

Volunteers:

Understanding their impact on
the zoo guest experience



Overview and Methods

Study Overview

Woodland Park Zoo (WPZ) has more than 700 active adult and teen volunteers, the majority of whom spend much of their time speaking with guests out on grounds. Despite the thousands of contacts volunteers have with guests every year information about these interactions has so far been limited to measuring the frequency of these interactions and how they rate along a few variables, such as friendliness and availability. In addition, many of these past measurements have grouped staff and volunteer engagements together, making it challenging to understand the role that volunteers play in the zoo experience. In the summer of 2014 Audience Research and the Volunteer team decided to collect more conclusive data regarding the percent of guests that speak with volunteers compared to staff members and more importantly to better understand the nature of these guest-volunteer interactions and how they impact the guests' experience at the zoo.

Evaluation questions:

The questions that were identified by the volunteer department and provided the framework for this study include the following:

- What percent of WPZ guests interact with staff or volunteers during their visit (not including when making a purchase)?
- In what proportion are guest interactions with adult volunteers, teen volunteers or zoo staff?
- Where do these interactions take place at the zoo and what is the nature of these interactions? What do volunteers or staff talk about with guests?
- To what extent are desired guest outcomes being achieved during these guest-volunteer interactions? Which outcomes do guests think contributes the most to their zoo experience?

Methods

To identify the intended guest outcomes or impacts that volunteers hope to be achieving, the Audience Research team conducted three group interviews, two with adult volunteers and one with teen volunteers from the ZooCorps program. In these interviews volunteers participated in an activity asking them to identify the impacts they hope to have on guests. From these conversations emerged a list of 17 guest outcomes or ways in which volunteers may commonly impact zoo guests, from helping guests find their way around the zoo to sharing information about what the public can do to help wildlife. (See Appendices for complete list of impacts)

During data collection, zoo guests were randomly selected as they were leaving the zoo to participate in a short interview and activity. First they described the interactions they had with staff or volunteers during their visit. Then, thinking about these exchanges, guests were prompted to look at the list of possible impacts and select the ones they felt described their interactions with volunteers, selecting all that they saw as applicable. Once the guest completed this activity he or she was asked to fill out a brief survey that included some demographic questions.

In total, staff and volunteers talked to 270 visitor groups as they were exiting the zoo. Data collection took place between July 30th and August 12th, with approximately 52% of interviews conducted at the South Gate and 48% conducted at the West Gate.

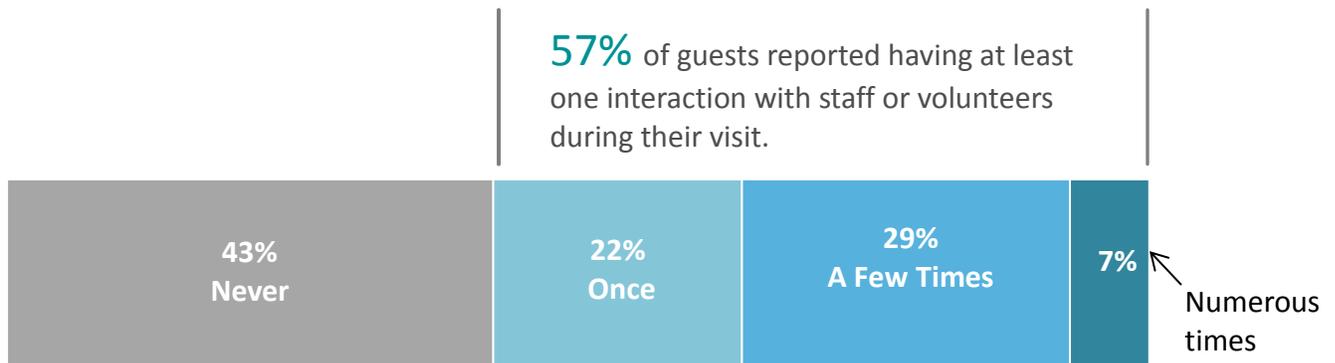
A word about quantitative statistical reporting in this report: Independent t-tests were run to explore differences between audience subsets in regard to various measures, including comparisons between first-time and repeat guests and groups with or without children. Confidence levels for tests of statistical significance were set at 95%. A test is “significant” when the p value was less than or equal to .05 ($p \leq .05$).



RESULTS: Staff and volunteer engagements with guests

What proportion of guests report interacting with staff or volunteers?

