Climate change – a topic at zoos, aquariums

By Leslie Kaufman, New York Times

BOSTON – Sitting on an artificial mangrove island in the middle of the ray and shark "touch tank," Lindsay Jordan, a staff member at the New England Aquarium, explained the rays' eating habits as children and their parents trailed fingers through the water. "Does anyone know how we touch these animals when we are not at the aquarium?" she asked.

The children's faces turned up expectantly.

"The ocean absorbs one-third of the world's carbon dioxide emissions," Jordan said, explaining that it upsets the food chain. "When you turn on your car, it affects them."

Downstairs, next to the jellyfish tanks, a rhyming video told how the jellyfish population was exploding in the wild because they thrive in warmer waters. In the main room, a staff member pointed to a rare blue lobster, saying that some lobsters have been scuttling out of Massachusetts and settling in cooler climes to the north.

With many zoos and aquariums now working with conservation organizations and financed by individuals who feel strongly about threatened habitats and species, managers have been wrestling with how aggressive to be in educating visitors on the perils of climate change.

Surveys show that American zoos and aquariums enjoy a high level of public trust and are ideally positioned to teach.

Yet many managers are fearful of alienating visitors – and denting ticket sales – with tours or wall labels that dwell bleakly on damaged coral reefs, melting ice caps or dying

trees.

“You don’t want them walking away saying, ‘I paid to get in, I bought my kid a hot dog, I just want to show my kid a fish — and you are making me feel bad about climate change,’ ” said Paul Boyle, the senior vice president for conservation and education at the Association of Zoos and Aquariums.

Some zoos and aquariums have therefore held back, relegating the theme to, say, a sign about Arctic melting in the polar bear exhibit. But many have headed in the other direction, putting climate change front and center in a way that they hope will inspire a young generation of zoogoers.

Working with cognitive scientists and experts in linguistics and anthropology, a coalition of aquariums set out in 2008 to develop a patter that would intrigue rather than daunt or depress the average visitor. After the group was pleased with the script, it secured a grant of about $1 million last year from the National Science Foundation to train staffs across the nation. This month, the foundation awarded the group an additional $5.5 million for a five-year education effort.

Boyle said that most of the association’s 224 members now have some sort of climate message.

The form varies from subtle to pointed. The zoos in Cincinnati and Toledo, Ohio, for instance, have installed prominent solar arrays over their parking lots to power exhibits and set an example. The San Diego Zoo and the Brookfield Zoo near Chicago have made their exhibits of polar bears and other Arctic species more direct about the threats posed by global warming.

So far the feedback has largely been positive, officials at most zoos say.

Ariella Camera, a counselor with a summer program run by Boston Rising, an antipoverty group, said some of her charges recently took part in a game at the New England Aquarium that

taught them what emits carbon dioxide (many factories, most cars) and what absorbs it (trees and the ocean). They were then challenged to balance the two.

Afterward the students struck up a lively conversation about their carbon footprints, Ms. Camera said. “It was a very engaging presentation,” she said.

Such anecdotes gratify Howard Ris, the aquarium’s president. “We would like as many people, if not everyone, to leave encouraged to take action,” he said.

Others are dubious that it will work. “Zoos have been making claims about their educational value for 150 years,” said Jeffrey Hyson, a cultural historian and the director of the American studies program at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia. The zoos “say a lot more about what they think they are doing than they can really demonstrate.”

Zoo managers acknowledge that they initially struggled with the challenge of delivering bad news.

In the 1980s and ’90s, Dr. Boyle noted, some zoos and aquariums made a big push to emphasize threats like the depletion of the earth’s ozone layer, the razing of rain forests by loggers and farmers and the overfishing of the Pacific. Electronic boards toted up the numbers of acres being cleared, and enlarged photographs depicted denuded landscapes.

Surveys of visitors showed a backlash. “For lots of reasons, the institutions tended to approach the issues by talking about the huge scale of the problems,” Dr. Boyle said. “They wanted to attract people’s attention, but what we saw happening over time was that everyday people were overwhelmed.” It did not help that a partisan split had opened in the United States over whether global warming was under way, and whether human activity was the leading cause.

At the Georgia Aquarium in Atlanta, Brian Davis, the vice

president for education and training, says to this day his institution ensures its guests will not hear the term global warming. Visitors are “very conservative,” he said. “When they hear certain terms, our guests shut down. We’ve seen it happen.”

Such hesitancy inspired the group of leading aquariums to develop, test and refine their model, which comes off as casual and chatty.

