

Lion Fun Days; Conservation Connects Mozambique to Texas

By:

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The Velasquez Elementary Cats for Conservation

The Houston Zoo's conservation department schedules several guest speakers throughout the year to present lectures to zoo patrons, employees, and volunteers. The money raised by the lectures is then donated to the conservation program the guest speaker represents. After learning that one of the zoo's fall lecture series speakers was Dr. Colleen Begg (researcher and conservationist for African carnivores), I began to research the Niassa Lion Project. NLP has been working since 2003 exclusively in the Niassa Reserve, Mozambique. Researchers have been tracking animals and vaccinating animals, as well as working with the locals on how to safely live with lions. "Lion Fun Days" was one of the project's methods for community outreach and education. The entire NLP team got together and came up with activities, games, and puzzles for the children of Mbamba, Mozambique to participate in. The idea is to teach the children about the importance of Carnivores in their ecosystem through fun and engaging activities. The children painted animal masks, ran relay races, acted out plays, and played a special ecosystem tug of war. At the end of the day, the children bring home solid conservation messages to their parents from these activities and crafts.

We wanted to replicate Lion Fun Days at the Houston Zoo and organize the event to mirror the

one in Mozambique. The Houston Zoo could help create awareness about the plight of African Lions, as well as sell unique items to raise money for the Niassa Lion Project. We thought it would be great to have Lion Fun Days at our zoo in conjunction with Mozambique's to strengthen the message and relationship between our organizations. We could teach the same principles, and let American and Mozambique children know that children around the world are learning about their role in conservation.

After discussing the idea with the Houston Zoo's Conservation department, we set our sights even higher and decided to include the Velasquez Elementary School on the project. Velasquez Elementary is located on the south side of Houston, Texas and raises money annually for feline conservation. Last year the school donated \$1,000 to the Houston Zoo's Conservation Department for Small Cat Conservation, focusing on ocelots. This year the school donated \$1,000 to be given to the Niassa Lion Project. As a reward for the classroom that raised the most money, we invited 18 kids from Velasquez to the zoo on March 22, 2011. The children participated in a condensed version of Lion Fun Days; we tried to duplicate a few of the activities they do in Mozambique. The children colored lion masks, played a special ecosystem game of tug of war, made hand prints next to their take home lion paw prints, all the while learning about African lions. At the end of the activities the children got their class picture taken in front of our lions at the training window. (Our zoo has a graphic which folds down exposing a wire mesh that allows the keepers to interact with the Lions while they are on exhibit.) Houston Zoo employees then traveled to Velasquez Elementary School to give a presentation about African Lions and the Niassa Lion Project as a reward for the entire school's participation in the Cash for Cats fundraiser.

When Dr. Colleen Begg visited the Zoo for her lecture, she took the pictures and film of the Velasquez Elementary children engaging in their Lion Fun Day activities back with her to Mozambique. The children in Mozambique were delighted to see that kids in Houston are participating in the same activities as them. We hope to create a partnership between the Houston Zoo and the villages of Mozambique. Together we can make a difference in the future of lions.

The Houston Zoo organized its first Lion Fun Days on November 3rd & 4th of 2011, and it was a great success. We were able to reach hundreds of children through keeper chats, games, and arts/crafts. We raised over \$1500 for the Niassa Lion Project, but most importantly we had fun with conservation. The children had a great time, and were able to recite the conservation message at the end of the day.

What's next? I would love to see other zoos collaborate with the NLP and organize Lion Fun Days



Children
participating in
Lion Fun Days at
the Houston Zoo.

of their own. I look forward to more schools getting involved in raising money for conservation, and learning how to take responsibility for the environment.

As a keeper, I am proud to be a part of something bigger than caring for the animals within our Zoo. I am proud to know that I am doing something to help make a difference for the lions in the wild. With the support of the Houston Zoo's Conservation Department, the children at Velasquez Elementary and I have become more actively involved in conservation. The Houston Zoo, Houston Zoo Keepers, Velasquez Elementary School, Velasquez Elementary children, Niassa Lion Project, and the children of Mbamba, Mozambique have started what I hope to be a beautiful relationship.



A game of Tug of War at Lion Fun Days



A large crowd enjoys a Keeper Chat in front of the lion exhibit



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