



Public Communications Inc. / Elephants in Our Future

Challenge

One of the most popular animals in any zoo, elephants became a big problem for some zoos in recent years as animal rights groups launched public campaigns claiming that elephants can't live well in zoos. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) recognized that the elephant issue might be only the beginning; campaigns against exhibiting other species such as giraffes, lions, bears and penguins could follow; threatening the future of zoos and aquariums.

Strategy and Action

PCI and AZA created an aggressive issues management program that included using research and internal communications to inform AZA members of the short and long-term threats posed by the detractors' campaign. To address the detractors' claims, AZA zoos with elephants began, for the first time, collaborating and collectively using scientific research and their animal care expertise to talk about elephants in their care. This included using unified elephant messages and developing communications materials based on conservation, science, and animal health data as well as public opinion. Another strategy was to use aggressive media relations to tell the positive stories about zoo elephant programs and their importance to wild populations in rapid decline.

Results

While activists groups continue to attempt to force zoos to abandon their elephant programs, the campaigns have made very little progress. AZA's crisis program not only unified AZA member voices on the elephant issue for the first time, but it helped educate the public about the facts regarding the high quality of care elephants receive in accredited zoos and the role of zoos in conservation. The elephant crisis plan and proactive program enabled AZA and its members to make significant steps to ensure elephants will be in the future of zoos. Now more than 60 AZA-accredited zoos have or are planning to build or expand their elephant facilities and breeding program. Also the program united zoos in a collaboration to support more than 85 elephant conservation and research programs to help wild elephants.

