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“CANS FOR CONSERVATION”: REDUCING OUR WASTE TO LANDFILL

By

Dr. Danielle Johninke

National Zoo and Aquarium, Canberra, Australia

Presenter and Corresponding Author

Dr. Danielle Johninke

Daniellejohninke@nationalzoo.com.au

ABSTRACT

With a staggering 22 million tonnes of waste sent to landfill in Australia annually, more than 80% of recyclable soft plastic packaging and containers continue to end up in landfill. Consequently, more than 130,000 tonnes of plastic waste pollute our waterways and oceans each year, endangering Australia's unique marine habitats and resulting in animal loss. To reduce our impact on Australian wildlife and practice more responsible consumption, the National Zoo and Aquarium Sustainability Team instigated a new waste management initiative in mid-2018, with the primary goal of reducing the amount of waste sent to landfill. A review of the current recycling procedures revealed that waste was predominantly divided into mixed recycling and landfill, allowing for large quantities of plastic to be incorrectly sent to landfill. New bins were introduced into every zoo department, separating waste into four categories: soft plastic, Container Deposit Scheme (CDS) refundable containers (bottles and cans), mixed recycling and landfill. Furthermore, several CDS bins were installed in high-traffic visitor areas as part of an educational program named “Cans for Conservation” to encourage zoo visitors to dispose of their waste more appropriately. Once collected, all soft plastic packaging was dropped at REDCycle outlets for recycling, whilst bottles/cans were returned for a 10c refund. To determine the amount of waste saved from entering landfill, the soft plastic packaging was collated into large bags and weighed prior to recycling. At an average of 2kg per bag, approximately 182kg of soft plastic was saved from landfill in 2018, during a 4-month period. Some challenges were presented, such as modifying staff behaviour, transforming the culture around wasteful consumption, incorrect recycling of certain products and covid-related lockdowns; however, improvements continued over time. We have now reduced our waste to landfill by removing an incredible 4.2 tonnes of soft plastic packaging in the three years since the program commenced. In addition, we have returned over 400,000 bottles and cans, thereby reducing the amount of litter in the environment and enabling these containers to be recycled into useful products. Of note, the \$40,000 raised by the return of these containers has been donated to a number of valuable conservation organisations both locally and abroad. Due to the success of this waste management initiative, we intend to expand the “Cans for Conservation” program to more visitor areas and now aim to reach a target of \$50,000 by August to mark four years since the program began.

BIOGRAPHY

Danielle is the Team Leader of Australian Natives at the National Zoo and Aquarium, having worked at Taronga Zoo previously. With a doctorate in Animal Reproduction and 10 years of experience in animal care, she has a passion for wildlife conservation and captive breeding programs. She is currently the Deputy Director of the NZA Conservation Team and founded the zoo's Sustainability Team, the first of its kind, in 2018.