Word choices matter, research showed. The FrameWorks Institute, a nonprofit organization that studies how people process abstract concepts, found the phrase “greenhouse gas effect” perplexed people. “They think it is a nice place for plants to grow,” said FrameWorks’ president, Susan Bales. So her group advised substituting “heat-trapping blanket” to describe the accumulation of gases in the atmosphere.

Today’s guides also make a point of encouraging groups to focus first on the animals, leaving any unpleasant message for later.

At the New England Aquarium’s giant reef tank, visitors peered over the side and watched sand tiger sharks, sea turtles and tropical fish swim around a giant coral reef. As a diver entered the tank to feed the fish, a guide explained that the smaller ones tend to hide in coral for safety.

A few minutes passed before she told the crowd that corals around the world are bleaching and dying because of a pronounced rise in ocean temperature and acidity.

Read the whole story

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• To celebrate “The Godfather’s” 40th anniversary, there is a Monopoly board game out – and it includes Lake Tahoe properties.

• Tahoe Prosperity Center has hired Mone´ Haen to be CEO.

• Fire Fest, presented by Kiwanis Club of Lake Tahoe, is Sept. 29 from 10am to 3pm at Lake Tahoe Airport.

• The 27th Lake Tahoe Autumn Food and Wine Festival is now nine days – Sept. 1-9. Go online for more information.

• Kiwanis Club of Tahoe Sierra’s annual SeptOberfest fundraiser is Sept. 27 at 6pm at MontBleu in Stateline. Tickets are $35 – which includes food, wine tasting and beer. Call (530) 318.9197 for more details.

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5 people speak out about SnowGlobe at college meeting

Lake Tahoe Community College’s board of trustees gathered information Tuesday night from the public about SnowGlobe. The five are expected to vote Sept. 11 on if and how they want to be involved with the three-day music festival.

A representative from the city of South Lake Tahoe gave an

overview of plans that were agreed to by the City Council last week, two people were in favor of the event, one against and one didn't take a true stance.

Jennifer Buckley, who has lived in town 25 years, said, "I had an amazing time." She also agreed more trash cans and turning down the bass are needed.

John Mark said, "I thought it represented our community really well."

Pete Jorgensen said he didn't want to endure another three days of having the pictures on his walls rattle.

While the city can proceed without the college's approval, the logistics would be problematic without LTCC's involvement.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

What are your memories of the first day of any school year?

Men of Worth to play at

Valhalla

Men of Worth is the music duo of Donnie MacDonald and James Keigher. They bring their talent and authentic Scottish and Irish musical heritage to Valhalla’s Boathouse Theatre on the South Shore on Aug. 30 at 7:30pm.

Several of MacDonald’s songs come from his mother’s poetry and from Hebridean crofters’ airs.

The musicians, who met in California in 1985, each play a handful of instruments, among them mandolin, guitar, mandocello, banjo, concertina and bodhran (a handheld drum).

Tickets can be purchased by calling (530) 541.4975. Prices are $18 for adults, and $15 for children online. Advanced tickets are recommended.

Opinion: Youth benefit from Soroptimist donation

To the community,

Live Violence Free, formerly the South Lake Tahoe Women’s Center, would like to extend a thank you to Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe for enabling us to conduct the inaugural Girls Empowerment Retreat.

Thanks to a grant from the Soroptimist group we were able to plan and execute two sessions of this overnight camp, packed with fun and empowering workshops for transition age girls. The workshops included self-defense, leadership, self-care, crafting, and a session with the Humane Society.

By the end of day twos, the girls were begging us to let them stay another night, and for us, that was a true measure of our success.

Thank you Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe for your generosity and dedication to this community; we couldn’t have done it without you.

Scarlet Caldwell, outreach educator for Live Violence Free

Bankruptcy trustee questions STATA’s financial dealings

By Kathryn Reed

Another deadline looms next week in the multi-million dollar South Shore transportation lawsuit, with a decision possible in November to dismiss or have the case litigated.

Fairfield-based MV Transportation, which once ran the BlueGo bus system, sued the nonprofit South Tahoe Area Transit Authority in 2010 for a number of reasons; most having to do with not being paid the nearly $3 million it claims it was owed. STATA then filed for bankruptcy and has since disbanded and essentially merged with Tahoe Transportation District.

MV Transportation has until Sept. 7 to revise its complaint, with the defendants then being able to respond before the judge acts in mid-November.



Transit on the South Shore continues along a bumpy legal road. Photo/LTN

David Thompson, who was appointed by U.S. Bankruptcy Court Judge Gregg Zive to review all the documents (12 drawers of paper files and more than 16,000 emails) pertaining to the case, does not understand how the STATA board continued operations when the expense to do so was more than the revenue being generated.

