

So what if you wanted to set up your own zoo, botanic garden, natural history site, aquarium or other biodiversity focussed attraction, but did not have enough money to do so?

It is pretty unusual around the world to find any source of external finance there explicitly to finance the inception or major extension of a biodiversity attraction.

Of course, whilst well run zoo propositions (*I will often use 'zoo' in the following as shorthand for all the various kinds of organizations listed in my title question*) accessing sizeable populations and with a strong commercial focus can sometimes make a tempting enough offer to commercial investors, that type of financial backer is normally looking for biggest, fastest or most certain return on their capital. For a mission focussed site such openings are rather rare.

In any case this short article excludes recyclable loans or equity related finance, and rather draws on my own experience as to accessing government support, grant making foundations, commercial sponsorship and private philanthropy to make your vision a reality. So whatever your starting point is (a new zoo or gardens; or extension of your current operation), I am going to suggest consideration of the following various agenda (all beyond the obvious usual suspects of biodiversity and tourism - however important these certainly are). These are new contexts which your ambition might support or merge into. In this way you can draw in the interest of major funders, who are otherwise probably inaccessible.

I had better try and forestall criticism that this amounts to a cynical pursuit of funding for its own sake, or a willingness to warp your *raison d'être* out of all shape. Instead I would invite agreement that all the areas that follow are actually positive social and ethical outputs deserving support in their own right. Some of you may even consider that the creative and imaginative stretch demanded here is also stimulating, exciting and worthwhile in itself; and that, in moving beyond your current comfort zone, you could very well end up creating something that is new and one of a kind, trailblazing for our sector as a whole.

All of the ideas that follow are only really intended as provocations for your own thinking: some of the themes suggested may be relevant; other definitely not; still further agenda, not listed here, will doubtless emerge in fertile minds.

1. Regional economic uplift.

Almost *the* most important activity for any government is economic growth. If you ask for support from some element of the public purse funded by tax, you should really show that your project will ultimately contribute to the shared prosperity that forms that same tax base. In doing so, you are completing a kind of virtuous economic circle.

Clearly zoo operations make an immediate and obvious contribution to economic development by way of tourism and employment. But your economic role is much wider than that. A well run biodiversity attraction is part of an overall regional fabric that enhances quality of life, regional & civic confidence or pride, external image and the overall brand of a given geography. In my own home country the UK, sites like Chester Zoo or the Eden Project add to the very distinctiveness of their county or sub-region, and increase place recognisability. This in turn means that businesses and other organisations are more likely to invest, and high skilled, high earning professionals are more likely to be willing to live and work in that particular district.

In a single sentence: **your zoo makes a place better.**

So sustainable economic development, or social regeneration for 'left behind' areas, must be at the core of your pitch for public sector funds.

For that matter pretty much all of the other following areas can, in addition to their immediate value, be considered to be also about economic development.

2. University collaborations.

Most biodiversity attractions have some kind of link with Higher Education. They are very proud of these, and so they should be. In many cases however these consist of individual researchers using the zoo's species and facilities for their own academic investigation in a kind of silo approach with no wider benefit for either party.

I remain convinced that there is value in more strategic and holistic relationships between zoos and universities. From the zoo's point of view as well as widening and sublimating your organisation's value to society in general, this renders your project more likely to win support from the public purse.

From your partner university's perspective there are multiple motivations.

Governments as the HE sector's regulators and research funders nowadays put enormous pressure on universities to demonstrate their value back to society and to the public in general. It is the general population after all, who in paying tax, making electoral decisions and as 'consumers' of universities' various public goods,

I remember chatting to my taxi driver (female, 65 years old and like me from an ordinary working class background) on my way to former client Yorkshire Wildlife Park set up just a few years previously. When I told her my destination her face lit up and she said *"Do you know, I have lived in Doncaster all my life and never thought we would have something as wonderful as this in my city. It makes me very proud."*

I had the privilege some years back of securing the willingness of Professor Sir Drummond Bone (up to recently Pro-Vice Chancellor at Oxford and Master of Balliol College) to serve as the first President of the British & Irish Association of Zoos and Aquaria. For Drummond as someone at the highest level within the Higher Education sector, collaboration between both sectors was blindingly obvious. In his speech to this very effect at the UK Houses of Parliament, he said "....."

"Strategic collaborations between leading universities in respective regions and their local zoos offer all kinds of benefits for both parties and are conspicuous by their very absence. Both types of organisations would do very well to make the effort to reach out"

are the ultimate funders, decision makers and beneficiaries for the higher education and research sector.

For any nation the HE and research community is an essential engine for prosperity, prestige and innovation, but these organisations are of course not innately public facing; whereas offering a uniquely wide demographic, that is precisely the role of zoos and other biodiversity sites. The potential for your 'zoo' project to act as a very effective shop window for so many of the good things that universities provide is vastly underused.

Beyond engagement in their work, the use of zoo sites as 'living laboratories' to actually carry out research and field test scientific investigations (possibly before commercial roll out) is a quite separate kind of academic/zoo collaboration, and one that is beginning to develop greater understanding and prominence.

