal venues for developing emotional connections to wildlife and fostering an appreciation for the natural world and AZA endorses the appropriate inclusion of animals acting as ambassadors by zoo and aquarium professionals seeking to create conservation education experiences that are engaging and effective at conveying cognitive and affective (emotional) messages about the conservation of wildlife and wild places (AZA, 2023).
- Studies have shown that naming animals with anthropomorphized names significantly increased retention of information about an animal (Newberry, 2017).
- Personal experiences with ambassador animals can have a lasting influence on a person's knowledge of the animal. Opportunities to meet live animals increase participants' feelings of connecting to animals (Rank, 2018). Adults who participated in dolphin interactions at five different US institutions learned and retained more information about dolphins than a control group of adults who viewed dolphin exhibits only (Miller, 2013) and participants who met a penguin and facilitator in a barrier-free setting recalled more fact-based information about penguins compared to zoo visitors who visited the exhibit only, interacted with an interpreter and touched penguin biofacts (e.g., feathers), or listened to a live narration during a penguin feeding (Manion, 2023). In another study, zoo visitors who encountered ambassador ravens or Radiated Tortoises outside of their exhibit with a facilitator, could recall facts about those animals more accurately than could visitors who only viewed these animals in their exhibits (Povey, 2002).

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