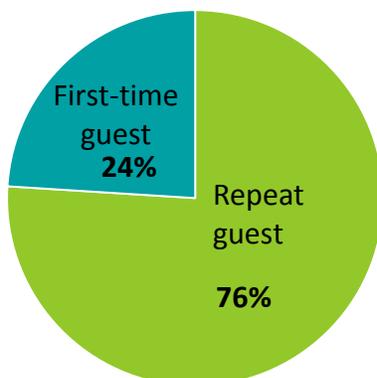
Excluding exchanges when purchasing tickets, beverages or souvenirs, more than half of the 270 guest groups interviewed had interactions with staff or volunteers during their zoo experience. Of the 111 groups that reported having no interactions with staff or volunteers only 3% said they had wanted assistance, but weren't able to find someone on grounds to help, indicating the vast majority of visitors were able to find help or engagement if they were inclined.



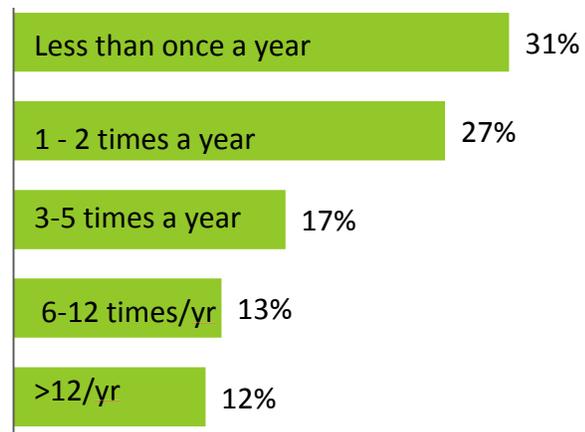
Is the audience that engages with a zoo representative any different from the zoo's overall summer audience?

Zoo guests that spent time in communication with zoo staff or volunteers did not differ significantly from the summer's general audience.¹

1 in 4 guests were first-time visitors

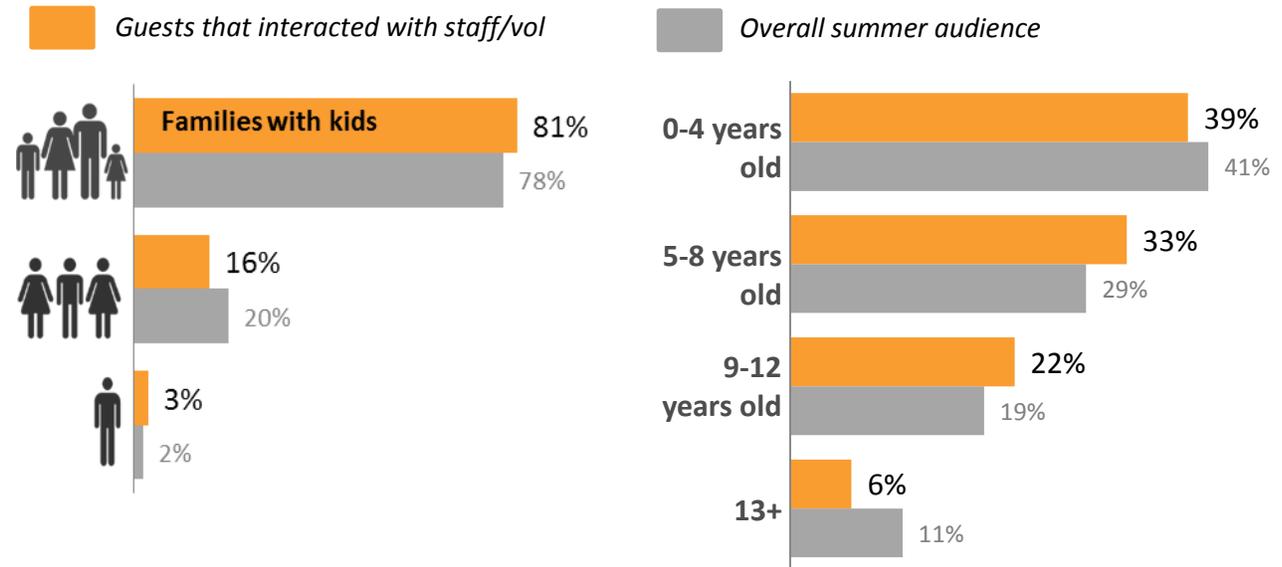


Almost a third of repeat guests visit less than once a year



¹ Demographic information about the summer's overall audience is sourced from the zoo's 2014 guest exit survey.