One essential point here widely overlooked is that the university discipline supported at a zoo site does **not** need to conform to the very traditional associations of veterinary or conservation science. Almost any area within the biosciences and environmental areas can relate easily to your work. For that matter all the sciences (physics, chemistry, mechanics, psychology, etc.) underpin the animal and plant world, and there can be an easy jump from a beguiling animal or plant display to engage the public in principles of these various disciplines. You have a very strong offer as well for the social sciences and humanities. The vast, multi-taxa anthro-zoological encounter and interplay between humans and non human animals at the zoo surely extends a unique sociological observatory ripe for investigation.

The very extensive list of benefits that a correctly configured public biodiversity site can offer to a university partner (...student enrolment , benefit for undergraduate student, promoting an inter-disciplinary approach, increase research funding and so on) is actually too long to deal with here, and I will address in a separate future article. Those interested might care to join this special interest Linkedin group bringing universities and biodiversity venues together <https://www.linkedin.com/groups/8606929/>

3. 'Attract and disperse function' in a native biodiversity/ national or regional nature tourism context

To their enormous credit many zoos and other biodiversity driven sites are placing greater ever emphasis on promoting and supporting native species and eco-systems as opposed to charismatic species from far off territories. This agenda is by itself more fundable in that, unlike the display of exotic biodiversity, it speaks immediately to authenticity and identity of a particular place (see above).

This offer can be extended however, whereby your capital project, starting from displaying given species and eco-systems indigenous to your part of the world, can effectively encourage its visitors to sample the much wider natural tourism offer of its overall region, or even its entire nation. In this way your initiative's economic value to governmental authorities is

dramatically enhanced: it is no longer just about more spending visitors to 'that one leisure experience'. Your proposition has become something that increases staying, spending and positive long term image across an entire landscape. Under the right circumstances your site can effectively position itself as 'the gateway to....'(fill in your locality, region or country)'.

4. Community benefit, social cohesion and mental health

It seems almost every day more evidence emerges as to the psychological benefits of contact with nature and other living things (*...one experiment shows that even a small square of green pasted on the wall of a room in which you spend a good deal of time in has a measurable effect*). At the same time the alarming lack of resources to support good mental health is zooming up the political and media agenda. Demotivated or depressed citizens are less economically active, or even a net drain on shared resources. So yet again we come back to your role in either 'virtuous' or 'vicious' economic circles.

Botanic gardens, animal attractions and their kin are effectively great green oases increasingly important within an ever more urbanised and 'grey' landscape: in a society where children and adults spend more and more time glued to plastic screens and, divorced from their own environmental heritage, and have little contact with nature or non human animals. Zoo parks are already magnets for all kinds of community groups and activities (...nature connected, photographic, artistic, or perhaps centred on more explicit social, psychological and health benefits). This role needs to be more pronounced in your bid for funding.

The unique demographic reach of zoo type sites is important here (as in all categories). As someone who used to work in the arts and heritage sectors, I know that galleries, theatres, museums, science education centres all have to make mighty efforts to try to ensure that their cultural and learning products are accessed by people from different ethnic & cultural backgrounds, social & economic strata, educational attainments, and so forth. With a great deal of effort, they can report some success. Zoos do not have to try hard to do this. These are places where society comes together of its own accord and families of differing backgrounds happily rub shoulders.

The whole idea of social binding or even reconciliation between divided parties through shared natural heritage plays an important role here too. Engagement with wonderful plants and animals offers a safe 'convening space' for elements of society otherwise currently or formerly in opposition or even actual conflict. The common ground of the welcoming biodiversity venue has a positive

I recall in my first week years ago at Chester Zoo, walking around the zoo trying to assess the mixture of people attending. In a previous job working for a big museum part of my role had been to try to widen the traditional, white, educated middle class audience to people from all kinds of backgrounds and cultures. With a bit of effort and ingenuity and by effectively temporarily changing the very product (the exhibitions programme) one had some - limited and temporary success. So it was an eye opener to see that with no particular marketing effort nor clever packaging, a representation of pretty much every aspect of society came to the zoo. Families from all ethnic backgrounds, people of very different economic status or educational attainment, and all ages mingled happily together.

It is perhaps an extreme example but the Bio Parc Colombia concept currently being developed aims amongst other deliveries to offer post conflict and economic resettlement for former combatants in the wake of that nation's fifty year long tragic internecine struggle.

social and psychological effect at individual, family, societal and national levels.

To solicit major capital support, your biodiversity site concept should clearly articulate the social and psychological benefits it offers. Even better it might from the ground up be organised around these very issues, demonstrating the positive difference it will make to people's day to day lives and the financial pressure it will remove from stretched public budgets for health and social services.

To put it in nutshell, zoos make people happy and healthy, the very same people who elect and pay your politicians and supply the taxes that fund everything. This basic fact cannot be laid too often at the feet of political decisions makers and other potential funders.

5. Links to overseas growth economies

The growing role of zoos in the native biodiversity of their own country is important and, as above, very relevant to your capital funding success

By their very nature however botanic gardens and zoos are normally about the wildlife heritage of *other* nations, rather their own.

