

Zoos and Economic Development: a new funding paradigm (.... or “How to talk to your Regional Development Agency”)

1. Why is this topic of any relevance to busy zoo decision makers?

Because your organization’s role in regional economic development provides a major argument to draw down very senior, ‘transformational’, external funding. Whether you look at this from a commercial, or from an ethical/ ‘mission driven’ perspective, these funds will allow your organization to do whatever you do, better. Organizations which disdain this agenda, or simply never get round to finding the time or resources to engage with the outside world and the potential funding it offers, run the real risk of being overtaken and displaced in a very direct ‘Darwinian’ way by those who do explore widely.

2. What is “economic development”?

Economic development is the process of stimulating economic activity or wealth creation within a defined area. You will see also references to ‘regeneration’. More fully defined, we should probably really speak of *socially inclusive* and *sustainable* economic development. We want to bring everyone along with us in the wealth creation exercise (don’t we?), and the funding regimes available will certainly demand this. Such processes also need to be self sustaining and in no way harmful to the social, economic and physical environment in which we all subsist. Each nation and region will publish a Regional Economic Strategy (RES) which further defines priorities for economic growth.

3. What is the basic argument here for zoos receiving such funding?

In addition to acting as self contained businesses and/or charitable trusts busily burrowing away at their own ends, zoo sites can be seen as an important part of the regional fabric that stimulates overall wealth creation, social stability and raises the tax base. In this identity they can, under the right circumstances, receive substantial external funding to support, or more likely, radically expand their operations.

4. What are the things zoo sites do that are valuable in this context?

- ❖ They generate stable, long lasting jobs, relatively safe from global competition
- ❖ They bring leisure and tourist income to their county or region, primary spend on site and secondary spend in local shops, accommodation, travel, etc
- ❖ They purchase substantial supplies and services (ideally locally)

- ❖ They can profile ecological innovation and solutions before large and socially inclusive audiences (of critical importance in the current political climate)
- ❖ They help positively anchor the identity of your town, city, county and region in the mind of investors, tourists, re-locators, media and decision makers
- ❖ They improve the overall quality of life and general leisure/ cultural/ educational offer to retain and attract high earning and knowledge rich professionals and recent graduates
- ❖ They have an explicit educational remit and can offer many forms of learning, skilling and research partnerships with other organizations
- ❖ They are environmental social enterprises reinvesting all their surplus into wildlife conservation and the community
- ❖ They increasingly support native and European biodiversity rather than only exotic fauna
- ❖ They can act as cultural organizations in terms of architecture, local community heritage and 'natural patrimony'
- ❖ They can easily act in partnership with other organizations (academic, vocational, tourism, sustainable technology, international trade development, cultural, community, etc) to create added value for a region
- ❖ They provide a means to impact positively in different ways on a very large and *very socially inclusive* audience difficult to find elsewhere

5. In terms of the necessary internal and external mind set, what are some useful 'key words and expressions'?

In order to begin to address this potential, a zoo organization must be seen, must present itself and, critically, must see itself as:

- an 'institution' not a 'business', nor in any sense a 'private society'
- 'Regional' or 'supra regional' in reach, and not just 'local' nor (ideally) even 'sub-regional'
- a 'zoological society' ('charity', 'institution', 'social enterprise', 'trust' are also all good words) and not a 'zoo'. The latter term, whilst very positive in many ways, can set off all sorts of unconscious low level or negative expectations amongst the relevant decision makers
- concerned with 'holistic socio-economic development', not 'just tourism'. If you get pigeon holed too narrowly in the tourism box, you may only ever have access to revenue, not capital budgets
- imaginatively open to all sorts of partnerships.

The organization must feel itself as part of, and be genuinely committed to something much wider than itself. The real 'killer' is the temptation to retreat into an elitist or parochial self satisfaction and pull up the drawbridges.

Whilst making the initial approach, you should be offering your organization as a platform for regionally beneficial developments, not simply 'selfishly' asking for financial support.

