

Section 1.6: Free Admission Days

- ◆ **All admissions to the Zoo are free on the first Wednesday of each month. These free days are the most highly attended of all days at the Zoo, especially during the summer months. For example, on the free day held in July of 1999, the Zoo recorded 23,771 visitors, a six-fold increase compared to the total attendance of 3,875 on the following Saturday. On the July of 1999 free day we observed the animals in the Gorilla World exhibit completely surrounded with jostling adults and children two to three persons deep. Other exhibit areas, such as the Lion exhibit, were similarly overcrowded. In the Primate Discovery Center Gift Shop, the two clerks on duty were clearly overwhelmed by the large volume of visitors. By early afternoon, the trash receptacles near the Terrace Café were filled to overflowing and long lines had formed for the playfield restrooms. We observed security staff in some areas working to keep order by reminding children to stay off of railings and not to throw objects into the exhibits.**
- ◆ **We recommend that the Zoo consider proposing a modification of its free day policy during the summer months to reduce stress on the Zoo's animals and facilities. This may become particularly important while the Zoo undergoes its planned capital improvements, which may concentrate or increase free day attendance during these peak summer months beyond the Zoo's capacity.**
- ◆ **One option would be for the Zoo to eliminate free days during peak summer months and move those free days to other times of the year when attendance would be more manageable. Or, the Zoo could limit free admission to only certain hours during peak summer months. For example, the Baltimore Zoo has free admission for children only on the first Saturday of each month between the hours of 10 a.m. and noon and the Portland Zoo has free admission on the second Tuesday of each month after 5:00 p.m. Other options are to offer free admission to children only and/or to encourage schools and other groups to limit attendance on free days (local school and other organized groups are granted free admission and out-of-County groups are granted discounted admission) by offering alternative arrangements for days that are not heavily attended.**

Background

Under the Lease Agreement with the City, the Zoo is required to “retain the policy of providing free access to the Zoo on certain days.” Currently, the Zoo designates the first Wednesday of every month as a “free day” where no admission fees are charged. Monthly free days take place at institutions throughout the City, including the Academy of Sciences, Legion of Honor, Museum of Modern Art, Exploratorium, and the DeYoung Museum. Free days provide opportunities for low income families to visit the Zoo and provides wide exposure for the facility to those who might not otherwise be able or willing to pay admission.

In FY 1997-98 the S.F. Zoo had a total attendance of 826,769 visitors which generated admission fee revenues of \$2,083,983. In FY 1997-98, 422,228 out of the 826,769 total visitors (51 percent) paid admission to the Zoo. Another 192,037 visitors (23 percent) received free entry due to policies such as free days, free admission for school groups, and promotional coupons. The balance of 212,504 visitors (26 percent) received free entry as part of their paid SFZS memberships. Among visitors who paid an admission fee in 1997-98 the Zoo collected an average of \$4.94 per visitor. Averaged across all paid and free admissions (excluding member admissions), the Zoo collected \$3.39 per visitor during the same period.

In its 1997 Management/Marketing Survey, the American Zoo and Aquarium Association reported that the average percentage of visitors receiving free admission in zoos with annual operating budgets greater than \$5 million was 13 percent (not including member admissions). As noted earlier, in FY 1997-98, the percentage of free visitors to the San Francisco Zoo was 23 percent, or approximately 77 percent (10 percentage points) higher than average. This can be attributed to the Zoo’s free first Wednesdays policy, free school group admission policies, and coupons as well as a relatively low rate of attendance by paying patrons.

Attendance on Free Days

Throughout the year free days are the most highly attended days at the Zoo. Free days, particularly during the summer months, result in dramatic increases in attendance compared to regular attendance during the same time period, especially during the summer months. For example, in July of 1999, the Zoo recorded 23,771 free day visitors, a six-fold increase compared to the total attendance of 3,875 on the Saturday following the free day. The significant peaks in attendance at the Zoo on its monthly free days compared with attendance on the following day and the following Saturday are displayed in the following table:

Table 1.6.1
SF Zoo Attendance
Free Day Compared with the Weekday and Saturday Following Free Day
FY 1998-99

	<u>Free Day</u>	<u>Weekday Following Free Day</u>	<u>Saturday Following Free Day</u>
July 1998	16,756	2,537	3,339
Aug 1998	24,727	2,875	4,432
Sept 1998	8,382	1,332	4,678
Oct 1998	6,326	905	3,213
Nov 1998	3,833	825	586
Dec 1998	839	191	1,214
Jan 1999	2,638	400	2,000
Feb 1999	5,033	701	127
Mar 1999	5,283	1,069	3,131
April 1999	1,957	612	1,315
May 1999	10,257	2,750	3,925
June 1999	9,068	2,631	19,018*
Total FY 98-99	102,299	16,828	46,978
July 1999	23,771	2,623	3,875

* *Special Event*

Survey of Other Zoo and Facilities' Free Day Policies

As a part of this audit, we surveyed the free day policies of eighteen other zoos comparable to the San Francisco Zoo as well as other facilities in the Bay Area which cater to children. We found that five of the eighteen zoos and other facilities that we surveyed offered free days, as shown below:

Facilities With Free Days

Bay Area Zoos and Other Facilities

Exploratorium All admissions free first Wednesday of each month.
 Academy of Sciences All admissions free first Wednesday of each month.

