

Theme-park visitors paying to get more access

by Penni Crabtree

In the end, even getting hit with flecks of partially chewed raw herring spewed by a lumbering, 10-foot-long Pacific walrus had its charm.

"It was shocking because I didn't realize it would happen, but it wasn't that bad," said New Jersey resident Rachel LeMeshow, 11, of her messy meeting with Obie the walrus during a recent behind-the-scenes tour of SeaWorld's Wild Arctic exhibit. "I'm a total animal nut, so it was all really cool and educational."

WALK WITH THE ANIMALS - Angie McDonald pets a beluga whale as part of SeaWorld's Wild Arctic Interaction program in San Diego. CNS Photo by Nelvin Cepeda.

At theme parks, zoos and museums across the United States, an increasing number of visitors are paying for the privilege of swimming with dolphins and beluga whales, feeding giraffes and antelopes, and exploring the once-off-limits corridors and crannies of natural history, science and cultural exhibits.

The private animal encounters and behind-the-scenes tours provide theme parks and other attractions with an unusual educational venue, as well as a way to reach out to the been-there, seen-that tourist, industry experts say.

"This is definitely a growing category in the tourism industry," said Christian Aaen, a senior associate at Economics Research Associates, a Los Angeles consulting firm that does economic analysis for the tourism industry. "It is a niche market because it commands a high price and it appeals to certain people who want a total immersion experience, but in the last five years it has really come into its own."

SeaWorld's parent company, Busch Entertainment Corp., set the commercial standard for animal-encounter programs in 2000 with the launch of Discovery Cove in Orlando, Fla., Aaen said. A thousand guests per day at the reservations-only theme park pay \$279 to swim with dolphins and snorkel among rays and exotic fish.

Since then, other theme parks, resorts and zoos have introduced a variety of animal-encounter programs, big and small, to offer a different experience from that found in the mass market, Aaen said. "Everyone is trying to think of creative ways to bring people through the gates," he said.

SeaWorld began offering its Wild Arctic Interaction program in November, building on the success of an older Dolphin Interaction program, which allows small groups of visitors to interact in the water with dolphins.

In the Wild Arctic program, two groups of up to eight visitors each day take a tour that includes feeding seals and walrus and viewing polar bears in pens not visible to the general public. Each person in the group pays \$160, on top of the regular admission fee of \$57. But the highlight of the session comes when the visitors put on wet suits and join a trainer in the 55-degree Arctic pool enclosure. There, visitors spend about 20 minutes touching and feeding two beluga whales while learning about the creatures' behavior in the wild.

The interaction programs, as well as behind-the-scenes tours, keep the theme park's attractions fresh, generate revenue and educate visitors about marine wildlife, said Dave Koontz, a spokesman for SeaWorld.

In 2006, some 70,000 visitors took a SeaWorld behind-the-scenes tour - which cost an additional \$12 to \$40 per person - with 60 percent of them coming from outside Southern California. An additional 28,650 visitors paid to take part in various SeaWorld interaction programs, and of that number 49 percent came from outside Southern California.

SeaWorld does not release its overall attendance figures. Lynn Willocks of Scottsdale, Ariz., said she decided after seeing an advertisement about the Wild Arctic Interaction in her local newspaper to vacation in San Diego for three days and do it. Before the Arctic interaction, she hadn't visited SeaWorld in 12 years. Now, after splashing among the belugas, she wants to do it again.

"I'm a huge animal lover, and I really like the whole approach to this," Willocks said. "It wasn't rushed. They

didn't force the animals to do certain behaviors. You didn't feel like the animals were exploited. You get to see the animals and really think about them."

Many zoos, for an extra fee, also allow visitors to see and do things that were off-limits until a few years ago. Visitors can help wash an elephant with a scrub brush at the Oregon Zoo and hide toys in the animal enclosures at the Philadelphia Zoo.

Zoos and other nonprofit entities often charge only a nominal fee, enough to cover the cost of the program. For the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park, taking guests behind the scenes is a way to get them more interested in the mission of conservation and education, zoo officials said. For instance, both the zoo and the Wild Animal Park offer 2 1/2-hour VIP tours that include visits to off-exhibit areas and up-close-and-personal animal presentations. Groups of one to 14 can participate for a \$350 program fee, plus admission.

The zoo and animal park also offer several popular sleepovers, including women-only and adult-only events.

Museums are also exploring additional ways to bring in money, such as renting out facilities for birthday parties, weddings and corporate events.

With the December release of Ben Stiller's blockbuster movie "Night at the Museum," in which a museum's displays come to life late at night, sleepover events at places such as Chicago's Field Museum and New York's American Museum of Natural History sold out months in advance.

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