A comparison between guests that **reported interactions with staff/vols** and the overall summer audience showed no significant difference in group composition or ages of children.

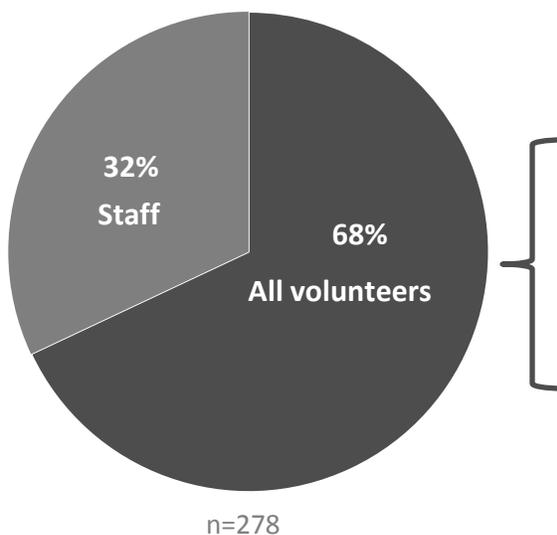


What proportion of guest interactions are with volunteers compared to staff?

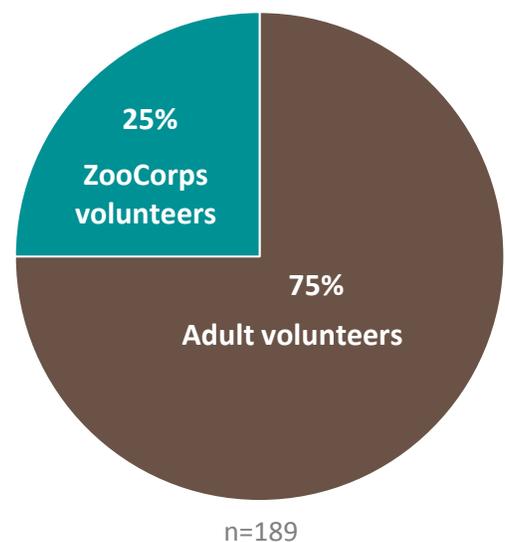
In total, interviewed guests described 278 specific exchanges with zoo representatives, from inquiries about directions to touching a corn snake. Guests were also asked to identify the type of zoo representative they spoke with that day. With volunteers facilitating about two-thirds of these interactions, guests engaged with volunteers twice as often as zoo staff.

Taking a closer look at these guest-volunteer engagements, approximately three quarters of these were with adult volunteers and a quarter was with teen volunteers from the ZooCorps program.

Guests were twice as likely to talk with volunteers then staff.



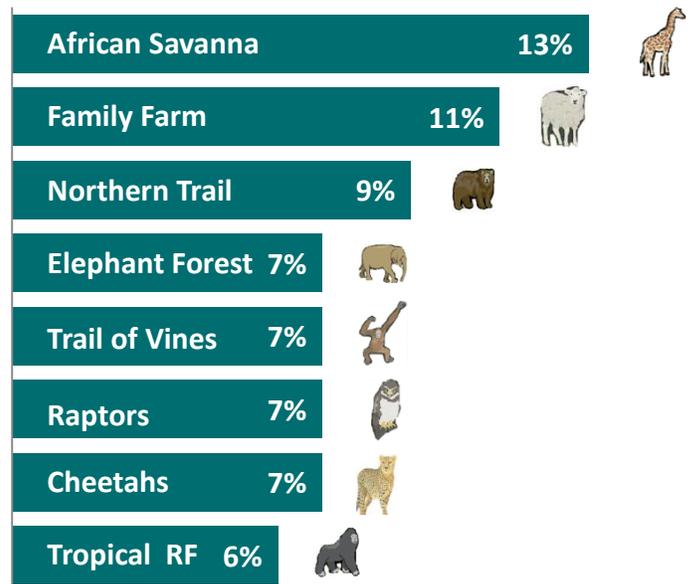
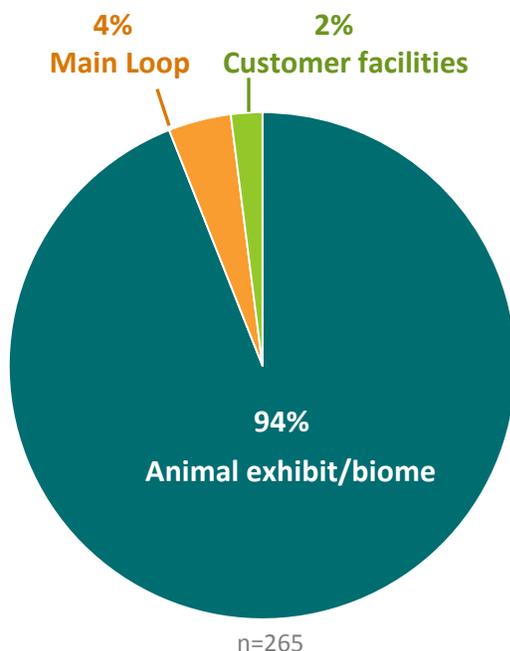
The majority of guest-volunteer engagements were with adult volunteers