Other Zoos

Baltimore Zoo Children's admissions free 10 a.m. to noon on the first Saturday each month.
 Bronx Zoo All admissions free each Wednesday.
 Oregon Zoo (Portland) All admissions free on second Tuesday of each month.

Facilities Without Free Days

Bay Area Zoos and Other Facilities

Six Flags Marine World
San Diego Zoo
Los Angeles Zoo
Bay Area Discovery Museum
Zeum
Lawrence Hall of Science
Sacramento Zoo
Oakland Zoo

Other Zoos

Zoo Atlanta
Woodland Park Zoo (Seattle)
Louisville Zoo
Pittsburgh Zoo
Dallas Zoo

Source: Individual zoo and other facility Web sites, July 1999.

Impact of Free Days

The large number of visitors on free days during the peak summer months strain the Zoo's animals, staff, and aging facilities. On the July of 1999 free day we observed the animals in the Gorilla World exhibit completely surrounded with jostling adults and children two to three persons deep. Other exhibit areas, such as the Lion exhibit, were similarly overcrowded. In the Primate Discovery Center Gift Shop, the two clerks on duty were clearly overwhelmed by the large volume of visitors. By early afternoon, the trash receptacles near the Terrace Café were filled to overflowing and long lines had formed for the playfield restrooms. Security staff were observed in some areas working to keep order by reminding children to stay off of railings and not to throw objects into the exhibits. However, our overall assessment was that the Zoo was at or close to exceeding its capacity. Such large crowds are detrimental to the animals since they increase stress on the animals as well as the likelihood that the animals will be harassed or frightened.

On free days the Zoo assigns administrative staff to the grounds to assist with operations and brings in additional security and other staff. The Zoo estimates that its operating costs increase by approximately \$3,000 on peak free days for portable toilets, additional security, garbage disposal, ground repairs, additional Zoo staff and staff overtime. These costs are in part offset by a \$1.00 per person charge for admission to the Children's Zoo. The Children's Zoo fee, which is charged only on free days, is intended to keep the number of visitors to that area of the Zoo within a manageable level.

We recommend that the Zoo consider modifying the its free entry policies during summer months to reduce stress on the Zoo's animals, staff, and facilities. This may become especially important as the Zoo undergoes its planned capital improvements which could result in portions of the Zoo being closed off and thereby concentrating visitors into a smaller area. The introduction of planned popular new exhibits will

also result in even greater free day attendance, exceeding the Zoo's current capacity.

One option is for the Zoo to modify its "free day" program by eliminating the free days during peak summer months and moving those free days to other times of the year when attendance will be more manageable. Or, the Zoo could limit free admission to only certain hours during peak summer months. For example, the Baltimore Zoo has free admission for children only on the first Saturday of each month between the hours of 10 a.m. and noon and the Portland Zoo has free admission on the second Tuesday of each month after 5:00 p.m. Other options are to offer free admission to children only and/or to encourage schools and other groups to limit attendance on free days (local school and other organized groups are granted free admission and out-of-County groups are granted discounted admission) by offering alternative arrangements for days that are not heavily attended.

CONCLUSIONS

All admissions to the Zoo are free on the first Wednesday of each month. These free days are the most highly attended of all days at the Zoo, especially during the summer months. On the free day in July of 1999, the Zoo recorded 23,771 visitors, a six-fold increase compared to the total attendance of 3,875 on the following Saturday. Our assessment is that the Zoo's facility and staff are overwhelmed on these peak summer free days. In addition, the stress caused by large crowds may be harmful to the Zoo's animals.

RECOMMENDATION

The Zoological Society should:

- 1.6.1 Modify its free entry policy during summer months to reduce stress on the Zoo's animals, staff, and facilities, particularly as the Zoo undergoes its planned capital improvements.

COSTS/BENEFITS

Modifications to the Zoo's free day policy during summer months would most likely not result in any significant fiscal impact. However, stress to the Zoo's animals, facility and staff from overcrowding may be avoided if changes are made.