

Creating a Zoo History Web Site

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INTRODUCTION

The creation of a zoo history Web site provides zoo historians, the interested-public, and the organization about which the history is written with many benefits. It can publicize and cultivate support for a zoo library or archives, the preservation of zoo historical materials and the historical study of zoos generally. This paper will highlight the concerns in creating a zoo history Web site including subject definition, issues of content and format, and the publicity that should accompany the site.

BACKGROUND

The Smithsonian Institution Libraries (SIL) operates the library at the Smithsonian National Zoological Park. In recent years the SIL has opened a digital imaging center in order to make available via the Internet, many of the rare or unique items in its special collections.

For many years the library at the National Zoo has collected ephemeral publications from zoos around the world. This collection includes annual reports, animal inventories and other publications by zoos dating from the mid 19th century. The collection was compiled by National Zoo directors, staff and librarians throughout the more than 100 years of the Zoo's history and represents zoos from over 30 U.S. states and 40 countries.

In 2002, the zoo librarian along with volunteers began to identify and select some items from this vast collection for a digital image project. The selected items were sorted geographically and the publication information was determined where possible. Certain images from each of these selected items were scanned and eventually added to the SIL Web site. Experience with this project forms the basis for the recommendations contained in this paper.

CONCEPT/SCOPE

Before creating any Web site, it is best to think about how the finished product will appear. It might be helpful to search the Internet for current Web pages on zoo history to see what has been done and gain some insight on what types of content are included. The subject and scope of the Web site should be tightly defined. Among the questions that should be considered are: Is the Web site to cover the history of one or several zoos? Will it cover specific aspects such as the physical structures, animals or particular individuals in the history of the zoo? Often the availability of historical materials and resources guides these decisions.

It may be that a zoo creating a history Web site, will also have a corresponding physical exhibit located at the zoo with artifacts or other items not easily displayed in cyberspace. Perhaps a centennial or other celebration of the zoo's history will have an exhibit or celebration that can be highlighted on the Web site.

History can of course be illustrated in many different ways and zoos are no different. Chronologically is probably the simplest, but there are other logical arrangements that may be suited to a particular subject: geographically, if more than one zoo, by building, exhibit or collection, or by individual zoo directorship. If chronological, there should be logical separations by decade or by historical period (i.e. pre-WWII, turn of the century).

Some of the preparatory decisions about the layout and concept of the Web site will be easy and some will be made by the archival and managerial resources available, but nonetheless they should be carefully investigated before beginning.

RESOURCES

A Web site covering zoo history can be used as a tool for the wide dissemination of material that may exist

only in a single location. The site can draw on many different resources for its content. An individual zoo may have its own archives and records, but can also borrow materials from other zoos or historical societies which may provide assistance of some kind for the project. Additionally, there are many images already on the Internet that can be downloaded if the creation of digital content presents a difficulty. However, when using resources created by other parties or institutions, care should be taken to obtain permission for the use of graphics or text and attribution should be included, if requested.

Text, graphics and links to other resources (online or print) are useful in telling history online. The easiest content to create for a zoo history Web site can be a narrative written by the Web creator or someone who has a historical familiarity with the subject. Other textual matter, if it already exists, can be scanned or re-typed for inclusion in the site. Selected passages from important documents such as letters or original charters can be re-typed for visual clarity and legibility, while the document is scanned and displayed as an accompanying graphic image.

Photographs, drawings, maps or other images can be very interesting and engaging. As in a conventional museum exhibit, graphics can be used to break up a narrative so as not to lose the casual observer's attention. Similarly, as with printed media, it is best to have an attention-getting image at the top of the opening page to invite curiosity and spark interest.

One unique series of graphics could be the logo of a zoo and its evolution. Zoo maps or the cover of guides to the zoo may be another interesting way to trace the historical development of a zoo and of graphic arts generally.

Or similarly one would include in-house photographs or illustrations in one's Web site, but some graphics also be available through other zoos or archives that may be willing to loan or scan them. Some possible sources of material for a zoo history site could be a local historical society or city museum, the park area in which the zoo is situated, or a museum of a trolley car line that may have operated in the area. It is possible to search the Internet for graphical material and download and/or contact the copyright holder of the illustrations for permission to include it in the Web site.

Photos in-hand can be scanned on a desktop scanner and saved, or they can be taken to one of many different organizations to have it done professionally. Most photo development shops will scan photos to the specifications of the customer.