Where do guest interactions happen most often at the zoo?

The vast majority (94%) of these exchanges took place within animal exhibit areas. Over 20 different areas were mentioned specifically, but the parts of the zoo that are the location of public programs such as the African savanna (giraffe feeding and poo paper making), the Family Farm (the contact area) and raptors, were more commonly mentioned. Areas that are frequent locations for volunteer-led carts such as the ZooCorps' Grizzly/wolf cart in Northern Trail also came up regularly. Approximately 4% of interactions were located on the main loop path, mostly in relation to wayfinding, and customer facilities such as the ZooStore or Guest Services factored in 2% of encounters.

Almost all guest encounters with staff or volunteers happened within animal exhibits or biomes. 8 different exhibit areas each accounted for at least 5% of these interactions.



What is the nature of the guest interactions with staff or volunteers?

When asked to describe their interactions with staff or volunteers, most (48%) talked about receiving factual information about an animal, such as their diet, life span, or adaptations. It was also common for guests to mention having a hands-on experience through the presentation of biofacts or a live animal (31%), as well as receiving help when they were lost on grounds (24%) and getting personal information about an animal (22%). (E.g. *"(I) heard about how the monkeys are learning hand signals"*).

Guests were least likely to mention having interactions that included conservation-related

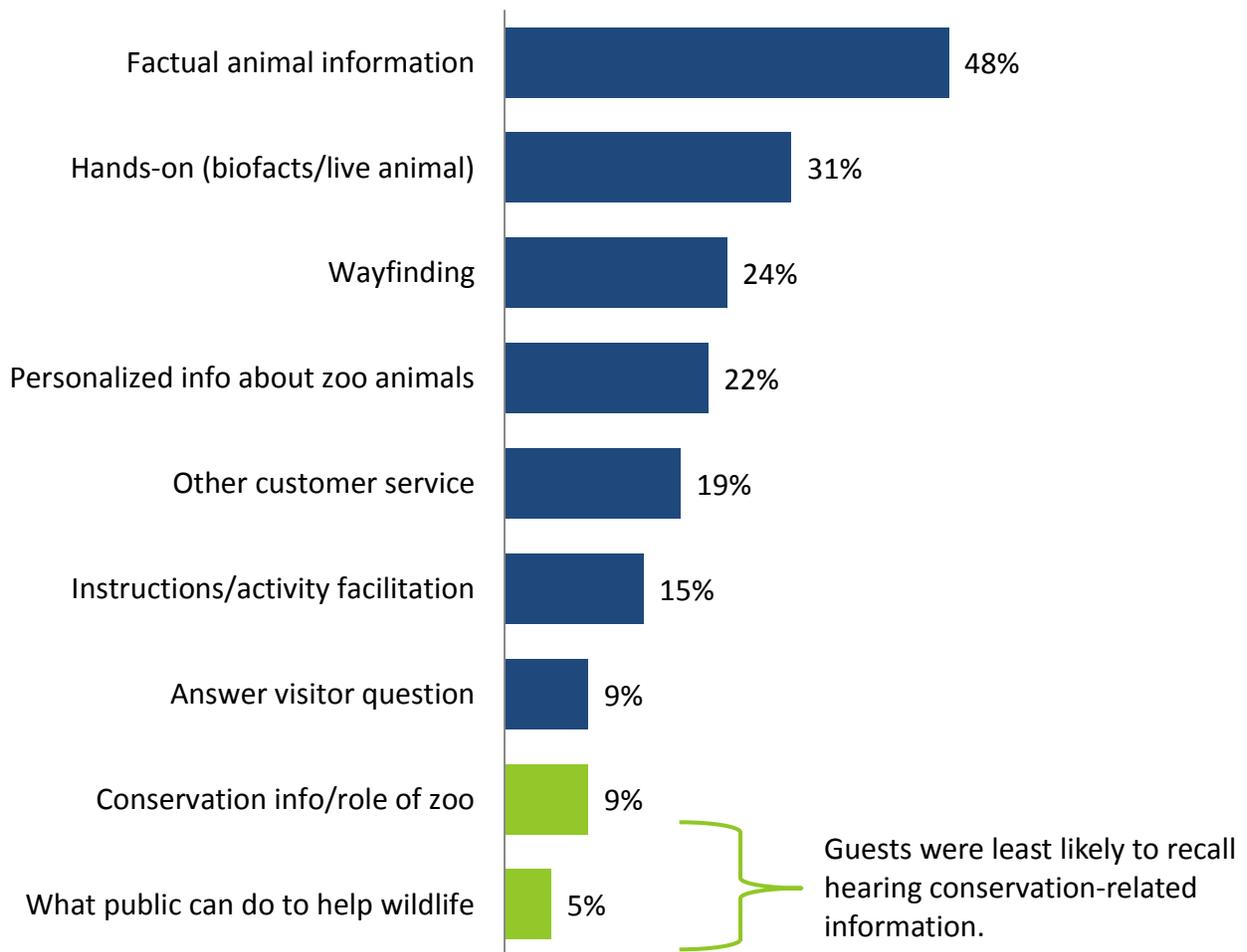


information, such as hearing about the status of an animal, learning about the zoo’s role in conservation (9%), or hearing about what guests can do to help wildlife (5%). It’s important to note that of the visitor groups who mentioned conservation all but one were interviewed on Asian Wildlife Awareness Day (AWAD), where there were emphases on interpretation of the 96Elephants campaign and awareness of palm oil in household products.

A comparison between group compositions showed that families with children were much more likely than adult groups to have volunteer encounters that included hands-on experiences, such as touching a live animal or a natural object. A comparison between visit frequency shows that first time visitors were more likely to receive assistance finding their way around the zoo and repeat visitors more often heard personal stories or information about the animals at the zoo.



Almost half of guests heard factual information about animals during their interactions.



Do the types of interactions guests have differ between adult volunteers, teen volunteers and staff?

