

# Puppets and Programs

By Roxanne Barbeau, Park Ranger  
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Yeah, it's a cliché, but there's no denying that a picture-or an object- is worth a thousand words. Especially if it's an object that can be clutched, hugged, petted, or drooled on. Yes, we're going to be talking about children's programs here (although now that I think of it, I've had some adult ones that went that way) and a fabulous, versatile, ancient prop-puppets.



As entertaining as the mental image of children picking up and comparing differences in live wild animals is, you just know some whiny pro animal/pro child group is going to complain. The solution? Puppets! Why, there's no risk of injury (to the child, the puppet could be another story), no "accidents", and no need to feed as when using live animals in a program. And these are not your parents' sock bodied, button eyed creatures of yore, either. If you're looking for puppets for a children's nature oriented program today, you can find remarkably lifelike ones that are durable and can be literally operated by a toddler. Using puppets of this type, I've had young program attendees become experts in insect anatomy and learn the difference between grasshoppers and praying mantises for "Children's Bug Safari", discover the differences in dinosaur sizes and types in our "Dinosaur Stomp" program, display some of the creatures of the Lewis and Clark saga (everything from mosquitoes to woolly mammoths) for various L&C programs, and had my face chewed off –my arm too, I think-by an enraged chipmunk puppet in a Girl Scout camp "why we don't feed wild animals" demonstration. And did I mention our large inflatable Tyrannosaurus Rex and Emperor Penguin puppets gallantly playing "victim" when our Junior Rangers needed to practice first aid techniques?

"Gee, Roxanne", you say, "puppets do make great props, but you haven't mentioned 'c'mon kids, let's put on a show in the barn!'" And I won't-first, because I don't have a barn. And secondly, unless you are a veteran puppeteer or are fortunate enough to have the services of a professional troupe (and we do have them in New England) it's unlikely that your show will have much of a genuine, lasting learning experience. Why? First, remember that your puppet is a clever toy. Even as just a prop it's distracting to young audiences who want to see how it works, touch it, etc. Second, it's difficult to turn this toy into an interesting character, deal with potential technical difficulties, and stay focused on your story, all at the same time. Many professional puppeteers have college degrees in their craft, and spend years of practice trying to convince their

audiences that they're looking at a singing frog or a backwards talking alien, not a piece of cloth and foam rubber.

So, after years of using puppets in Corps programs, a little puppet advice-

1. Limit puppets to cameos in programs. If you want to use them as distinctive characters, think "open mike night" as opposed to "Broadway play."
2. Consider the age of your audience in determining how much and what type of puppets you'll be using, but.....
3. ....STAY AWAY FROM MARIONETTES- and high tech, electronically operated puppets. Unless they're making brief appearances and you're very comfortable with the technology, the simpler the puppet, the better. Kids seem to be just as enamored with the old fashioned hand powered kind.
4. Puppets are expensive celebrities (good ones generally start in the \$20-25 range) and children can be crazed fans. Unless the children are permitted to touch and handle them, consider the same kind of security team you'd have for a co-worker in costume.
5. And speaking of puppet prices and where to acquire them, first decide what type or types of puppets you'd like to work with, then do some comparison shopping. Again, a good quality durable puppet is not cheap, so keep an eye out for sales. Look in better quality toy stores, gift shops, and children's stores. And you can now order directly from many puppet manufacturers online, or at least see what their wares are like. A couple of sites worth taking a look at: <http://www.folkmanis.com/> (Click on the puppet index link here to see their many realistic wild animal puppets. They also have nice prehistoric critter puppets.) <http://www.puppetsuperstore.com/> (just about any kind of puppet you could want here!)



We work largely with Folkmanis products here, and have been very happy with them. However, I certainly don't practice puppet prejudice. I have tried different puppet types as well, and would love to hear from others about their own puppet programs and the types of puppets they use, and can be reached at

[roxanne.p.barbeau@usace.army.mil](mailto:roxanne.p.barbeau@usace.army.mil)

In the meantime, if you're not using puppets in your programs, consider

giving them a try. Just remember to play nice and share them with the kids.