



Houston Zoo Volunteer Training

ACT: PALM OIL



The goal of this continuing education opportunity is to offer Volunteers at the Houston Zoo the tools and training to effectively engage guests with messaging that supports the mission of the Houston Zoo

Houston Zoo connects communities with animals, inspiring actions to save wildlife.

The information offered here is meant to supplement the training course and should be read prior to attending training.

"Interpretation is a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource." – National Association for Interpretation (NAI)

Think about what the "resource" is here at the Houston Zoo. Our individual animals? Our conservation programs? A little of both? As we move forward as both an institution and as a live-interpretation program, our focus is going to be more on connecting our guests with the individual animals in our collection. The hope is that once an emotional relationship is established, behavior change will be more easily achieved.

So how do we forge emotional and intellectual connections? By relating our conversations and presentations to our guests' interests and lives. Basically, we are answering the question: *What can I do?* There are some who would argue we should be answering: *Why should I care?* The reality is that most people know the answer to this and actually *do* care. Consider what our end goal is. Are we asking people to *care* or are we asking for them to *change* their behavior?



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Palm Oil. It's everywhere! In the food we eat, the lotions and make-up we use, and even the detergents we wash our clothes with. Present in almost ½ of packaged products, palm oil is the most widely consumed vegetable oil on Earth. The clearing of tropical rainforests for palm oil plantations has led to the destruction of much of the natural habitat for many species that can be seen here at the Houston Zoo. Simple awareness and shopping savvy can be the key to saving these species!

When speaking to our guests about any of the Zoo's Conservation Initiatives, it is important to remember to highlight what the Zoo is doing to help as well as the simple things our guests can do. We want to avoid the "doom and gloom" presentations that leave guests feeling guilty and helpless. Our main goal is to encourage behavior change and empower guests to make and be those changes!

When opening conversations, it is most effective to begin with the animals themselves. Of course, if you are already in conversation with a guest about a conservation topic, use your best judgement. However, studies have shown that behavior change is most effective if spurred by an **empathetic connection**. If guests have some sort of connection to the wild world we are trying to save, they are more inclined to want to help it.



Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection.

Freeman Tilden



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As an ACT (Animal Conservation Team) Volunteer, you will be able to talk about this message across many areas of the zoo. We encourage you to be creative, but here are a few ideas of where you can message and the animals found in these habitats. Please research natural history and our collection via the [Dashboard](#):

Wortham World of Primates (WWP)

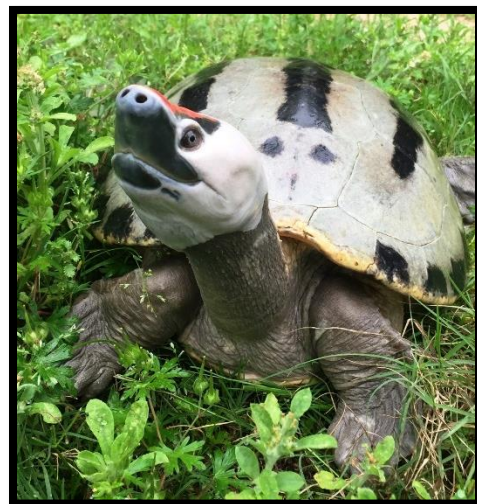
There are three exhibits within this area that are great to interpret this message at: orangutan, babirusa, and siamang. All three of these exhibits represent animals from southeast Asia, an area identified to be the hardest hit by poor palm oil planting practices.



Don't Forget the Little Guys!

The Malaysian painted river terrapins are located in the orangutan moat! It's easy for guests to get focused on the orangutans in the habitat, so it would be a great interpretative bonus to point these colorful turtles out to them.

When you protect orangutan habitat, you are also helping to protect the habitat of all of the other wildlife that live there as well!





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The McNair Asian Elephant Habitat

Home to our Asian elephant herd, this habitat just underwent an expansion that doubled the elephant complex and includes a 160,000-gallon pool. Our [website](#) has more information about the expansion as well as the individual elephants in our herd.



