

# STORYTELLING

## The Benefits of Full Transparency

BY KATIE MORELL



**It was in the early hours of a Tuesday morning in November 2017 when Jessica Fontana sat down at her desk and started to worry. As director of communications at the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta, Ga., she'd hadn't left to go home the night before, waiting while a beluga whale named Qinu attempted to give birth. Things looked good in the beginning—so good that she and her team decided to post a Facebook Live video of the first sign of the calf being born.**

But as the hours crept on, the cameras turned off.

From the beginning, staff knew it was a high-risk pregnancy and, when conception proved successful, decided that instead of leaving the public in the dark, they would share every detail of the pregnancy with the outside world. Ultrasound photos were given to reporters, social media posts were dedicated to behind-the-scenes looks at Qinu's care and the concerns for the safety of the unborn animal and its mother were freely shared.

Sadly, in the end, the calf didn't make it because of its size. It was too large for a natural birth, and whales are not built for human-version caesarean section surgeries.

"I remember going back to my office and thinking: did we make a mistake? Were we too transparent?" said Fontana.

Despite her concern, she and her team forged ahead and the next day explained what happened on Facebook. They included every detail, and the comments came pouring in.

"We had thousands of paragraph-long comments saying

things like 'we know you guys did everything you could' and 'we are so sorry for your loss,'" she said. "We realized in that moment that they'd been following Qinu's story the whole time. The media didn't even question anything."

Rewind the clock back to May 2012 and Fontana was experiencing something quite different, although the set-up was eerily similar. Back then, a beluga whale had given birth at the Aquarium and its calf had passed within a month of being born. The media's response was

vicious. Scrambling to control the message, Fontana and her team sent out statements explaining everything the institution had done to try to save the calf.

"But nothing worked," she remembers. "In hindsight, it is psychology 101: you can tell people how to feel, but it is only when you show them what's going on and allow them to have their own feelings that things really resonate."

Enter the age of transparency for zoos and aquariums: The Bronx Zoo in Bronx, N.Y., is in

its second season of *The Zoo*, a behind-the-scenes program that broadcast on Animal Planet and many other zoos and aquariums are taking to social media to spread messages of emotion, backstories, sad stories and even love stories.

"We launched 'Aquarium Love Stories,' an episodic show on Facebook, on Valentine's Day 2018," said Fontana. "We post things like what happened when a penguin chick was born and we had to perform surgery. One of our videos just hit 10 million views."



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## **Public Scrutiny: the Backstory**

Public transparency in the zoo and aquarium world is a relatively new concept—about a decade old. This recent focus is related to the public scrutiny following films like *Blackfish*, but also has to do with the evolution of animal care in the institutions themselves.

Don Moore, director of the Oregon Zoo in Portland, Ore., offers a unique perspective. He’s celebrating more than 40 years in the zoo and aquarium community and has grim memories from his first job, in the late 70s.

“I came in trained as a wildlife biologist, having studied animals in the field, and what I saw was prison conditions for animals,” he remembers. “I remember asking,

“This isn’t how animals live. Why are we doing this?”

Soon after Moore joined, the Zoo received a grant for a full renovation and upgraded its enclosures. He then went to several more zoos to help rehabilitate habitats. The issue he found had to do with animal welfare—something that zoos and aquariums weren’t initially getting right.

“In the 1980s we started to understand the animals’ psychological needs from an animal point of view and started to design habitats for that,” he said. “During the 70s, 80s and 90s, zoos were going through a renaissance of design and management. It was an enlightenment that resulted in animals having better habitats.”



It also resulted in the creation of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ Animal Welfare Committee—something Moore helped to create in the late 90s. Now every section of AZA accreditation has animal welfare at the forefront, he said.

Fast-forward to today’s focus on transparency and Moore sees it as a wonderful development.

“Public trust in zoos is now apparent because we are talking about the amazing care and welfare we give each species,” he said. “And with that trust comes support?”



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### Letting it All Hang Out

Examples of transparency at AZA-accredited facilities are as fun as they are touching. The Oregon Zoo's Facebook page is lively with weekly videos showing tiny goats visiting different animals in the Zoo, a local TV cable anchor filming weekly segments behind the scenes and a video series dubbed "Second Chances," dedicated to rescued animals.

"We have 60 animals that wouldn't have survived in nature if we hadn't rescued them, and we tell their stories," Moore said.



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“People are obsessed with our tiny goat videos; we get calls of praise from people all over the country. Our marketing team calls these campaigns ‘chocolate covered vitamins.’ We do a lot of cute, but there is always science behind it.”

Tom Stalf, president and chief executive officer of the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium in Powell, Ohio, is just as enthusiastic about transparency. Columbus has a long history with video thanks to the on-site residence of animal care legend Jack Hanna and his many shows, but of late, the Zoo is looking to do even more to educate the public on its dedication to superior animal care.

“Later this summer, we will be premiering a new TV show with Nat Geo Wild,” he said. “It will focus on animal care and follow

our vets, our zoo teams and our stories of conservation success. I think the most important thing the zoo world can do is engage our guests and give them opportunities to be inspired to care about wildlife and wild places.”

### **Advice for Full Transparency**

So how can institutions start on a journey to transparency?

“Just do it and don’t be afraid,” advised Dan Ashe, AZA’s president and chief executive officer. “There’s no guarantee that you won’t be criticized, but overall, transparency is our friend. We all have good stories to tell. Occasionally a story may not come out exactly the way you want it, but overall we will win when the public sees how well we care for the animals inside our member institutions.”

Fontana plans to give a talk at September’s AZA Annual Conference in Seattle, Wash., about the importance of transparency, and among her suggestions, said it is vital that zoo and aquarium teams get on the same page.

“Realize that we are all on the same team—people in PR, people on the animal care side, vets—and if we don’t trust each other, it won’t work,” she said. “My team has spent a lot of time with people on the animal care team to get an appreciation and respect for what they do and vice versa. If you want your fans and the public to trust you, you first have to trust each other.”

Another piece of advice is to start small. Fontana’s team didn’t launch its transparency campaign with CNN segments and ultrasounds of high-risk whale pregnancies.

“We started in early 2016 by filming a sea lion rescue,” she said. “It was risky because we didn’t know what was going to happen, but we decided we were going to do it and it worked. I recommend figuring out what story you want to tell and going with it.”



Controlling the message is also a great idea when starting out. Don’t invite in news crews until you’re ready. Start with some social media posts and grow from there. Make sure to share the emotion of the people who love and care for the animals—those connections will help stories be

even more relatable to the public at large, she said. Most of all, trust that your facility is doing a good enough job that your stories should be shared with the world.

“If you would have told me back in 2012 that we’d be so transparent about what happened in 2017, I would have laughed—a

lot,” said Fontana. “At the time it wasn’t popular because people were so scared. But we aren’t scared anymore. As an industry, we are realizing that transparency is the right choice.”

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Katie Morell is a writer based in Sausalito, Calif.