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Data Analysis and Summary Report

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Photo Credit: WQAD, 2018

*“Working today to assure a better tomorrow for all living things.”*

~ Niabi Mission Statement

The Niabi Zoo understands that improvement is an ongoing process and that effort must be given today in order to create a more fulfilling future for the world. The Niabi Zoo has therefore partnered with Western Illinois University to complete an evaluative study of visitor engagement with the recognition that listening and responding to visitor needs is an important part of the larger role Niabi plays in the community as environmental stewards and entertaining educators.

The study consists of a focus group transcription analyzed and interpreted for qualitative data which provides insight into visitor perceptions of the zoo and its services. Grouping the data into concentrated categories focuses in on overarching themes of visitor interests, namely communication and accessibility.

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This report breaks down each category of coding in communication and accessibility to highlight the most salient issues emerging from the data. Visitor engagement, marketing, pricing, and the physical use of the Niabi are interpreted along with supporting quotes from focus group participants.

Recommendations are provided for each category and are meant to address the most evident issues found during data analysis while capitalizing on the positive perceptions visitors have of Niabi.

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## Evaluative Study



Photo Credit: Niabi Zoo, 2019

*“I think the education department has gained a lot in the last couple of years and they are getting more forward in that message.”*

~ Focus Group Participant

Visitor studies are a cornerstone of best practices that use research and engagement methods to better understand visitor motives, expectations, and desires. This study was designed and implemented by a selection of Western Illinois University professionals and graduate students who worked in conjunction with the Niabi Zoo. The purpose of the study was to find what motivations drive people to come to the Niabi and what things might extend their stay at the zoo.

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## Focus Group

- ❖ 2 Hours
- ❖ 5 Member Participants
- ❖ 2 WIU Evaluators
- ❖ Open-Ended Questions & Activities

The focus group took place onsite at the Niabi in the fall of 2018. The process took a total of two hours and was recorded for data collection. The evaluation group consisted of five member participants and two Western Illinois University evaluators.

A randomized selection of Niabi members were sent an email inquiring about interest in the focus group and participants were chosen from the respondents. The small sampling did well to cover varying types of visitors that were representative of regular zoo users. Ages ranged from approximately 70 years of age to early thirties. Family focused individuals as well as single person households were represented in the group. The majority of people were women, but there was one male participant. Other demographics such as ethnicity or annual income were not revealed nor were they relevant to this part of the qualitative data analysis.

Focus groups are semi-structured interviews used to generate a group dynamic that encourages in-depth conversation, (Rubenstein, 1989). The main topics of exploration in this focus group were what encourages visitation and what would make people stay longer. The questions posed, however, were open-ended and exploratory rather than closed and direct which let participants voice what they personally found important when considering the zoo.

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## Data Analysis

- ❖ Data Collection
- ❖ Focus Group Transcription
- ❖ Qualitative Data Examination
- ❖ Coded for Themes

Data was collected during the focus group by creating an audio recording of the group's discussion. The recording was later transcribed using the computer coding program NVivo which provides many tools for the complete analysis of qualitative data. The transcript was then reviewed and coded for overarching themes found in the discussion.

Coding is meant to provide a summarized view of the most significant aspects when used in qualitative evaluations, (Saldaña, 2016). The data is reviewed for significant statements that are then selected from the data and grouped together based on similar concepts.

Central elements are revealed through data arrangements which provide foundational themes that help summarize data findings. This inductive reasoning allows the data analyst to find the group's most salient issues and group excerpts from the transcript to support the findings (Diamond, Horn, & Uttal, 2016).

Please refer to Appendix A for the coded list of data points and their descriptions.

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## Findings



Photo Credit: Niabi Zoo, 2019

*“It’s just this connection of when you get to know an animal then you care for it. My kids grew up that way and then wanted to learn more about them because of the zoo.”*

~ Focus Group Participant

The focus group data indicates that many people value Niabi as a unique and important asset of the Quad Cities community that helps set the area apart. The study found various reasons behind visitor turnout. Clubs, programs, and animal watching were all indicated as motivators behind a trip to the zoo. Many participants showed a connection to positive family experiences, but even those who came alone seemed to enjoy the sights of families having fun.