The nature of guest interactions with a zoo representative did vary depending on who they spoke with out on grounds.²



Adult volunteers (n=319): Their interactions with zoo guests were the most diverse in topic. Most often these volunteers provided:

- Factual information about the animal (26%)
- Opportunities to explore biofacts or a live animal (16%)
- Personal information about the individual animals or their care at the zoo (14%)
- Wayfinding assistance (11%)
- Conservation-related information (9%)
- Answers to guests' questions (6%)
- Help in locating an animal in an exhibit (5%)
- Facilitation or instruction of an activity (5%)
- Additional customer service assistance (5%)



ZooCorps volunteers (n=101): The teens heavily engaged zoo guests in a few select areas. Primarily guest-ZooCorps interactions involved:

- Opportunities to explore biofacts or a live animal (45%)
- Factual information about the animals (19%)
- Wayfinding assistance (9%)
- Personal information about the animals or their care at the zoo (8%)
- Facilitation or instruction of an activity (8%)
- Help in locating an animal in an exhibit (5%)



Zoo staff (n=174): Primarily staff was involved in:

- Factual information about the animals (22%)
- Wayfinding assistance (17%)
- Facilitation or instruction of an activity (11%)
- Opportunities to explore biofacts or a live animal (10%)
- Personal information about the animals or their care at the zoo (10%)
- Help in locating the animal in an exhibit (8%)
- Conservation related information (6%)
- Answering guests' questions (6%)

² The types of staff or volunteer interactions that accounted for 5% or more of their encounters with guests are reported.

Results: Volunteer engagements with guests

For the remaining questions, respondents were asked to exclude their interactions with staff and focus their responses solely on the exchanges they had with adult or teen volunteers.



How much do guests feel these volunteer interactions add to their overall visit?

Guests were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 10 the extent to which their interactions with volunteers added to their zoo visit overall, where 1 is “*added nothing to my visit*” and 10 is “*added a great deal to my visit*”. Zoo guests indicated these exchanges did enhance their guest experience, giving an average rating of 7.6 with a median of 8. Less than a quarter (24%) gave a rating below 7. Repeat visitors were, however, significantly more likely to give a higher rating than first-time visitors. There was no significant difference between adult and family groups.

Repeat guests rated the contribution of volunteer interactions to their zoo visit significantly higher than **first time guests**.



