

Grant to help zoo visitors learn more about science with their cell phones

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Zoo visitors may soon use their cell phones to "Call the Wild" as part of a project led by University of Florida researchers to help the public learn more about the nature of science.

Scientists at UF's Florida Museum of Natural History and Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences recently received a \$494,509 National [Science](#) Foundation grant to develop "Call the Wild," a project that will encourage zoo visitors to expand their trip and their understanding of science through the use of mobile technology applications.

"We want to creatively engage visitors in learning how science works - for example, that science knowledge continues to grow and change, and science is a collaborative and creative process," said project leader Betty Dunckel, director of the Florida Museum's Center for Informal Science Education. "We are using cell phones, which are most frequently thought of as communication tools, as learning tools."

The Association of Zoos and Aquariums and the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens are project partners that will provide a setting to test learning through mobile device use.

The team conducted surveys on how visitors typically use their cell phones at the Jacksonville Zoo and Toledo (Ohio) Zoo earlier this year. The data will help determine how audio calls, texts or smart phone applications could best be applied as educational tools and engage visitors in learning about how science and scientific processes of

discovery work.

"Call the Wild" will test different text and visuals to see if visitors enjoy using cell phones to understand the science that takes place throughout the zoo. UF researchers and staff from the Maryland-based Institute for Learning [Innovation](#) will interview Jacksonville Zoo visitors to explore how to most effectively measure their understanding of science concepts.

"Zoos are a social setting, but they're also centers of research, especially for local species," said project co-investigator Jaret Daniels, an assistant curator at the Florida Museum's McGuire Center for Lepidoptera and Biodiversity. "With 'Call the Wild,' we hope to show that everyone can enjoy the wildlife on display while appreciating the valuable research scientists conduct in the same setting."

Once mobile device-based kiosks are set up at an outdoor venue, tracking technology already built into most phones will allow investigators to record how visitors interact with the kiosks and which features are most popular. In addition, project researchers will be present at each station to observe their use and answer questions. The team expects to finish its background research and begin developing kiosks by the end of the year. The first kiosks are slated for temporary installation and monitoring at the Jacksonville Zoo early next year. New kiosks with different texts and visuals based on the visitor data collected this fall will be introduced in spring and early summer for further testing and monitoring.

Dunckel said another potential benefit to using cell phones is the ability of the Internet and smart phones to extend the [learning](#) experience beyond the visitor's physical trip to a park. In the future, the project could link venue-based activities to a Web site featuring videos, discussion boards, live feeds, picture uploads and other resources.

Visitors would be encouraged to share photos and experiences with others on the Internet using popular social networking sites such as Facebook and YouTube.

Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens Executive Director Tony Vecchio added that the project supports the zoo's existing cell phone-based education program.

The project's other co-investigators are Paul Boyle, Association of Zoos and Aquariums senior vice president for conservation and education; and Joy Jordan, IFAS associate professor of 4-H youth development.

"Many times, people think of science as an activity you do while wearing a lab coat," Jordan said. "We hope to highlight the accessibility of scientific study and science-related careers, especially with youth, by presenting nature of science concepts in a fun, informal environment."

Boyle said 175 million people visit accredited zoos and aquariums every year.

"Call the Wild" grew out of past UF-based projects, including the recently launched Project Butterfly WINGS 4-H curriculum, which showed a need to teach about the nature of science. The team hopes the initial prototypes will prove successful and encourage other zoos and aquariums to adopt the project.

Source: University of Florida ([news](#) : [web](#))

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