

Why do zoo animals get pumpkins? For play and public relations

By Ellen Brait, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.25.16

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A Siberian tiger plays with a pumpkin at the DierenPark Amersfoort zoo in Amersfoort, Netherlands, October 30, 2014.
REMKO DE WAAL/AFP/Getty Images

That special season of autumn is with us again. Leaves are changing color, and people are putting on coats against a new chill in the air. Autumn also brings pumpkins into everyone's lives – especially the lives of animals at zoos across the U.S.

Every year, as the U.S. gears up for Halloween, numerous zoos across the country begin taking part in a longstanding tradition: They place pumpkins in their animal's living spaces. The animals can do what they please with these orange gourds. They eat, they play, they smash.

Pictures of lions, chimps, birds and more flood the internet as they interact with the pumpkins. But one central question remains. Why?

Decoration And Nutrition

Ron Evans is in charge of primates, or monkeys and apes, at the Cincinnati Zoo and Botanical Gardens. He said the gourds are more than just decorative and that there is “nutritional value to a pumpkin.” Some zoo workers will include treats inside the pumpkins for animals to discover. This year, Evans said his staff put sugar-free jello in the pumpkins. They made it look “like brains, kind of traditional Halloween stuff,” he said.

Some animals that have no interest in eating a pumpkin will receive one anyway. At some zoos, visitors will find birds with pumpkins, polar bears with pumpkins, owls with pumpkins. Even snakes may get them. At the Cincinnati Zoo, Evans says, staff members let the animals decide what to do with the gourds.

Smaller animals might “just use them more for going into and hanging out,” he said. Zoo workers sometimes carve out the pumpkins for birds to make them hollow. This provides them with a place to explore and “something exciting for them in the exhibit.” Elephants can crush them with their feet. Polar bears can take them underwater, and then perhaps have them for a snack.

Encouraging Natural Behavior

Gigi Allianic works for the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, Washington. She said pumpkins are provided in order “to promote natural animal behavior and keep animals mentally stimulated.

The Detroit Zoo says it provides its animals with pumpkins “as part of its comprehensive program of ensuring environments for animals that are ever-changing and appropriately complex”. Their employees hide food items to encourage natural behaviors animals would do in the wild, according to a press release. It's good for the animals to practice searching for food or hunting for prey.

The purpose behind the pumpkins doesn't end there, though. They are not just for the animals benefit but are also meant to entertain guests.

“It's just one of many ways that we try and engage our guests and capture their imagination,” Evans said.

Explaining Conservation Efforts

Zoo, of course, rhymes with “boo”, and the zoos take full advantage of other plays on words for the Halloween season. The Cincinnati Zoo has its annual HallZooween, the Detroit Zoo holds a yearly Smashing Pumpkins event and the Woodland Zoo puts on a Pumpkin Bash.

According to Evans, zoos have been giving animals pumpkins “since the existence of zoos”. But it wasn’t until about 25 years ago that the Cincinnati Zoo started involving the public. It’s also the perfect opportunity to get their message out about other problems animals face. They want to remind people about their conservation efforts for those animals they house that are endangered. Animal conservation is about protecting animal species in the wild which may be in danger of dying out.

“It gives us the opportunity to talk about conservation issues or whatever else we want to tag on to it when people are there,” he said.