The 76% of respondents that gave a rating of 7 or higher were asked in an open-ended question to describe how these interactions added to their visit. Overwhelmingly guests felt these volunteer engagements contributed to their overall learning at the zoo (e.g. “*(The volunteers) provided richer knowledge of what we were seeing*”). See the chart below for other benefits that were mentioned by at least 5% of respondents.

Groups that included children were the only ones to cite tactile or personalized experiences as contributing to their overall visit. For example, one caregiver wrote “My children were lost in the magic the volunteers provided with the hands-on.” Adult groups were the only ones to mention wayfinding assistance as a benefit.

Guests said the educational benefits of volunteer interactions added the most to their visit.

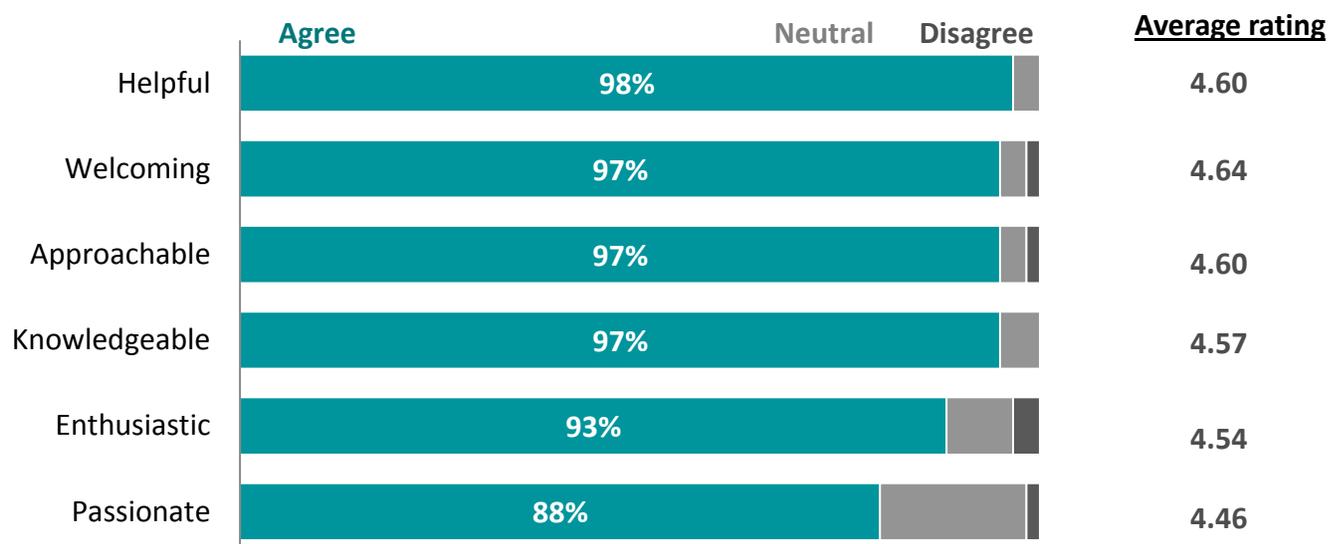


How do guests rate different areas of customer service provided by volunteers?

Guests were asked to rate volunteer performance in six areas of customer service, on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is *strongly disagree*, 3 is *unsure* and 5 is *strongly agree*. Respondents were extremely positive along all six measures, with at least 97% agreeing or strongly agreeing with four measures.

Repeat visitors had significantly higher agreement that volunteers were helpful and knowledgeable compared to first time visitors.

Guests rated volunteer performance highly along all six measures of customer service