In the participation agreement paragraph 5.11 states: "… that if revenues fall short, the directors shall reduce the levels of service unless the parties (participating members) mutually agree to make additional contributions."

Service was not cut and additional contributions were not made.

Thompson, who was appointed in August 2011, has prepared three reports for the court, with the latest coming out this summer.

In part he writes, "From the start, the operating revenues generated from cash fares, members contributions and operating grants were insufficient to cover operating costs. This resulted in STATA being constantly short of cash and having to issue a note payable to MV Transportation for $825,000 covering the initial start up months of operation. Operating shortfalls continued for several years reaching over $2 million. MV was terminated on June 20, 2010. … None of the participating members paid the operating shortfall as required

in the bylaws. TTD confiscated the assets, grants and contracts of STATA, gutting the organization and leaving no means to pay the creditors.”

South Lake Tahoe City Attorney Patrick Enright disagrees with Thompson’s assessment. He said the city only had to contribute what it received from the state and federal government for transportation, nothing more.

It has cost South Lake Tahoe more than $75,000 to pay attorney Lou Bubala of Reno to represent the city at the Reno bankruptcy hearings. That amount does not take into account Enright’s time. The city’s portion of the nearly $3 million is about $600,000.

Each defendant is represented by separate legal counsel, so the cost of the case continues to escalate at a greater rate than if they had the same attorney. If they lose, the parties are also likely to incur MV’s legal costs, the fees of the trustee, as well as penalties beyond the $3 million MV is claiming it is owed.

The defendants in the case are:

• STATA

• Tahoe Regional Planning Agency

• Douglas County

• South Lake Tahoe

• Heavenly Mountain Resort

• Tropicana Entertainment

• Harrah’s Operating Company

• Harvey’s Tahoe Management Company

• Lakeside Inn

• Horizon Casino

• Lake Tahoe Casino Realty

• Columbia Properties Tahoe

• Ridge Tahoe Property Owners Association

• Tahoe Transportation District.

Early on El Dorado County worked out a deal with MV.

“In October 2010, El Dorado County settled with MV Transportation for $160,000 because MV has a rock solid case against STATA’s member agencies. As the bankruptcy trustee points out, member agencies have a clear obligation of make additional contributions to STATA if STATA operates at a deficit,” county Auditor Joe Harn told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Because the TRPA staff gave the STATA board horrible advice, STATA operated at a huge deficit. The TRPA staff also wasted a lot of El Dorado County staff time. On at least three occasions, the TRPA staff recommended unlawful allocation instructions to the TRPA board. We spent a lot of time on conference calls explaining the fundamentals of the California Transportation Development Act to the TRPA staff.”

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is an integral part of this because the Tahoe Transportation District was created by TRPA. Beyond that, TRPA first hired John Andoh to handle the transit system. And while the STATA bylaws require an executive director to run the operation, it never had one. Andoh was a transit administrator.

STATA was the name given to the group in 2008. Originally it was called Tahoe Coordinated Area Transit when it was formed in 1998 as a coordinated transit system on the South Shore.

Mike Bradford, president of Lakeside Inn Casino in Stateline, acknowledged it was a tough sell at the time to get the casinos to give up their individual bus routes, but the

thinking was that to be a destination resort, the South Shore needed to be able to move people around.

It has never worked the way people envisioned. Part of it has to do with inconsistent and constantly changing routes and fares, the inability to balance the needs of locals and visitors, and that marketing for the bus system has failed miserably. After all, bus signs don't even have a bus symbol and most are not sheltered.

Bradford is frustrated MV has alleged the STATA members conspired against the transit agency.

"They are so off the mark," Bradford told *Lake Tahoe News*. "MV knew service levels exceeded the entities' ability to pay. When all the accumulated fees came to light, the STATA board said we can't pay now. We said we would pay over time."

Lakeside Inn officials said they tried to settle with MV using the same formula El Dorado County used, but said MV denied that request.

Jessica Woelfel, attorney for MV, said she had no comment at this time.

Act fast to ensure having

camping spot for Labor Day weekend

By Barbara Barte Osborn, Sacramento Bee

Tahoe National Forest officials are advising visitors to act quickly if they want to secure a campsite for the Labor Day holiday.

“This is one of the big weekends of the summer, and campgrounds, picnic sites and trail systems are expected to be busy,” forest spokeswoman Ann Westling said Monday.

Westling advised making reservations for the most popular campgrounds. Many have some first-come, first-served sites, but it would be best to arrive Thursday or Friday if one is hoping to secure one of those, she said.

Most campsites can be reserved by calling 877.444.6777.