In a fast globalising world where every government is looking to establish links of all forms (... cultural, educational and person to person) to other countries to ultimately forge stronger trade and political links, ambitious and imaginative biodiversity sites have been dealt an extra card to play.

The £7+ million project being developing for the National Zoological Society of Wales 'The Silk Road' will be a celebration of the nationhood of China, starting from a zoogeographic treatment but immediately widening into something that promotes all kinds of cultural, scientific, human and of course ultimately commercial links with the most important economic agenda on earth.

A major new exhibit, beginning from profiling the species and ecosystems of a given other part of the world (perhaps Latin America, Africa or Asia) can make an easy jump to championing and forming links with the culture and peoples of that same region. Should these latter include growth leading economies where your politicians are falling over themselves to establish commercial links, you have offered government a gift. And you have been given an extra rationale to ask for funding for your project in the first place.

6. Macro environmental issues

Your organisation is devoted to the biodiversity cause, inextricably linked to other environmental fronts (climate change, the circular economy, etc.)

The project for which you seek finance is likely a physical structure (an exhibit, an education centre or perhaps a front entrance?)

Most public sector authorities have a strong remit to promote sustainable life styles, the virtue and potential of sunrise building technologies and emergent energy and waste systems.

Where better to fund an exemplar building to these ends than at a site where the public already come in very large numbers and from an enviable to learn about the environment?

The marriage between biodiversity sites' need for capital support and society's need to demonstrate the physical structures and carbon neutral lifestyles is surely one made in heaven?

7. Links to agriculture and food

Botanic gardens are about plants. Aquaria are about all the things that live in the seas. Zoos are about animals.

There is another industry (and accompanying huge economic, political and social agenda) that also envelops all of these. It is called agriculture; not forgetting fisheries, and the entire food industry that flows from these.

Of course in making any link between zoos and agriculture there are certain sensitivities to be dealt with. But equally the question of truly sustainable agriculture, the impact of land used for crops on biodiversity, and questions around animal welfare are all already issues of direct concern to any biodiversity site genuinely focussed on environmental and ethical treatment of animals.

A sufficiently well thought through exhibit could act as a kind of giant billboard for the world of food, farming etc, dealing sensitively and thoughtfully with all the issues whilst still extending the fundamental thrill of contact with wonderful live animals; and thereby benefit from the considerable capital available to this industry and its issues.

I was shown around the impressive farming and food exhibit at Dublin Zoo some years back by Director Leo Oosterweghel. This combines live animals with classroom style arrangements to increase public awareness of Ireland's agricultural history and the continued importance of the farming and food industry. I understand this major initiative was part funded by Agri Aware, a charitable trust which works toward improving understanding of agriculture in Ireland. So this is really good example of a zoological institution reaching out to another field to the benefit of its own capital development.

8. Zoos and art: Science and culture

Decision makers in the world of botanic and zoological world can be forgiven for looking with some envy on the public and philanthropic funds made available to institutions dedicated to 'high culture' . They may further reflect on the irony that the demographic available to such venues is normally strikingly less inclusive than at zoos and aquaria; and that arts and heritage organisations often struggle to be financially sustainable: a problem that does not normally apply to the well run zoo, once capitalised.

The reference above to agriculture concerns of course only one relevant industry tangential to the zoo and garden world. There could be a long list of others. What about the waste disposal business? Or biotech? Cybernetics?

Despite this I have yet to come across any example of any really major attempt to fuse a cultural site with a zoological one (and will be really interested to hear of such in response to this article).

Many education experts at biodiversity sites have long ago come to the conclusion that art, storytelling and other 'affective' means of sharing ideas are much more successful than old fashioned didactic methods. On the whole people do not come to the zoo to 'be educated', but do enjoy having their emotions and sense of playful curiosity stimulated.

Trying to compete with TV, computers, phones etc. to relay straightforward information at a visitor venue is futile; and most visitors will refuse to read any text longer than a single sentence.

The world of plants, animals and landscapes is already intimately intertwined with art, music, literature. Add to all of this the rise of environmental art, and surely the hybridisation of the animal park with the sculpture park or other cultural experience is conspicuous by its very absence?

Art and culture funding is jealously guarded of course; but with a sufficiently subtle approach the argument to use the zoo demographic to give access to the arts to new audiences and to therefore legitimately receive funding support to that end is a very powerful one.

That - for the time being at least - concludes my quick survey of the new frontiers that might just be available to release really substantial capital funding for whatever your biodiversity site ambition might be.

Of course many of the above are things that our zoos and gardens do 'a little bit already'. The challenge is to find a way to take these to light speed and make this extra identity the very core of your approach for funding.

And the list above is by no means exhaustive. Any idea that preoccupies the mindspace of senior decision makers; any discussion that dominates the media; any aspect of life that looks to create prosperity; or any approach that might save society money. Can one or other of these be related to the fundamental attraction of plants, animals and nature for human beings?

I very much look forward to response to this piece. I suspect there are legitimate challenges to some of my points, and I am quite certain that new ideas, beyond this initial trawl are waiting out there for exploitation.

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