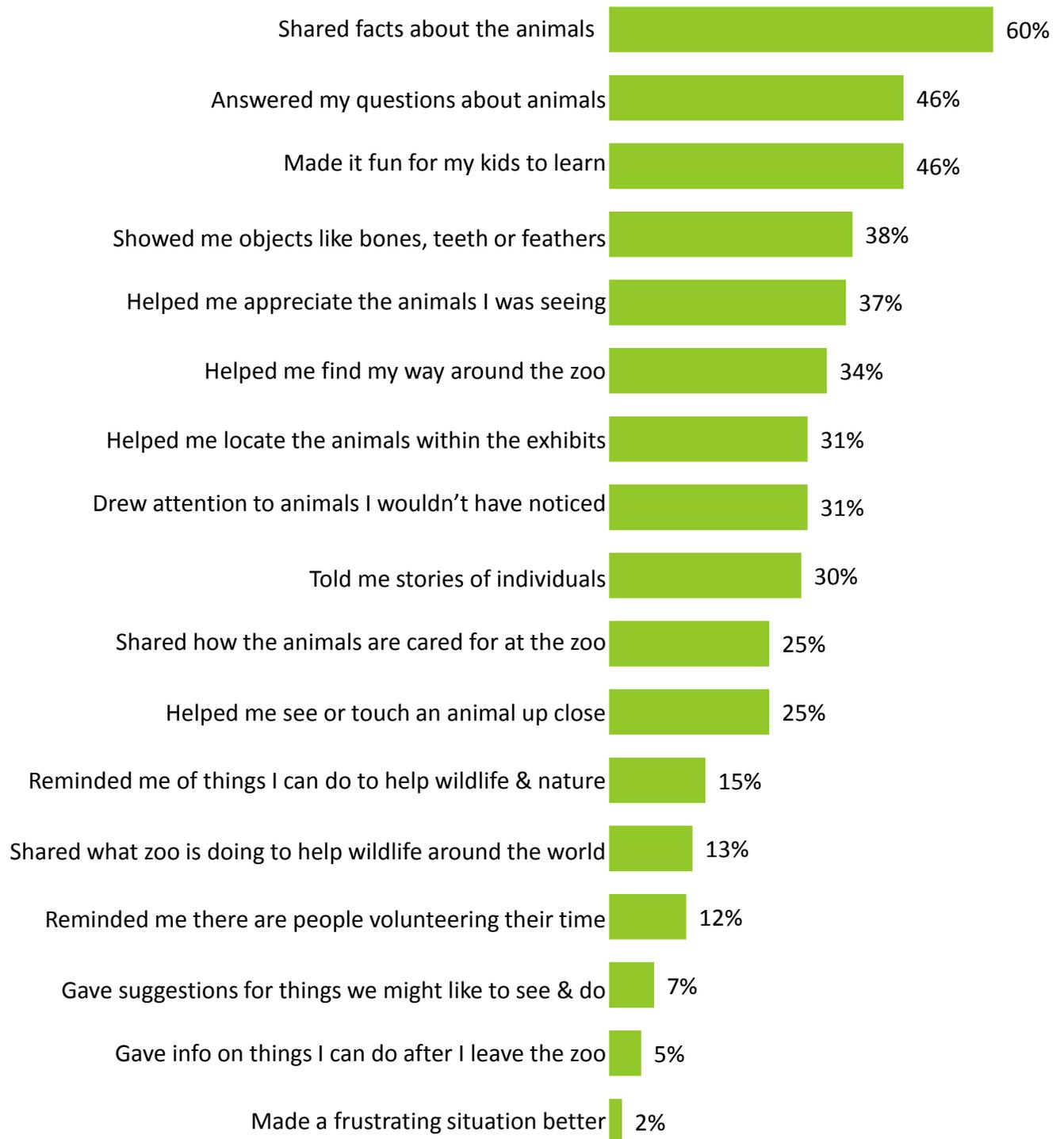
To what extent did guests identify the desired outcomes occurring during their interactions with volunteers?

After describing the interactions they had with volunteers, guests were asked to identify which of the 17 desired outcomes, that were identified by volunteers, they felt they took away from their interactions.

In total, 11 of the 17 outcomes were selected by at least 25% of zoo guests as applicable to their experiences engaging with volunteers. Similar to the guests' descriptions about the nature of their interactions, the outcome of sharing facts about the animals factored most often in the guest-volunteer engagements. Some outcomes that were not mentioned in these descriptions, but were commonly selected by interviewed groups as applying to their interactions were (volunteers) made it fun for their kids to learn (mentioned by 52% of families when adult groups are removed from the sample), they helped guests appreciate the animals guests were seeing, and they drew attention to animals that may not have been noticed otherwise.

Frequency of occurrence of the 17 guest outcomes during their volunteer interaction.

Sharing facts about the animals was the only outcome that occurred in more than half of these encounters.



Which outcome do guests say contributed the most to their visit?

