

# REOPENING A ZOO OR AQUARIUM AFTER LOCKDOWN

## COMMUNICATIONS GUIDANCE



**Good practice guidance**, 13 May 2020

The aim of this document is to assist Members and Candidates with handling of communications issues related to the opening of zoos and aquariums following the lifting of official public health controls. It should be used in conjunction with the [general good practice document](#) previously circulated.

### 1. General objectives

Clear communication will be a key component in a successful reopening. Visitors will only return to your institution if they have confidence in your ability to provide a positive and relatively carefree outdoor experience, and this confidence will come directly from the content and tone of your interactions with them at each "touch point".

Many Members will have suffered serious financial loss as a result of the disease control measures employed throughout our region, and there will undoubtedly be pressure from all sides to ensure the prompt return of visitors, however the current circumstances require communications to balance contradictory desired outcomes:

- To ensure that the public understands that safety is your main priority and so there will be limits to the numbers of visitors you can admit.
- To ensure that the public understands that their visit and support will be vital for the ability of your institution to continue to contribute to conservation, education and research

Furthermore, you need to be able to demonstrate that you are meeting the requirements set by the government. And as a final challenge, you need to make sure you do not present the zoo as a disaster zone but as rather a pleasant experience.

### 2. Clarity and transparency

Confidence needs to be established through clarity (ease of understanding) and transparency (providing all of the information needed) in all of your communications.

In terms of clarity, you should ask:

- Do you know what it is that you want your audience to do? Is it one action or more? Can they realistically do it? Is it genuinely helpful?

Posters or other direct communications are more effective if they communicate **one message only**. For matters of public safety protocol this is especially important. Messages should ask the visitor to do one thing that they are able to do and for which they can see a clear reason. A current government slogan asks the

public to do one thing that doesn't have a clear reason ("Stay alert"), and one thing that they cannot realistically be expected to do ("Control the virus"), two messages that could potentially increase confusion and decrease confidence.

- Is your communication easy to understand for the audience? Could you say it more simply?

There is a temptation always to write "well" in communications – however, it is more important that the message is clear to everyone who sees it. You do not need to be a great writer to ask someone to do something, especially if you tell them why.

In terms of transparency you should ask:

- As a someone who knows about zoos, what information would you ask for before agreeing to visit a zoo with your family? (what is necessary/useful?)
- Is there any reason why any of this information should not be available to the general public? (There may be: sometimes, media or other parties may interpret available information incorrectly. However, if you do decide not to provide information to your visitors, you should always be prepared to explain honestly why not)

In the most general terms, you should aim to **make available** all information related to your decisions to reopen the zoo and your management of the institution during the crisis; but allow for exceptions where they are genuinely needed. You should **actively communicate** any information that allows you to execute those decisions successfully.

For example, you may choose to make available documents such as letters from the local authority setting out the conditions of reopening including keeping visitors 1.5-2m away from each other on your website or other channel. On the other hand, you should actively demand that visitors respect those conditions.

### 3. Media relations and reopening

Members will be aware of the [EAZA Crisis Communications Manual](#). Much of the information in this manual can be applied to handling media inquiries regarding your institution's reopening. In essence, and depending on the kind of media approach and the volume of inquiries, you could consider:

- Setting up a small team to handle media inquiries and appointing someone as a spokesperson for interviews and other media requests (should usually be the CEO or the most visible senior staff member)
- Preparing a Q&A sheet with potential lines of media inquiry and transparent, clear responses to them. Some media may be more hostile to zoos, their mission, your decision to open, the government measures, and other issues than others, so you should not assume that all interviews about your reopening will be sympathetic.
- If you have a large number of inquiries, particularly from abroad, or if you need help developing your Q&A or other response messaging, please contact [David Williams-Mitchell](#) in the EAZA Executive Office.

## 4. Decision to visit and online communications

Your online presence should become the primary communications interface with the public before they visit during the reopening period. As referred to in the general guidance document, e-ticketing provides an excellent way to control the numbers of visitors and the time that they arrive, so it makes sense to try to direct people to your online ticketing site via a specific pathway that shows people what they can expect during the process from the very beginning. You should be able to answer the potential visitor's questions:

1. Is it safe to visit the zoo?
2. When can I visit the zoo? (visitors will become frustrated if they continually fail to buy tickets – while some frustration is inevitable, they must feel that there is a realistic chance of succeeding)
3. How do I buy a ticket?
4. What precautions do I need to take? (this should include questions of masks, travel arrangements and parking, catering on site etc.)

Please also remember to thank your visitors for their patience and for their support for the zoo and its ability to support conservation.

Print or broadcast media support may allow you to inform the public that the zoo is open under specific conditions, however, these messages should aim to bring the public to a central point for information – namely your website. While the internet is perhaps not ideal as an information source for older visitors, we would suggest that government regulations in many cases would prevent visits from people at a higher risk – your immediate priority should be to manage the visitors you know will arrive.

## 5. Communications at the zoo

Set out clearly the conditions of admittance as required by the authorities or by you as the institution and be prepared to explain why you have taken decisions.

- Remind visitors of social distancing and ensure that they understand that this includes keeping their distance from staff on site.
- Inform visitors of any areas or facilities that they may not visit and be clear why. Knowing in advance can prevent frustration which could hurt your compromise your ability to get visitors to comply with the rules.

Communications should be clear but not alarming – again, there is a balance that you need to achieve between messages welcoming visitors to a nice day at the zoo and those warning them that they could become infected with a deadly disease if they do not respect the rules. Achieving this balance will also be a matter of national culture, and as a result, EAZA makes no specific recommendation.

Having visitors onsite is also an excellent opportunity to increase public understanding of the value of biodiversity. In particular, visitors will be particularly receptive to messages familiar to zoo educators such as the link between biodiversity loss and decreased protection from disease and other unwanted environmental effects. While this is of course important, we would also highlight the possibility that increased communications about zoonotic disease may also make your visitors more nervous about the animals in your collection as potential vectors of disease. It is also important that visitors should understand that bats and pangolins (or other species of wild animal) are not to blame for this or other pandemic disease outbreaks.

While visitors will be aware of the financial stresses that many zoos have undergone over the last months, it is important to remember that many in the community may also be under financial pressure – we would therefore strongly suggest a considerate tone be used at all stations for fundraising throughout your facility. Again, people are likely to be sympathetic if you can be transparent about the reasons for needing funding both in the zoo and in the (conservation) field. We would therefore recommend dedicating staff or producing print collateral that can help visitors to understand why you are asking for money.

## **6. Consultation**

If your institution is a Member of an EAZA-affiliated national zoo association you should be able to call on their expertise regarding nationally applied regulations, government communications and relations and so on. They may well be able to advise you on media relations and coordinated messaging about the reopening. The [EAZA Executive Office](#) staff are also available to help you with less nationally specific media issues, including providing data on EEPs, zoo-led conservation education and research, and so on. We recognize that many Members do not have large press offices or communications staff and will provide assistance where requested as much as possible – equally if we cannot provide the assistance you need, we will inform you.