All recreation sites in the forest will be open for the holiday, but the forest is very dry this summer and visitors are urged to be especially careful with fires, Westling said.

Fire restrictions are in effect, limiting campfires to developed campgrounds. In the backcountry, portable propane stoves can be used with a free campfire permit that’s available at all Forest Service offices.

New this year at many campgrounds are bear-resistant food lockers, which have been “very successful – virtually eliminating bear problems,” Forest Supervisor Tom Quinn said in a news release.

Read the whole story

Labor miffed with California pension reform deal

By Reuters

Gov. Jerry Brown and lawmakers have reached a deal to raise public employees' retirement ages, have them pay more into their pension accounts, and cap retirement payments in a vast overhaul of the state's pension system that he says will save $30 billion.

Union leaders panned the deal between Brown and fellow Democrats who control the Legislature and hope to drum up support for his tax measure on the November ballot by showing voters they can tackle big challenges.

California faces a huge liability for funding the nation's largest public pension system, but other states and cities also have huge pension funding gaps and will be watching the state closely.

Brown did not get everything he wanted from lawmakers, such as a hybrid plan that would funnel some contributions into 401(k)-style accounts, and some of the deal's measures will not affect current employees.

But Brown said at a press event in Los Angeles that the changes would ensure the state's pension system would be sustainable.

"We have lived beyond our means," he said. "The chickens are coming home to roost and this is just one in a series of countermeasures that will be required over the next decade."

The Legislature's Democratic leaders plan for the full state

Senate and Assembly to vote on the changes on Friday, the last day of the Legislature's session for this year.

Democrats have enough vote to approve the plan, which is based on proposals made by Brown last year. The Legislature's Republican minority endorsed his proposals.

The package of reforms includes provisions that will require new state and local government workers to split payments to pension accounts at least evenly with their employers.

Local governments using the state's pension fund to manage retirement accounts could impose higher payments from employees if they are unable to negotiate the 50-50 split in five years.

New employees must work two additional years to get maximum benefits after retirement. Formulas used to calculate pensions for new employees will be changed, making them less generous.

Government employers will be given more flexibility in crafting pension plans and new rules will be put in place to prevent inflated pension payments.

Additionally, savings to the state from employees paying more toward their pensions will be used to reduce its unfunded pension liability.

"Anything that reduces the state's unfunded pension obligation would be a good thing," said Steven Zimmermann, Western Region managing director at Standard & Poor's Ratings Services.

Labor groups were stunned by the deal.

"We are outraged that a Democratic governor and Democratic legislature are taking a wrecking ball to retirement security for teachers, firefighters, school employees, and police officers," said Dave Low, chairman of Californians for Retirement Security, which represents 1.5 million public employees and retirees.

Outside the state building where Brown unveiled the agreement, union activists said the deal unfairly bypassed collective bargaining rights.

“Labor did not have input on this and we are very, very concerned on what this will mean for rank and file workers,” said Barbara Maynard, also with Californians for Retirement Security.

Brown has lobbied lawmakers for a pension package since last year and has said that putting changes into law is critical for helping convince voters to support his November tax measure.

If voters reject the measure, California will need to cut more spending, including more than $5 billion from popular education programs, to keep its books balanced. The measure would increase the state sales tax to 7.5 percent from 7.25 percent for four years and raise income taxes on Californians making more than $250,000 a year for seven years.

“Pension reform is just a big issue for folks these days,” said Larry Gerston, a political scientist at San Jose State University. “This helps build his credibility.”

Voters in San Jose, California’s third largest city, approved a measure in June to clamp down on pension expenses. San Jose Mayor Chuck Reed said the deal between Brown and lawmakers is significant – but urged constitutional changes so future legislature could not undo them.

(Reporting by Alex Dobuzinskis and Troy Anderson in Los Angeles, Peter Henderson in San Francisco and Suzanne Hurt in Sacramento; writing by Jim Christie.; editing by Richard Chang.)

Body of missing Placer County man found

Just as the Placer County sheriff’s deputies ramped up today’s search efforts to find a missing Clipper Gap man, the body of Gary Howe was found by searchers within a half-mile of his home at about 9:40am.

Howe was first reported missing Sunday night by a caretaker.

A large-scale search and rescue effort began Sunday evening. By Tuesday morning, searchers from El Dorado, Nevada, and Calaveras counties had joined the effort. Fifty searchers, including those on foot, specialized dog teams, horses and 4×4 vehicles were looking for Howe when his body was located in a steep, heavily wooded area.

Howe, 71, had dementia and vision problems.

An autopsy will be performed to determine the cause of death.