

Award for Outstanding Achievement

Zoomazium

NATURALLY FUN

by Frank Hein & R. Scott Vance

Here's a universal equation that you may not have learned in school:

Kids + Nature = Play

If, when you think of your childhood you remember such things as vacant woodlots, climbing, hunting for fossils, hiking, hiding, seeking, wandering, building forts, and more, you know the equation is true. Those times spent playing in nature occupy a special place in memory. It's as though childhood just wouldn't have been childhood without a whole lot of nature thrown in. Is there even such a thing as a childhood without time spent in nature? Unfortunately, we're beginning to find out. According to recent studies, children nowadays may be spending only half as much time outdoors as earlier generations.

Parents should care about that. The sharp rise in children affected by Attention Deficit Disorder, for example, is being linked to this trend. Childhood obesity is suddenly on the rise. Kids, it seems, really need nature to grow up healthy and happy.

What's more, we're finding that people who miss the chance to connect with the natural world in childhood are less likely to care about (and protect) wild places when they grow up. Nature, it seems, really needs its kids.

Somebody needs to find a way to connect lots of our kids to the wonders of nature, and soon. Oh yes, and from a kid's perspective, this had better be fun. It has to be fun. Enter Zoomazium at Woodland Park Zoo.

Zoomazium is perhaps the first of its kind - a purpose-built, naturalistic play space for kids (and their parents, of course). We created Zoomazium to feel like a natural environment. It's much more like a diorama - one that you can play on - than an exhibit that you mostly

just look at. We decided that if we were going to have any chance of connecting kids to nature, the space had to behave and play like the outdoors. Speaking of the outdoors, we get the nature thing: Woodland Park Zoo happens to be one of the most naturalistic zoos in the world. We have built-in field trips to places like Asia, Africa, and Alaska right here. In other words, kids "Come for the play, but they stay for the nature."

Okay, enough of philosophy. Let's take a kid's-eye-view of Zoomazium. The first thing kids notice is that the main door is the kids' door - half-size and round, with playful handles. Inside, they find a big play space, complete with a mountain to climb. And it's not spongy. It's, hmm...this feels like real rock! And there's a nurse log that you can load up with slugs and ferns and fungus - just like the real thing! Hey! There's even an African drumming hut and an egg you can hatch out of. And over here, look, it's an outdoor play space at the edge of the woods. Cool! Of course some of you kids are practically grown up. Where's the big kid stuff?

Just beyond Toddler Zone, that's where. As you head over, you discover a huge mountain of tumbling talus (a rockpile). Like nature, it seems simple at first glance. But look close, you can climb up there, or there, or that way looks tough, let's try it. That was hard, but I made it.

Did you? And under here, in the cave, there's a passageway to... what's this? Whoa, I'm in a lava tube. Wait it's an ice cave... Hey wait, you can get to the top of the mountain from here too, and even slide back down to the...what kind of tree IS that?"

It's a Strangler Fig, all 32 vertical feet of it. "How do you get up it? Wait, it's around back. Yeah, you climb up here. Hey cool, there's a



The Strangler Fig is one of the climbing adventures at Zoomazium.



Frank Hein, program manager for the Woodland Park Zoo, holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Wildlife Management and Biology from the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point and a Masters Degree in Environmental Policy and Management from the University of Denver. He spent more than a dozen years as a dedicated field ecologist working to protect endangered species and habitats. Frank's passion for connecting people to nature for the good wild places and things was a driving force behind the Zoomazium concept.

R. Scott Vance loves discovery and knows how smart kids are. He's a careful observer of nature. He draws what he sees and he draws things that don't exist - yet. He's been doing that longer than the 27 years he's had his own design business. After completing his second interactive exhibit for the Woodland Park Zoo, Scott officially joined the zoo's incredible team of professionals, as Interpretive Exhibit Specialist. The zoo's tradition of creating naturalistic exhibits with a focus on animals, habitat and environmental conservation has brought together an incredible team of professionals. Scott is one of them.

corkscrew slide inside the hollowed out tree. And a tree house, all the way up to the ceiling. I can see Mom from here. Hey, Mom, look at me! I'm sliding down the tree. "Watch!"

Add a theatrical stage designed for almost any kind of show, including animal presentations (there are two animal holding areas inside Zoomazium), a grassland play area, a Parent Place where tired adults can relax in comfy chairs and a very comfortable nursing area for moms and you almost have it. Almost. There's also Nature Exchange, where you can trade your nature knowledge for points. Then you can use those points to trade for some pretty amazing nature items - like fossils, crystals, and lots more. Kids and parents love it.

Finally, we built Zoomazium to extremely high ecological standards. If we're going to ask folks to care more about nature, we have an obligation to show that we care too. That's why Zoomazium is built with FSC certified wood - wood harvested from forests in a sustainable way - among other things. And all that green just got us a Gold LEEDS certification from the U.S. Green

Building Council. We love that LEEDS status helps us to encourage other institutions and our many visitors to build green too.

Some of the more earth-friendly innovations of Zoomazium include new anti-bird-strike glass (designed to save birds from colliding with it) and a green roof. The green roof is particularly innovative. It's planted not with just grass, but with all native plants. It simulates a temperate forest floor habitat complete with sword ferns, salal, knickinick and lupine. It's like a forest restoration project instead of a roof.

Since opening on 19 May 2006, Zoomazium has reached well over 400,000 visitors, with more than 60% of all zoo visitors going to Zoomazium. That's exciting for all the reasons you might expect (we all like our exhibits to be popular), but for us, the popularity of this exhibit is doubly significant because it is helping us deliver on our mission. It's green, it's fun and by helping us give millions of children a stronger connection to the wonders of wildlife and nature, it might just help us make the world a better place for kids and other animals for years to come. 

