EFFECTS OF HUMAN-ORANGUTAN COOPERATION AT THE INDIANAPOLIS ZOO

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The Indianapolis Zoo is in the process of developing a new orangutan exhibit. The exhibit aims to help zoo guests develop an appreciation for the cognitive abilities of orangutans as well as understand how those abilities have helped the animals survive in the forest. The goals of the experience are to ultimately affect zoo guests' attitudes and beliefs about orangutans and the importance of forest conservation. To that end, the zoo will be implementing interactive devices that allow orangutans living in the exhibit and zoo guests to work cooperatively on a series of discrete, individualized tasks.

In the summer of 2011, IUPUI Museum Studies graduate students conducted visitor studies research and evaluation on a Chutes Interactive prototype. The prototype invited research participants to cooperate with an orangutan by taking turns with the animal to rotate a series of chambers. With each rotation, a treat moved from the top of the device to a bottom chute, where the ape could retrieve it.

Researchers used questionnaires, meaning mapping, and direct observation methods to measure: 1) the extent of guest interaction at the device, 2) gains in general content knowledge/conceptual that occurred after the experience, and 3) prototype functionality with regard to the exhibit goals and mechanics. Evaluation of the experience revealed that the cooperative experience stimulated little long-term change in participant attitudes and behaviors toward orangutans; that participants showed cognitive gain after the prototype activity, but not in knowledge areas identified as the core goals of the experience; and that design elements should be reconsidered to ensure the device would function properly more often.