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Interspecies Human Encounters as Learning Opportunities in/for Environmental Education

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Research Symposium Poster

Summary

The presentation aims at examining the potential directions and issues emerging from a international research project that seeks to investigate how young children interact with captive animals—i.e. dolphins and reptiles—in Portugal and Canada.

For over forty years now, the field of environmental education (EE) has sought to find solutions to environmental problems both globally and locally. At the same time, researchers in the field of EE have tended to adopt a more socioculturally-oriented approach to EE (Robottom, 1993). This, in turn, suggests that knowledge is not a byproduct of an individual mind, but rather the outcome of communal relationships (Hibberd, 2005). In addition, such socioculturally-oriented framework considers emotions to be significant components of environmental learning and instruction in general (Järvenoja & Järvelä, 2005; Reis & Roth, 2010). Here, emotions are succinctly defined as responses to a wide range of stimuli that people are constantly exposed to in their environments.

Likewise, zoos and museums have always played an important role in helping to educate the public about the need to adopt more sustainable practices in our society (Arbuthnott, Sutter & Heidt, 2014; Sellmann, 2014). However, little is know about how the emotions associated with human (visitors) encounters with other animal species mediate the adoption of more environmentally-friendly attitudes and behaviors (Wulff, 2007; Knight, 2005; Milton, 2002).

Therefore, the present proposal aims at examining the potential directions and issues emerging from a international research project set to start in 2014. The ethnographic comparative case study will seek to investigate how young children (between 6-12 years of age) interact with captive animals at a marine park in Portugal as well as at a reptile zoo in Canada. The study is currently being designed to describe and understand the rituals of interaction performed by participants when they engage in activities common to the settings where data will be collected—i.e. zoos. In addition, we want to explore the mediation role

played by emotions in these situations. Our research questions include the following: (i) How do the interactions between children and captive animals (i.e. dolphins and reptiles) take place? (ii) Which emotions can be identified in these interactions? (iii) What is the role of these emotions in these interactions? (iv) How can these encounters be an opportunity for environmental learning?

Assuming that environmental education should promote an affective relationship between humans and non-humans, the present research is of interest to researchers, teachers, public educators and students at all levels and who appreciate the importance of an education in/for/about the environment. Ultimately, by sharing our research interests at the conference, we hope to collect value feedback from the audience in order to develop our project further.

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