



Houston Zoo Volunteer Training

ACT: PLASTIC POLLUTION



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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Plastic is everywhere. You would be hard-pressed to go an entire day without interacting with this material. Essentially polymers of very high molecular mass with other materials added depending on their intended use, plastics have supplanted many traditional building and packaging materials such as wood, glass, metal, and paper. Its low production cost and versatility has made this material nearly indispensable to our modern way of life.

The drawback to this miracle material is its non-existent decomposition rate. As the use of plastics has become mainstream, inexpensive single-use plastic items have become the norm in our lives. Many people do not consider what happens to that straw once they are done drinking from it, but it will likely remain in the environment for about 200 years after they've finished their soda.

There are simple changes we can all make in the way that we consume this material that will help keep our waterways clean and our carbon footprint low!



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.

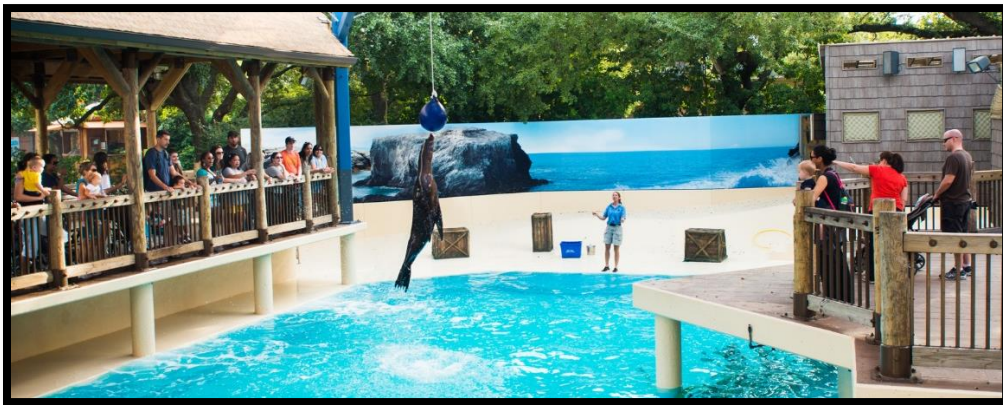


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As an ACT (Animal Conservation Team) Volunteer, you will be able to talk about this message across many areas of the zoo. We encourage you to be creative, but here are a few ideas of where you can message and the animals found in these habitats. Please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

Sea Lions

One of the very first experiences our guest interact with here at the zoo, the sea lions are some of our most popular residents. This area is expected to undergo a massive renovation in preparation for our centennial celebration in 2022!



Kipp Aquarium

This aquarium is home to over 2,000 individual fish and marine invertebrates representing over 200 species. While sea turtles are sometimes rehabilitated on-exhibit and can be effective ambassadors for plastic messaging, every animal in this building is susceptible to problems caused by plastic pollution.





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John P. McGovern Children's Zoo

Plastics don't just affect marine life! Animals living along waterways and next to the coast need our help as well! The Children's Zoo coastal area houses several species including pelicans, river otters, alligator snapping turtles, and bald eagles.



What is the problem with plastics?

- Plastics don't really decompose – they just break into smaller pieces
- Entanglement hazards (ex: monofilament fishing line, 6-pack rings)
- Can be mistaken by some animals as food (plastic bags and sea turtles)
- Energy and materials going into the manufacturing of single-use plastics



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What the Houston Zoo is doing to help

- The Houston Zoo is plastic bottle free! We currently offer refillable bottles already chilled and ready to go! We do offer disposable bottles that are made from recycled materials. We are currently working on a way to recycle those recycled bottles.
- Hold annual beach clean-ups to remove plastic trash and involve the community
- Our sea lion team holds a jetty clean-up every month which involves both staff and volunteers. They collect abandoned fishing line, among other trash, to help prevent wildlife entanglement.
- The Zoo is plastic bag free and encourages the purchase of reusable bags in our gift shops
- Our vet clinic removes entangled plastics from sea turtles and provides care so they can be released
- The Houston Zoo supports numerous projects around the world that deal with the wildlife threat of plastic pollution. Many of our partners coordinate their own cleanups (like ours) in places like Kenya and Argentina to the Galapagos Islands!



What our guests can do to help

- "Just by coming to the zoo you are already helping to save animals in the wild!"
- Use our bottle refill stations to stay hydrated and carry your reusable bottle every day
- Bring reusable bags when shopping
- Skip the straw at restaurants or fast food joints as well as other single-use items like plastic baggies, cutlery, and coffee cups.



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What are some ideas I can share to replace single-use plastics?

- Keep a set of reusable cutlery handy in your car, purse, or whatever you might carry with you
- Put your reusable shopping bags where you will see and remember to bring them into the store.
 - Purchase and use reusable straws. They come in metal, glass, and even silicone!
 - Reusable sandwich and snack bags! They even come in fun colors and designs!
 - Reuse your coffee cup. Some stores, like Starbucks will give a discount when you bring in your own tumbler.
- Bring your own food containers for carry out or take away in lieu of those Styrofoam ones that melt in the microwave anyways!
- Shop savvy with cosmetics. Some stores, like Lush, encourage you to bring your own containers and will give discounts or free products for your efforts.
- Do your personal care products really need to come in plastic? Consider searching for solid alternatives! For example, switching to a solid shampoo and conditioner can save over 1500 plastic bottles!
- Switch to bamboo/biodegradable toothbrushes
- Check out <http://zerowastehome.com/app/> for local stores that sell in bulk and even allow you to bring your own containers!



Microbeads

Until very recently, a great number of cosmetics and personal products were manufactured with microbeads. These tiny plastic particles helped with exfoliation and the visual presentation of products. Unfortunately, the very design that allows them to freely go down the drain also allows them to be washed into our water ways where aquatic animals can mistake them for food.

Many countries now ban the production and sale of microbeads. With this pressure, companies have begun phasing out microbeads from their products and opt to use natural and biodegradable alternatives like almonds, oatmeal, apricot shells, and sea salt.

Another way to Interpret

Entanglement doesn't just happen with plastics! Poachers in Africa use metal snares to illegally catch wildlife. Unintended animals like painted dogs are often bycatch. Anti-poaching units go out in the bush, retrieve the snares, and bring them back to the village where they are made into artwork and sold all over the world! HZI staff even helped to design a satellite collar to protect animals from these snares!