Beyond visitor motivation, the group discussed experiences at the zoo itself and shared views on what they in the end found important. Data analysis of the focus group found that communication and accessibility are two areas that greatly influence how visitors perceive and experience the Niabi Zoo. This study aims to



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provide insight to the Niabi on what areas of development might be used to increase turnout and prolong guest visits.

## **Communication**

- ❖ Visitor Engagement
- ❖ Marketing

Communication was a major theme found among focus group participant remarks. Communication is defined in the study's coding as how the Niabi conveys their mission, position, and services to visitors and the surrounding community. Two categories of importance were developed using the data that helped indicate the significance of communication, visitor engagement and marketing.

### Visitor Engagement

*“The status of the animal (is) important, but I would like it to go further and say the status of the species and what it is. I would like it to go further and connect with people as far as what is their status due to if they're endangered. Is it because of loss of habitat? And then that connection of what you can do in your own home, that we can all do something.”*

~ Focus Group Participant

Visitor engagement was the highest coded category from the focus group analysis. Participants were very vocal about what types of activities appealed to them and

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what they expect from a zoo like Niabi. Education centered on conservation and environmentalism was paramount in the focus group discussion.

Every participant commented on the importance of zoos communicating their purpose as environmental stewards to their visitors. A desire for more signage devoted to the conservation status of animals and their environment was documented often as well as a concern for what to do for those who are not engaged through reading.

One participant pointed out that there are kids and adults alike who do not care to stand in one spot and read a wordy sign. Interactive components for exhibits were a popular idea with how to engage people of different interest levels.

It was clear from the data that visitor engagement involving the animals themselves is impactful and exciting. Each participant described having at least one deeply absorbing experience centered on an animal whether it was through observation or interaction. One mother of young children described a thrilling moment when a zebra brayed at her son by saying,

*“We were in the Savannah..we escaped with that zebra and my son had a connection with that animal.”*

~ Focus Group Participant

Meaningful experiences were found to have connections to the animals themselves through interaction and educational opportunities. A strong desire for various educational programming was found in participants’ responses whether it was for young children or older adults, families or individuals.

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## Marketing

*“It’s like that message just never gets out to the community (of) what’s going on. We listen to WQPT a lot and every Thursday this lady comes on, she tells you all the things going on in the community and the programs are never on there.”*

~ Focus Group Participant

Data from the focus group indicates that there is a disconnect between Niabi and the surrounding community when it comes to promotion of programs and services. One to two people out of the five focus group members were routinely surprised to hear things offered at the Niabi when the subjects came up organically during the conversation. One participant who had moved to the Quad Cities area in the last ten years seemed particularly unaware of services that could be of benefit to themselves and their family.

Many different modes of communication were discussed leading to the perception that visitors may be invested in one or two forms of information delivery and miss important messages if not engaged through that particular modality. A troubling aspect of this data set is that participants in the focus group were also members of Niabi, meaning that if some were unaware of special programs or services then the chances of regular community members knowing about them could be minimal.

One participant comment revealed that when bringing up the zoo to an acquaintance that had lived in the area for a year that person mispronounced the zoo’s name, suggesting that there the zoo lacks a strong community presence for newcomers or people who have not had previous interactions with the Niabi.

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Micro-targeted marketing works well for people already associated with the zoo; however, there are many others in the community who are unaware of the exciting opportunities found at Niabi. When able to connect with an audience, however, data suggests that the impression is effective and positive.

Comments from the focus group suggest that Niabi's social media presence is strong and informative. One participant who was particularly fond of the way Niabi reaches out to the public said,

*“Get on Facebook, Niabi has a good Facebook page!”*

A look at Niabi's website provides a professional looking and informative view on the many things that the zoo offers. Anyone who seeks the Niabi out will find a lot on what services the zoo provides, the goal should be getting the same information out to people unaffiliated with the zoo.

## **Accessibility**

- ❖ Pricing
- ❖ Physical Use of Grounds

Accessibility was another major theme drawn from focus group participant responses. Accessibility is defined in the study's coding as a visitor's sense that the zoo was made for people like them and their loved ones; i.e., the ease of use navigating personal limitations when visiting the zoo. Two categories of importance were revealed through analysis of the focus group's qualitative data, pricing and physical use of the Niabi grounds.

