

Bringing Research to LIFE

Student and Faculty Reminders

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October 30, 2013

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Upcoming Event

Visionary Conversations

Welcome to Winnipeg: Population 1 Million

Welcome to Winnipeg! Population One Million. How did we get here and where are we going?

Join our panelists to discuss how Winnipeg will reach a population of one million, when it will happen and what it will mean for economic development, the arts, health, safety and community planning.

September 25, 2013

Robert B. Schultz Theatre
St. John's College, Fort Garry Campus

Reception in Galleria 6:30 – 7 pm
Panel discussion 7 – 8:30 pm

Featured speakers:

Jim Carr
Rick Linden
Wanda Wuttunee

umanitoba.ca/visionaryconversations

Ethical eavesdropping

Geographer puts ear to the ground to find out how to better connect with zoo visitors

BY KATIE CHALMERS-BROOKS
For The Bulletin

Mary Benbow goes to the zoo to observe humans, not animals.

The U of M geographer's research has her listening in on visitors' conversations. She sat for two weeks at the Toronto Zoo recording banter overheard at the polar bear exhibit. She wanted to know: Do people read the signage about climate change? Do they discuss this pressing topic with their kids while looking at polar bears, animals that have come to symbolize the consequences of a warming planet?

"They don't," Benbow says. "I waited and waited. There were essentially two conversations in the entire study that vaguely alluded to climate change."

But people did talk about the hot weather and speculated how that might make the bears feel. Benbow hopes that visitors' concerns for the welfare of individual animals in the zoo could translate to broader concerns for the well-being of Arctic ecosystems. The goal of her research is to provide zoos with practical information about how their visitors engage with the exhibits so they can do a better job of educating the public.

"It's really to give zoos another thread of information of how they can interact with their visitors to give people more information and more relevant information to some of those serious decisions that they have to make about things like climate change," Benbow says. "I think a lot of people are still bewildered about the issue of climate change."

The need to better understand the environmental challenges we face has put zoos front and centre in recent years. Benbow's research – she's been studying the social, cultural and environmental implications of zoos since the early 1990s – shows how they set the scene for family discussions, are places where people feel safe and provide an opportunity to educate. People view zoos as trusted sources of information. "My hope is that (zoo visitors) will get the information they need and they'll have greater clarity," she says.

The environment and geography professor is on the interpretative team for the new Journey to Churchill exhibit scheduled to open in 2014 at the Assiniboine Park Zoo. Benbow has contributed the insight she gained from her observations at the Toronto Zoo. She and several of her colleagues in the Clayton H. Riddell Faculty of Environment, Earth, and Resources played a key role in the signage for the International Polar Bear Conservation Centre, home to Hudson the polar bear. "We've been able to access that very current information and create really carefully honed messages," she says.

No longer simply collections of animals, zoos are raising standards for care, Benbow says. Assiniboine Park Zoo, for example, continues to use techniques like hiding food to satisfy an animal's natural desire to forage, or positive reinforcement to get bears like Hudson to cooperate with workers in a less intrusive way. Exhibits are becoming more



Submitted Photos



Mary Benbow, associate professor and associate dean (academic) in the Clayton H. Riddell Faculty of Environment, Earth, and Resources. The faculty is celebrating its tenth anniversary this year.

complex and require more staff. They're also incorporating more signage that gets people thinking about the big issues in the world. "Visitors overall have a far more complex understanding of the world they live in so obviously zoos are going to have to deal with that level of sophistication," she says.

How we perceive animals has changed as well. An expert in zoo maps, Benbow analyzes how illustrations of animals on these visitor handouts have evolved over years. Take the gorilla, which has become friendlier looking and is no longer portrayed as a brooding beast. She's now investigating

if the same can be said for polar bears. "There's a changing perspective," Benbow adds.

Research plans are being finalized for one of Benbow's students to undertake her own 'overheard conversation' research at the Assiniboine Park Zoo this summer. A recipient of a U of M undergraduate research award, the student hopes to listen in on what people are talking about at the Toucan Ridge exhibit, honing in on a couple of species, including the dart poison tree frogs. "There is a global frog crisis," Benbow notes.

Since 1980, 168 amphibian species have gone extinct because they've lost their habitat thanks to factors like pollution and climate change. To get this message across you need to know how best to share it with the audience, Benbow says. "By being able to listen in, we may be able to capture the reactions that people have and provide the information to the zoo so they can create interpretative signage that will speak to the people's interests."

A sign will be posted to let visitors know that by being in the exhibit area, they may be in the study. Benbow knows of a number of other studies in different fields that have used the unconventional research technique: for example, researchers have recorded museum guests as they navigated exhibits, and a hospital tracked what clinical staff said about patients while riding the elevator. Benbow was first inspired to investigate visitor conversations when she was touring a zoo in Wichita, Kan.; she was in the Midwest to help the American zoo redraw their map. Spending time at an otherwise unfamiliar zoo, she realized that as well as observing visitors and their habits, their conversations might reveal more complex ideas.

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Comments, submissions and event listings
to: research_communications@umanitoba.ca
Phone: (204) 474-7300 Fax (204) 261-0325

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