Look for a case whereby there is some higher level of public good, some inspirational vision that your zoo simply could not be expected to reach by itself in any time frame of use or interest to political figures with relatively brief tenures, and where an injection of public money could act as a critical

catalyst. This will be a 'near market' situation, where only external investment will unlock the full benefit of your organization's benefit to Society.

6. Which authorities should you talk to for starters?

In England, the RDAs. You will probably also be covered by some form of sub-regional economic development partnerships. In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland naturally it is the respective national executive authorities. Dependent on their respective financial situation and just how dynamic their leadership is, your local authority, county or municipal may just be a relevant partner as well, but do not allow yourself to be blocked by unimaginative local bureaucrats.

7. How do you make the approach?

Obliquely, not through official channels. Relatively junior officials may not have the leeway or imagination to see your potential, and may automatically categorize you as a 'local tourist attraction'. So try to find an informal path to the most senior figures possible through existing contacts to begin the dialogue. Do whatever it takes to get such figures to actually visit your site, and begin to paint a picture of your great vision. Find an excuse as to why they should visit you, rather than the reverse.

8. My zoo is private, a profit making commercial enterprise, not a charity. Does this not disqualify me?

Although it may take a little extra work to position yourself for such funding if you are a private zoo, this remains entirely possible. Some private zoos are of course still very mission driven and basically family businesses.

Most importantly, private businesses of all size and types have benefited from statutory support. Grant makers fundamentally only care about the output of your project as in 5 above. If you can make the case as to the boost you will provide for the regional economy, your constitutional status should really not be an issue.

9. My organization lies in an affluent part of the UK, and the funds I keep hearing about are all for economic regeneration. Why would regional government be willing to boost an organization in an area not suffering from deprivation?

Areas designated officially as having economic problems certainly do have an advantage with bigger budgets ascribed. However, all the nations and all regions of the UK are in competition. The South East, London and the East of England may be designated as the most successful regions, but that does not mean that their regional authorities do not want them to stay that way!

If the right regional figures are sufficiently convinced that your project is the right, competitive engine for economic growth, then they will find a way to support you.

It is also worth saying that very few zoos UK sites cannot claim to contain pockets of severe economic difficulty somewhere within their visitor

catchment. Chester Zoo, for instance, is located in one of the richest counties in the UK, yet draws heavily on visitors from all income brackets in Merseyside and Greater Manchester.

10. I understand that either:

- a. it is against the policy of my Regional Development Agency to fund what I want it to fund*
- b. our RDA has limited funds compared to other regions*
- c. that the system of Regional Government will be dissolved, or lose its budget soon.*

Policies change. As above, if 'government' wants to do something badly enough, it will find an avenue to do it. The shadow of The State Aid EU principle is pesky, but there are multiple precedents as to substantial capital funds being allocated to zoo and zoo like projects all over the UK and across the EU. If you have received a rebuff on the policy, the budget or another basis, do not be too quick to take this as a permanent rejection. What kind of 'no' was it?

- *No, not now:* so ask again later
- *No, not this project:* so reformulate the project
- *No, not you! :* so go get yourself an influential, well informed and connected champion
- *No, from me:* so wait until 'me' changes or go and ask someone else higher up the food chain

Continue to knock persistently, but politely, on the right doors. Continue to engage and explore.

As for budget being taken away from the RDAs and devolved administrations, certainly the landscape is always changing, and this is an argument for not putting off the process of enquiry and networking for another time. The current Comprehensive Spending Review or a future Conservative administration may well change the situation. However it should be remembered that regionalism is at root an EU policy not simply a UK Labour party agenda. It is hard to see a time in the next decade when regional decision makers are not somehow the gateway to serious funding.

The truth is each decade seems to unlock fresh funding mechanisms, but it is only through meshing with the decision makers who control and indeed devise such mechanisms in the first place, that zoos, aquariums and similar organizations will be seen as the natural recipients of the investment available

ENDS

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