

What to do with a 20-foot python? Coronavirus puts the squeeze on unusual museum

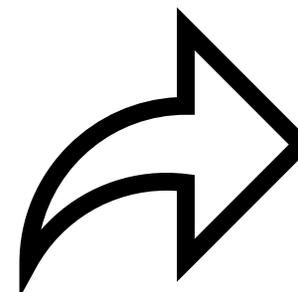
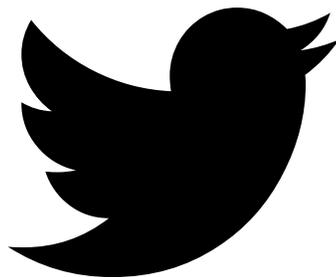
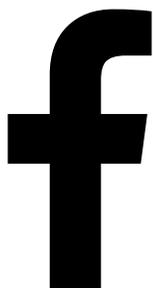


Susan Nowicke, president of EcoVivarium, with a green iguana named Chance. (Don Boomer)

EcoVivarium was planning to move its 250 reptiles and amphibians into bigger quarters when the coronavirus hit. What now?

By JOHN WILKENS

MAY 29, 2020 6 AM



This was supposed to be a time of dreams coming true at the EcoVivarium, a living museum in Escondido that's home to 250 snakes, lizards, turtles, crocodiles, frogs and spiders.

For a decade, museum President Susan Nowicke and her small staff did hands-on animal presentations at schools and fairs and hosted tours, birthday parties and other events at the museum to spark "awareness, understanding and respect" for reptiles and amphibians that are routinely feared and reviled.

They'd been successful enough to outgrow their 1,800 square-foot storefront on a downtown side street and eye a lease-purchase agreement for a 10,000 square-foot building on Grand Avenue, which would enable them to provide more space for the animals and offer more workshops and labs.

Earlier this year, they gave notice to the landlord that the nonprofit museum would leave its current space when the lease expired at the end of May. "The future looked so bright," Nowicke said.

Then the novel coronavirus arrived, evaporating the museum's revenue stream. In a period of two weeks, they lost bookings for 280 presentations, 10 assemblies and 15 birthday parties. They had to shutter the museum as a nonessential business.

"All that money, gone," Nowicke said.

The animals, meanwhile, still have to be fed. So funds that had been set aside for the move went instead to food and other supplies, she said, and the deal for the new building fell through because they could no longer afford to rent it.

Cost is an issue in the existing storefront, too, she said, and with the five-year lease expiring Sunday, they are scrambling to figure out what to do with Bunny, a 20-foot python, Ana, a 100-pound anaconda, Mac, an 8-foot monitor lizard, and all the others — glass case after glass case of critters that slither and crawl and creep.

Nowicke said she's in negotiations with another building owner downtown on a lease that would allow the museum to defer rent payments until it gets back on its feet. As a fallback, she said, there's a small warehouse they might be able to use temporarily to house the animals while they continue to hunt for new museum space.

Or....

"When I started all this, I had the animals at home, about 90 of them," Nowicke said. "I would be hard-pressed to be able to do that now, but if that's what it comes down to, that's what will have to happen."

She sighed.

"When you're dealing with animals," she said, "there's never a dull moment."

Into their world

This started with earthworms.

As child, Nowicke caught them outside her home and dumped them on the kitchen table to watch them wiggle. Before too long she discovered something that liked to eat worms: frogs.

“And I was on my way,” she said.

She home-schooled a daughter with special needs who seemed to do better at science and other subjects if there was an animal involved. She got involved with and helped run the San Diego Herpetological Society, founded in 1978 to support collectors and breeders and educate the public about reptiles and amphibians.

In 2009, she created EcoVivarium and started taking animals into schools for presentations. The money she made kept the animals fed and allowed her to expand her collection. Six years later, she opened the living museum and educational center on Juniper Street.

Many of the animals there are “rescues,” donated by people who misunderstood what they were getting into when they bought them as pets. Some were discovered along the side of a road, or confiscated by authorities for health or legal reasons. Many are rare or endangered.

One of the turtles got orphaned after it upset its owner by eating \$500 worth of koi babies in a pond. A green iguana was donated by a young man who found it in his grandmother’s garden as a boy, raised it through childhood, and then had to give it up when he went off to college.

In the museum, volunteers built display cases with windows recycled from a housing project. They were placed along a snake-like path to give visitors a sense of different habitats – desert, grassland, swamp.

One large enclosure had a glass dome in the middle of the floor where visitors could stick their heads up for a closer look. There was a tree near one door with shed snake skins dangling from the branches.

But the main attraction was the chance to touch and hold the animals. At birthday parties, the guest of honor sometimes got to walk Mac the monitor lizard around on a leash.

The museum's motto is "Step into their world," and Nowicke said visitors often leave with a greater understanding of the cultural, historical and ecological significance of the creatures.

And those who left often told their friends. That meant more visitors, more school assemblies, more presentations at fairs and festivals. And big plans for the future.

"Then the coronavirus just knocked the wind out of our sails," Nowicke said.

COVID behavior

Like countless other institutions, the museum has moved some of its offerings online. There are bi-weekly animal encounters on [Facebook](#), "Virtual Education Programs" on Zoom. Under the state's guidelines, indoor museums have to wait until Stage 3 to reopen; San Diego County is now in Stage 2.

Nowicke said they're using the downtime to assess their organizational structure and make improvements in how they'll operate moving forward.

But the coronavirus has also brought them additional animals to care for. Some people who have lost their jobs can no longer afford exotic pets and are relinquishing them.

"In these troubling times, we don't want to turn people away," she said.

Several of the veteran "animal ambassadors" at the museum are showing signs of stress from the decreased interactions with humans. They're acting out -- crushing overhead lights, splashing water from tanks, biting.

"It's COVID behavior," Nowicke said.

Early on, she furloughed her handful of staff members, but they come to work anyway. Some have dipped into their wallets to help pay for food.

"I'm optimistic we'll get this all worked out and get back to letting people see these remarkable animals," Nowicke said.

Then she added a comment that feels universal these days: "Right now, we're under the gun."