Clouded Leopard and Malayan Tiger Habitats

Located in the carnivore area of the zoo, these two species of cats have some of the most striking coat colorations of all the felids. They also represent two distinctly different types of predators; arboreal and terrestrial!





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Natural Encounters – Asian Small-Clawed Otters

Part of the River's Edge experience, Asian small-clawed otters are found in Malaysia, Indonesia, and throughout southeast Asia. While not one of the main animals we usually focus on the speaking about palm oil, their habitat can be affected by poor farming practices. Our conservation work with partners in this region helps to protect this species.



Fischer Bird Gardens

While the larger animals tend to be the flagship species for conservation campaigns, birds are also affected by habitat loss. Hornbills are exceptionally smart birds and the two species represented in Fischer Bird gardens are the great Indian hornbill and the rhinoceros hornbill.



What's So Awesome About Palm Oil???

Many argue that palm oil is more economic to produce due to its higher yield of fruit per acre compared to other oil tree crops. The oil itself is also said to be more versatile than other vegetable oils and can be processed into a wide variety of products. Throw in the dependency on it as a cooking material by some of the largest populations in the world, as well as the livelihood its crops provide to farmers and their communities, and you have an idea why it is not going anywhere anytime soon.



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So, What's the Problem?

The palm oil industry has caused extensive deforestation as sensitive rainforests are cut down or burnt to make room for new plantations. This not only destroys habitat critical to the survival of many species of animals, but can also lead to increased human-wildlife conflict as wild animals find themselves pressed into smaller fragmented areas.

Changing How We Respond: What Can You Do?

Our first response as a capitalist society is to boycott something we don't like. The thought behind this strategy is that *if they don't get my money and I get enough people to agree with me, they'll feel it on their bottom line!* We've all received that email that says "Boycott XYZ Gas!" "Don't buy on this date!" The problem with this approach is that these companies are multi-billion dollar conglomerates and palm oil is in almost ½ of our pre-packaged products. Simply saying that one just won't consume palm oil is not a viable solution for many consumers. The consumers who can and will abstain cannot make enough of a dent in that billion-dollar bottom line to change the dependence on a product that is cheap and readily available. So, all you have is moral outrage, but no action.

There is another option! Rather than boycotting palm oil completely, we encourage our guests to switch their patronage to companies who are doing the right thing and committing to farm it sustainably. The [Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil](#) (RSPO) developed specific guidelines on palm oil practices do not negatively impact the environment.

What makes Sustainable Palm Oil a Better Choice?

- Grown in a way that is friendly to wildlife and local biodiversity
- Oil palm is very productive and trees can be used for nearly 25 years before new plantings are required
- Plantations employ many local people, providing them salaries that are used for education and healthcare



Palm Oil in the Americas

No longer just a southeast Asian crop, palm oil is a relatively new addition to the economy of 12 Latin American countries. Research is still needed to determine to impact plantations are having on Latin American biodiversity, but some countries like Brazil and Mexico are reporting a *decrease* in deforestation!

Some feel that the plantations are being planted on land that had already been cleared for agricultural purposes. There is hope that if this trend continues, Latin America will be home to both an economic crop as well as an amazing array of protected biodiversity.





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However, it doesn't have to stop there! **As the next step**, guests can write to companies who are not members of RSPO and explain how important these practices are to them as a consumer. **Did you know that you can do this from the Houston Zoo's website???**

<https://www.houstonzoo.org/palmoil/>

Don't forget to remind guests that just by coming to the Houston Zoo, they are already helping to save animals in the wild!

What is the Houston Zoo Doing to Help?

- The Candy at Zoo Boo is palm oil free
- Our on-grounds food service (SSA) uses sustainable palm oil
- HZI supports projects in Borneo that are directly working with local communities, including local palm oil plantation employees, to reduce the impacts of this product on wildlife.

Plantation and Forest

This is a great example of remaining patch of forest with palm oil plantations. The plantations are not supposed to plant up to the river, but instead leave riparian corridors for wildlife to move through!



For More Information:

- Download the Sustainable Palm Oil Shopping Guide to your smart phone (can be used as a tool to show guests what they can do!)
- How RSPO Certification Works - <http://www.rspo.org/certification/how-rspo-certification-works>