Conservation Resolutions through Debates - an Educational Tool

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Conservation debates at Arignar Anna Zoological Park -- for teachers

Arignar Anna Zoological Park did something new on 21.03.2001 - World Forestry day. Instead of routine talks on a conservation subject by a noted speaker, we decided to hold debates on some issues for keepers, students and teachers. Zoo education should always be innovative, otherwise the enthusiasm is lost.

Subjects for debate were carefully choosen. For teachers the debate issue was " What is most essential for organizational development (a) Experience based action (or) (b) innovative thoughts based action. The zoo as an organization was kept in mind. A brilliant Tamil orator was requested to mediate and be the Judge. The debate was interesting. I wish we had recorded the heated arguments. A combination of both is ideal and essential for zoo development. Teachers on one side argued that there is no substitute for experience and vouched that progress of an organization requires experienced hands to put up a good show. The opponent were vociferous when they said that scientific innovative thinking and action, alone can pave way for dynamic changes.

In my opinion honestly neither long experience nor new scientific thinking is happening in Indian zoos and management. One valid point for my argument is the **method of animal exchange and animal collection policy !** On this subject I would definitely organize a debate and discussion later.

The Judge who sat over the debate quoted from far and wide to prove that scientific thinking and innovative action alone will pave way for dynamic changes in an organization, but hastily and cleverly concluded, that based on the days argument put forth, the speakers who dealt on the issue of experience argued their case better and pronounced that experience far outweighed scientific thinking and action for organizational development. It was interesting all through.

The most interesting and exciting debate was the subject debated by the zookeepers. The subject of their debate was "Which system (i.e.) Zoological Parks (or) media - play a meaningful role in Eco-education and conservation awareness success". The arguments were very well placed by keepers from both the sides. The zookeepers were happy that their participation in such a debate was the first of its kind in the Zoo's short history. The spectators were over whelmed to hear the arguments of the keepers. I have heard some of our keepers speak on few occasions, during keepers training programmes etc., but for the first time I realized the deep subject knowledge of the keepers.

Some of them spoke about the impact of zoos, of the drama of touching and feeling and smelling the animals, and explained the role zoos played in transformation of visitors. Some of them quoted from their own experience, narrating the way some visitors had changed attitudes after speaking to keepers on zoo issues. I was also excited and thrilled that my zookeepers knew so much about the media, its strength and contribution in conservation education. Many of them spoke about Discovery channel, National Geographic and Animal planet. Some keepers said that though their families watched Tamil features and channels, the keepers only preferred to see the Discovery and other nature channels. When professional debators (or) political orators today argue on subjects, the lure of gift packets or awards, stand before many of them more often than ideology and the subject matter. The debates organized by Arignar Anna Zoological Park for keepers, promised them nothing, yet the arguments were vociferous, vibrant and strong in the subject matter. Today I am very confident of the oratorial abilities and skills of my staff. If only we can provide them the right working environment, conditions and benefits due, they will perform much better. The employer and Manager have to strive to provide the best working mileu for enhanced productivity in zoos.

The subject of elocution for the students was the " Role of Zoological and Botanical gardens in the conservation of Bio-diversity". Five schools participated and I am confident that every student, who participated, will undoubtedly become a conservationist. A wide variety of cultural events were put up by students and zookeepers. The day was hectic yet fruitful. The education wing of Arignar Anna Zoological Park gave away certificates to fifty zoo club volunteers who had served in the zoo for one year during 2000 and bid farewell to them, seeking an assurance from them of their continued support for our future activities. Come April 2001 and we will be inducting a new group of zoo club student volunteers. The students and keepers also helped the zoo management in tree planting activities organized during the day.

T-shirts, pencil packets and information kits given by Zoo Outreach organization and the zoo brochures came handy as they were given to students and Teachers besides prizes given by the zoo. The discussions and debates happening in the zoo at the level of keepers, teachers and students, are more reassuring and source of strength for me, than the discussions and debates that take place during Zoo Director's meet and Annual zoo conferences every year as they involve no sentiments, convictions, determinations and completely lack the element of sincerity and truth. Further the zoo Director's conference are costly as they take place in the conference halls of plush hotels where the proceeds and deliberations are recorded minuted, and yet have no sense and meaning, as they are not followed up nor advocated and acted upon.

Awards for student and teacher winners of conservation debates at Arignar Anna Zoological Park

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