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## Pricing

*“Money is allocated in so many other ways and this truly is a bargain, especially if you’re a member..come every day and parking’s included. You can’t go wrong with that.”*

~ Focus Group Participant

Focus group data indicates that those who have a membership to the zoo are very satisfied with the value it holds. Statements from multiple participants directly relate to what a deal membership is for a family by saying that visiting the zoo is not as big of an issue after making that initial purchase. Free parking and member events were discussed as incentives to obtaining a membership.

The price for activities found at the zoo such as the train, carrousel, and animal interaction were not as well regarded as the deal people get with becoming a member. Focus group data correlates visitor engagement and the pricing, many things that could lead to positive impactful moments for visitors can also price those activities out of reach for some visitors. Animal feedings and educational programs were directly mentioned as activities that people would like to do, but often cannot afford. The train was a popular subject in the focus group, however, for affordable activities that leave a positive impression.

The train was brought up so often in the focus group that it could have been in a category all to itself in analysis. One participant in particular said that their children are so young the train is often the motivation for coming out to the zoo. The train was discussed as being very popular for families with children. A comment directly correlated use of the train to length of visit stating that if there

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were a deal on the tickets or availability the participant would stay longer at the zoo.

Pricing was the only area of data where participants directly associated the cost of services to the length of zoo visits. The freedom to do things like bring in large wagons with food was seen as major factors of affordability.

*“You can bring food in here and I think that's a big plus. I'd really hate to have them get rid of that, because there are many families and schools that bring their picnic lunch and they'll spend a big hunk of the day. There will be families that if they can't bring their own food, they may not come and they're certainly not going to stay all day.”*

~ Focus Group Participant

Focus group data suggests that visitors to the zoo often negotiate affordability issues when planning their stay. Many of the allowances made by the Niabi in regards to affordable access, like being able to bring in food, are incentives for people to not just visit, but to stay for the day. The value of a membership is so positively perceived by participants that it can encourage repeat visits; however, communication of that value may be lost when visitors are priced out of the more engaging activities at the zoo.

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## Physical Use of Grounds

*“My step-mom would never be comfortable doing the whole zoo walking and she doesn't have to have a wheelchair or a scooter to get around typically in her daily life, but here she would. So I think that's a plus to be able to use the (electric wheelchairs) and make sure the community knows that so that everyone can say hey grandma can go there or I'm not feeling well today, but I can still go to the zoo.”*

~ Focus Group Participant

The physical use of the zoo came up during the focus group discussion. The Niabi has done well to make areas accessible for those with limited mobility; the carousel can accommodate people with wheelchairs, large viewing areas for animals allow equal viewing space for all persons, and the majority of pathways are now wide enough to fit two ambulatory aids side by side. Focus group data suggests that even with all of the advancements made to ease the use of the zoo grounds, visitor can still find it difficult to enjoy the entirety of Niabi because of the walking distance and occasional hilly terrain.

One focus group participant regretted that during chemo treatments they could not enjoy their visit to the zoo because of the overwhelming size. While they realized that their condition was more unique, they equated the experience to elderly people who have mobility issues and could understand why some people do not even bother coming out when faced with those challenges.

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Comments selected from the focus group also suggest that some people do not know that mobility aids are available at the zoo. This section's opening comment was from a participant who had not realized that wheelchairs were available which would greatly impact what they could do and who could come with when visiting the zoo.

*“We only have one members night now, they used to have four, it was every Thursday in July. I don't know why they stopped doing that, but yeah and they used to. It's great because the animals are out, it's more active.”*

~ Focus Group Participant

Aside from mobility issues, participants indicated that another issue with the use of the zoo itself is the early closing time. Data from the focus group suggests an interest in visiting the zoo in the evenings during the summer when the day is not so hot and the animals are more active. One participant suggested that the early closing did not allow them to come with their kids after work and that a later closing time would let them visit the zoo during the week.





Photo Credit: Jennifer Swofford, 2019

## Recommendations

Recommendations for the Niabi are based on focus group data and seek to address issues brought up during the conversation as well as emphasize positive visitor perspectives.

### Visitor Engagement

Additional and more prominent signage detailing conservation efforts and species habitat conditions are suggested in order to satisfy visitors' educational desires and support the mission of Niabi Zoo.

