

THE ANIMAL AS EDUCATOR

The conservation of our natural resources, of which our natural and man made beauty spots and wildlands and their inhabitants are an important part, is a topic of major concern to the public these days, as well as to the professionals for whom it has been a concern for decades. Many recognize that public education is the principal factor in the preservation of these areas and their living creatures, both animal and plant.

The living animal is almost unique in its appeal to all ages and ranges and types of people.

This appeal can well be used for instruction -- see Smoky the Bear, the animals of the Walt Disney nature movies, Ranger Rick, and many other symbolic teachers of the nature appreciation lesson.

Educational talks, nature walks, and the like, are now quite common in many parks. We can prepare animals especially to fit into such series of programs, each with a lesson to teach of great significance to the park and to the conservation effort, but presented with such disarming appeal that the audience will not realize they are being instructed.

Animal skits represent a logical tie-in here: for example, to get across the NO SMOKING message, a man could walk into an area marked by a large "FIRE DANGER CRITICAL-NO SMOKING" sign, nonchalantly light a cigarette and drop the match. A crow flies in, picks up the match, stuffs it into the man's pocket (with much commotion -- the man beating out sparks, etc.), removes the cigarette from his mouth and flies off with it or disposes of it properly. Other skits could be designed around putting out camp fires, anti-littering, etc.

The nature talk, in which animals are often exhibited to the audience, can be amplified in an important way not only by showing the physical features of the animal and describing his life history and habits, but also by showing the people how the animal does certain things, what are his chief abilities, and how does he differ from other species. For example, how many have really seen a raccoon wash his food? How many have seen a deer reach up to pull bark or foliage off a tree (naturally this can be demonstrated without actually harming a growing tree)? Such demonstrations can readily be included in nature talks with a wide variety of animals.