It should be noted that when including photographs of the earliest inhabitants of zoos, it might be necessary to consider the sensitivity of some to the treatment of animals in that era. If the photos are of other animals, the creator may want to consider that photos of animals in chains or concrete cellblocks, might reflect poorly on the institution. Such photographs could be accompanied by explanatory text, placing the image in historical perspective. Additionally, the Web site should be reviewed by any sponsoring and partner organizations if there is uncertainty as to the institutional attitude toward photographs of this nature.

Finally, links to other Internet sites may be of interest whether those sites are of zoo history or to some historical societies or organizations. A list of magazine articles or books may also be helpful for those who visit the site and would like further information.

FORMAT/ACCESS

The means of navigating Web pages on the Internet varies but falls into one of several patterns. The simplest form is linear, top to bottom on one page. However with a large amount of material, the site should be broken into separate pages covering the different themes or historical periods and hyperlinked together. A menu at the top or the left side of a page can link the user with the various sub-headings or pages in the site. Whatever the arrangement, the means of navigating the Web page detailing the history of a zoo should be clear to the user. The menu items or logical divisions should be identified and consistent in theme. A search engine can be included if the Web site is very large.

The arrangement of any textual or graphical materials should be done deliberately. Images should have

captions or at least some identification of the zoo or publication from which it was taken. Images can be clickable links to enlarged versions for more detailed viewing. These smaller "thumbnail" images allow the user to scan the page and read accompanying text but then to view the photo in detail by enlarging it if desired. The larger image should however be formatted to fit into a maximum 600 X 800 pixel resolution setting.

UPDATES

One of the primary advantages of creating Web site content is that it can be changed almost continually at little cost. The content can be quickly modified or supplemented an unlimited number of times after initial release without the need for re-printing and distribution that traditional print publications require. For this reason, the Web site can be created and tested "live" where only the creator(s) and zoo staff are aware of its address. This pre-release of the Web site serves as a final proofreading and can lead to error detection by zoo staff or other insiders which can be corrected before the site is publicized.

The links to outside Web sites of interest should be modified if and when those other sites change addresses or are eliminated. It should be ensured that the zoo history Web site creator checks those links regularly to verify that they are still valid and relevant resources.

PUBLICITY

While an increased awareness of zoo history is an admirable objective the cultivation of supporters, patrons or donors for a particular zoo or project is a much more tangible result and publicity for the Web site will help ensure that. Notification should be sent to as many potential audiences as possible since more people visiting the site increase the chances that someone will take an interest in the subject and perhaps provide some support.

A brief description in the form of a press release should be written up and kept on disk. This way, the same basic announcement can be used in an e-mail, fax or standard printed press release with slight modifications depending on the audience.

Suggesting the Web site for inclusion to the standard Internet search engines will help to publicize your site. It can take weeks for the major search engines to include or index a site, so it is best to submit your site as soon as the page is ready. The use of Meta tags in the HTML code will also result in higher traffic to your site since search engines index these terms. Terms like zoological parks, societies and gardens or specific buildings, exhibits, individuals or the names of parks in which zoos are located would be good choices to include as meta tags.

Announcements on any listservs of interest (and even those of marginal interest provided they are not heavy-traffic lists) could be helpful. Any zoo-related listserv or local history list would be an appropriate forum for such an announcement. Many neighborhoods now have e-mail lists and this might be a good place for an announcement.

A Web counter can be included in the page to track visitors and may be a very useful way to track usage. Although some counters are invisible, others may appear with a commercial advertisement or other material that distract from the page. In any case, an HTML code to count visitors can be created by someone familiar with Web page editing. Alternatively, the code can be copied and pasted into the HTML document from one of several free sites. There are also some Web counter services available free on the Internet. Note: very often the Web page creators themselves are the primary visitors to a page and may "visit" the page many more times than the general public at first. Therefore each of their visits will be reflected in the visitor count.

A guest book can also be included on the site, to further inform the creators of who is visiting. Again, Web scripts are freely available on the Internet to create a standard form that can be included in any Web page.

TECHNICAL ISSUES

Web page creation has become much easier in recent years thanks to the inclusion of HTML format in standard office computer software packages. Many inexpensive or free software programs are available

for download on the Internet. Hosts for Web sites are also increasingly affordable. Some Web site hosts include a simple or easy-to-use HTML editor to assist in creation of Web pages.

SUMMARY

Web sites covering the history of zoos can be educational and popular, particularly among regional audiences. The primary historical material which currently exists is facing deterioration and a public interest in zoo history can provide the necessary support to collect, house and preserve these materials. A zoo history Web site cultivates that support through donations of material, money or volunteerism.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Kalfatovic, Martin R., *Creating a winning online exhibition : a guide for libraries, archives, and museums.* Chicago : American Library Association, 2002