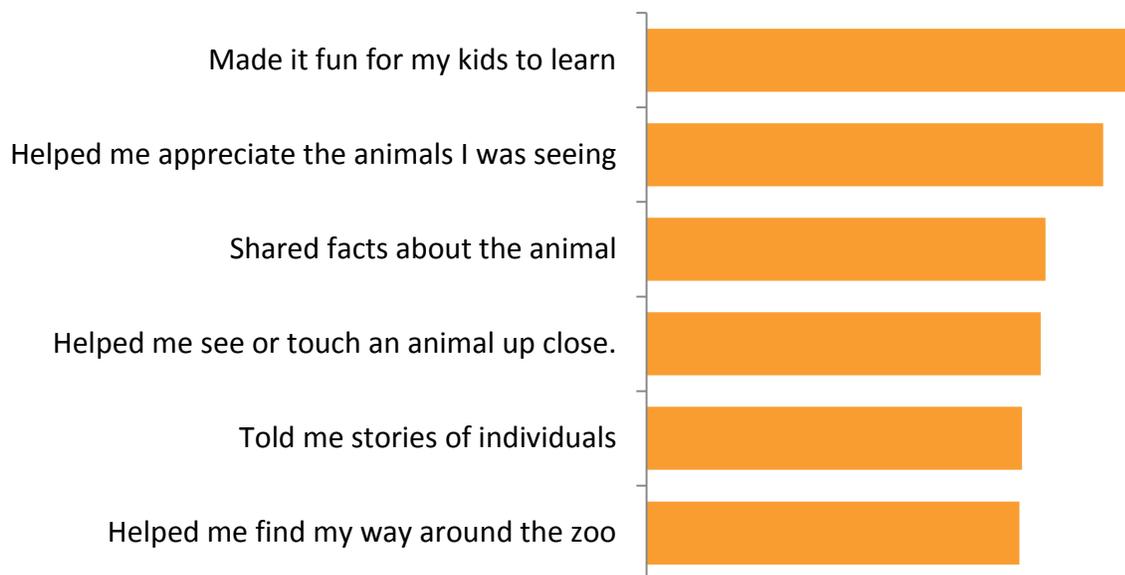
Visitors were then asked to identify the outcome (of those they had selected) that had contributed the most to their visit that day. The chart below shows the six outcomes that visitors reported adding the most value to their visit.³

Guests placed the greatest value on interactions that provided a fun learning experience for their kids or instilled a greater appreciation for the animals they were seeing at the zoo. Also, although less than a third of groups reported having experiences that gave them an up close encounter with an animal or where they heard personal stories about individual animals, guests reported both of these outcomes contributing greatly to their zoo experience.



The top six outcomes that contributed most to the guest experience.

Guests saw engagement of children as having the greatest value during their visit.



³ The contribution of an outcome was calculated by looking at the occurrence of that outcome divided by the percent of time it was chosen as being most impactful.

Final thoughts

Although a good percentage of guests did not engage with staff or volunteers during their visit, only a handful of interviewees said they were unable to find assistance when they were in need. It's clear that guests saw zoo staff and volunteers as an available resource out on grounds. Those that had an interest in having a more hands-on, enhanced zoo experience were able to find those opportunities.

During the high season, adult and teen volunteers facilitated the majority of guest engagements, especially hands-on encounters and personal experiences. Guests indicated these types of interactions enrich children's experiences (and subsequently their caregivers') and inspire an appreciation for the animals that might not have occurred otherwise.

This study reinforced the importance of engaging children who visit the zoo. Families with children represent our largest group demographic and parents see great value in the on grounds opportunities that provide educational and engaging experiences for their kids.

Both adult and teen volunteers, in our initial conversations, said they hoped that visitors come away from their interactions with a better sense of the zoo's conservation work and how they can help. Based on these findings, few visitors are receiving these messages in their interactions with volunteers or staff. This suggests a need for further conversation about the role of volunteers and staff in conveying these messages.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to the Volunteer team, Kim Haas, Julie Ann Barowski and James Bluher, for their help in the planning and implementation of this study. And a huge thank you to our team of data collectors: Judith Alexander-McGovern, Lynne Bannerman, Harry Decimo, Gretchen Howard, Joni Jabker, David Leigh, and Michelle Spencer, who spent many volunteer hours interviewing guests for this study.

Appendix A: List of 17 impact statements used in the guest activity.

1. Helped me find my way around the zoo.
2. Helped me locate the animals within the exhibits
3. Answered my questions about animals
4. Told me stories of individuals.
5. Gave information on things to do after I leave the zoo
6. Made a frustrating situation better
7. Gave suggestions for things we might like to see and do
8. Made it fun for my kids to learn
9. Shared facts about the animals
10. Drew attention to animals I wouldn't have noticed otherwise
11. Helped me appreciate the animals I was seeing
12. Shared how the animals are cared for at the zoo
13. Reminded me of things I can do to help wildlife and nature
14. Shared what the zoo is doing to help wildlife around the world
15. Reminded me there are people volunteering their time
16. Helped me see or touch an animal up close
17. Showed me objects like bones, teeth or feather.