

Member & View

News, Ideas & Insights

Conservation Education

Creating Conservation Champions

By Jen Duffy and Andrea Robinson



On a soggy day in June, 402 passionate young people gathered at the Calgary Zoo in Calgary, Alberta, for the first annual Conservation Champions Festival. The Zoo's Festival Hall overflowed with a diverse spectrum of projects and the sounds of their student designers enlightening Zoo visitors with expertise and enthusiasm.

Projects included a dramatization about the endangered mountain bongo, storybooks written to inspire compassion for nature in younger students, community pollinator awareness campaigns, and alternatives to single-use plastics. Each project reflected the positive impact youth can have in sustaining wildlife and wild places. They also reflected the positive impact zoos can have in inspiring young people to become conservation champions.

The Conservation Champions Festival was the culminating celebration of the Zoo's Chevron Open Minds Zoo School program. Zoo School is a unique, year-long educational experience that merges cutting-edge education techniques with the learning environment of the Zoo. It includes educator professional development and ongoing support; in-class visits; a week at the Zoo with experts in conservation, plant, and animal knowledge; and education. The experience is a powerful agent for change that strengthens student and teacher relationships with nature and creates a catalyst for student-led conservation action.

This past school year, the Zoo's conservation education team created

resources and designed the Conservation Champions Festival. The goal was to be more intentional in the inspiration, stewardship, and celebration of such projects. The impact of this increased involvement was significant, as sixty percent of the Zoo School cohort created projects and participated in the Festival. That reach is expected to increase in coming years. Indeed, all of the incoming Zoo School educators are already eager to get started for the new school year.

For grade 3-4 teacher, LL Smart, the key to the success of this year's experience was the value placed on the students and their work, as it empowered them to see the vital role they have in creating a sustainable world.

"It was a treasure to witness how proud they were to share their conservation work with peers and the public," said Smart. "They now more automatically see conservation connections in their world and talk about it or come up with ideas to educate others about conservation."

For a Zoo with a mission that includes inspiring action to sustain wildlife and wild places, the Conservation Champions initiative was a success; demonstrating that zoos play a critical role in inspiring a generation that will conserve the natural world.

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