Incorporation of exhibit interactives is recommended in order to engage visitors of all ages and skill levels; both digital and hands-on are supported by focus group data.

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## Marketing

Niabi should seek to connect more with the Quad Cities community in broader ways. More consistent marketing opportunities through local radio stations, T.V. stations, and community flyers are suggested in order for the zoo to communicate its presence.

Niabi's digital features like its webpage and Facebook page are perceived positively; therefore no additional recommendations are suggested for Niabi's digital presence.

## Pricing

The value of a membership can encourage more visits to the zoo and should be used to encourage more people to sign up. Allowing families to use their admission as a down payment on a membership can create an incentive for repeat visits because after a couple times their membership is paid for and they can return whenever they would like regardless of admission price. An added benefit of this recommendation is that names and emails can be collected in order to hold a down payment on membership, increasing the marketing potential through mailing lists.

It is recommended that Niabi continue to allow visitors to bring in food and drink to the zoo as it can extend the stay of those who want to visit for an extended period of time; this may also encourage spending on other more engaging activities with the money saved on food.

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## Physical Use of Grounds

It is recommended that the train is incorporated into mobility support around the zoo by creating a stop near the far end of the zoo in order to allow people on and off the train. Wristbands would be sold at a higher price for visitors to gain access to the train throughout the day. This could also cause the added benefit of families extending their stay because of the all-day train use and prompt them to purchase the passes even at a higher price.

It is also suggested that Niabi extends park hours during the summer for at least one night a week in order to capitalize on visitor availability and pleasant weather. Additional programming could accompany the later hours and focus on how animals act differently throughout the day.

## Further Evaluation

The qualitative data analysis of the focus group includes additional coding categories for Comparative Zoos and Animals for potential future evaluative efforts. Comparative Zoos provides names of regional zoos that participants mentioned during the focus group and how they see the Niabi comparatively. The Animals category provides a list of animals that participants became excited about during the focus group discussion. Examination into both categories could lead to additional insight into visitor interests.



Photo Credit: Jennifer Swofford, 2019

Niabi understands that improvement is an ongoing process and that work must be done today in order to create a more fulfilling future for tomorrow. The Niabi Zoo and Western Illinois University have completed this evaluative study of visitor engagement in order to fulfil the zoo's promise of actively working for a better tomorrow.

The study shows that people are pleased with the direction of the zoo and if anything, they want to be more connected to the zoo's purpose. A strong desire to understand more about the animals, conservation, and the zoo means that there is a strong desire to connect; visitor's want to see more, know more, and hear more about the Niabi and its services.

Niabi's commitment to its visitors and community is reflected in the positive way the zoo listens and responds to peoples' needs. The reputation garnered as being one of the area's best in environmental stewardship and entertaining education means that Niabi has earned a special place in the hearts of the community and will continue to do so with their outstanding care and responsiveness.

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## **References**

- Diamond, J., Horn, M., & Uttal, D. H. (2016). *Practical evaluation guide: Tools for museums and other informal educational settings* (3rd ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Rubenstein, R. (1989). Chapter 19: The Use of Focus Groups in Audience Research. *Visitor Studies*, 1(1), 180-188.
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.

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## **Appendix A: Coding List & Definitions**

### Nodes

	Name	Files	References
[-]	Accessibility	1	24
+	Physical Use of Grounds	1	7
	Pricing	1	17
	Animals	1	10
[-]	Communication	1	91
+	Marketing	1	10
+	Visitor Engagement	1	81
	Comparative Zoos	1	8

### Code Definitions

Accessibility - A visitor's sense that the Niabi was made for people like them and their loved ones.

Physical Use of Grounds – The ease of use visitors have while at the Niabi.

Pricing – The perceived monetary value of Niabi admission, programs, and services.

Animals – Zoo animals that excite interest in the focus group participants.

Communication – How the Niabi conveys their mission, position, and services to visitors and the surrounding community.

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Marketing – Promotion of the Niabi and its services to the surrounding community.

Visitor Engagement – The ability to optimize visitor experiences through Niabi's context and content.

Comparative Zoos – Regional zoos that focus group participants mentioned comparative to the Niabi and its services.