**World Owl Conference 2017, Évora, Portugal**

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Trystan Williams, the Scottish Owl Center, Scotland

I’ve been working in environmental education for 25 years now, with only owls the last 12-13 years. There has been a change over the years in people and children, many of the people nowadays know very little.

Attitude to owls in the UK: pretty positive, due to media, film, books that portray owls as very good things, as wise professors, companions, friends etc. So what people think about owls is all based on what they see in the media.

The main program that Scottish Owl Center has portrays the owls in the context that they are, the medium that is mainly used is the flying demonstrations. The difference between the falconry in UK where flying demonstrations are out in the open field in the middle of the day which is not very natural to a lot of the owl-species and not an educational way of presenting them, and the Scottish Owl Center is that at the Center it is all indoors, the owls fly around the public. Which is an experience they’ll never get in their life otherwise.

So one of the questions is: has anyone ever seen an owl in the wild, most people of the public have not. People are becoming disconnected from the natural world. Challenges: people see the natural world on a screen or in a book, they are disconnected to the natural world and becoming spectators. The SOC wants to give people a context though enviromental education. The SOC is a zoo and a conservation breeding center, with owls in pairs that are breeding. The owls that we breed are exchanged with other collections and with zoos with the aim that they will raise awareness. Part of the license is because of raising awareness and show people where the owls come from. The Center has about 20 to 25 different species of owls in the display-team and over 120 birds, 45 different types of owls from around the world in the collection. When visitors are asked how many owls they know they may say 2 or 3, and when asked how many owls there are in the world the answer is 4 or 5. So the Center shows the diversity of owls. The disconnection between people in the UK and the natural world is becoming quite startling.

Education starts with the very basic, with the very young. We have school programs where children can see all these different species of owls, big and small, from around the world. In the last 12 months we’ve had 30 schools visiting the center. We do go out to schools too, we actually only had bookings for 6 in the last year since the facilities that we have are obviously more attractive for the schools to come to us, which enables the children to see the huge variety of owls that are being displayed, and there are the flying displays which are age-appropriate to the public. With general public we give a wider view but for schools the center has special school programs. Age of the children is from 6 to 16. And sometimes the school might be doing a topic in their classroom about owls and we will incorporate that into our program for them.

One of our simple games or interactive presentations that is commonly booked by the schools is a simple thing called ‘hoots for dinner: what do owls eat’ and we usually have 2 presenters with a live owl on the glove, different owls, and we have a bucket full with shredded newspaper and hidden in there are little toy food items, and there’s a little dinner plate for each owl there. Children are invited out of the class to come forward, put their hand in the bucket and pull out one of the things and then hold it up and show it to the group and identify it. They are basically simple things, and in over 25 years I’ve seen quite a shocking change in what children, particularly from urban areas in the UK, can actually identify. They might know the wiggly worm, but they have no idea what a grasshopper is anymore. They’ve seen pictures of a mouse and they certainly know what a spider is, but that bird which is meant to be a house-sparrow and they could see in their garden or school yard or even in the court yard here, they have no idea what it is. It’s a robin, or an eagle, they’ve got no clue. So we can then talk about the natural history of the birds on the glove and tell them a little bit more about their lifestyle, where they live in the wild, how they would survive, what sort of prey they would eat, and whether they would eat these things that the children have chosen from the bucket. The children pick which owl to put the food for, so we’ll run through whether they got that right or not. It is quite a good start. As the general attitude to owls is quite positive, it gives us a good starting place. We can bring in simple things like that and work up to more challenging concepts of what does it mean, what happens to these owls in the wild, from children up to adults. What problems might owls face in the wild in the British Isles or around the world.

In our flying demonstrations with owls from different places, our job is to interpret the job of the researchers and present that to the general public. So we have schools from the local areas but we also have tourists from around the world. Many people that come to us really don’t know particularly much about owls from their own area either. So our job is to interpret the job that the people here (at the conference) do to the general public. I have included in my presentations for the Indian Eagle owl, the rock eagle owl the work of Raju [Acharya] here for groups that were very interested in that. So that’s a long-going thing that we want to do. So we are a kind of a conduit between research and the general public who may not know a lot at all. So I think a very important role and as people may even get more disconnected from the natural world I think it is even a more important role. So it’s a little bit different from some places perhaps. We will work with big groups, with small groups, family groups. We’ll have different activities, different talks. A volunteer here was doing a chicken-egg chat during the breeding season where we have some of the owl eggs from our birds that have infertile eggs, we’ve blown them out and we can hand them out so people can touch and feel them, we can ask simple questions before they see the eggs like “what colours are bird’s eggs?” The first time my boss did the program, he expected lots of answers and was quite shocked when he asked: “Has anyone ever seen a bird’s nest?” and no one really did. Or “What colour is a bird’s egg?”, answer: brown, the colour of the hen’s egg they might have seen for their breakfast, and that’s about it. So we can talk about the differences and with owls we can hand out some owl eggs. We have birds that we’re breeding, either we creche-rear or hand-rear some and we’ll have them for the public to see. We don’t allow the public to touch them, but just seeing one is such a magical thing for many people. I think it makes a connection, and that’s our aim as educators to make a connection between people and the natural world.

If we are not there talking to the public, all they are left with is interpretation. And interpretation is signs, documents, posters and booklets and in my previous job as an interpretation officer for the National Trust in England I found that many people in the UK don’t really read large blocks of text. They want things simple, they might read the first sentence, the last sentence and they ignore everything else. So it doesn’t matter how well you’ve worded your poster, if it is longer than 2 sentences you are wasting your time. So we make our signs much more simple with the idea that we augment them with human interaction. We’ve found that if you are standing next to a sign, people won’t read it, they’ll ask you. So that’s fantastic, we have meet and greets, staff and volunteers maybe out around the center with an owl on the glove, people will come over and ask about that owl. The individual people for instance like to know what kind of bird the owl likes to eat. That kind of thing. People like to anthropomorphize it, which we don’t do in a cuddly fluffy kind of way, but there is some way of connecting people with owls. People have been fascinated with owls all around the world since the beginning of time. So there must be something about it that attracts the human mind. So if we can get that interest, we can help to put the concepts into context of where they are in the wild. What things people might be doing to the world that are making it difficult for owls and for other animals that share the habitat with them. So whether it’s an Indian eagle owl or a British barn owl, they are all affected by our impact on the world. So that’s what we want, to raise that awareness, it’s part of being a licensed zoo where it is part of our responsibility really as owl educators to put this message out to as many people as possible. So my job is very different from my colleagues here but we’ll have our different roles to play for the betterment of the world that we all live in.