

The First International Congress on Zookeeping

Geoff Underwood*

The genesis of the first "International Congress on Zookeeping" occurred at a meeting of individuals at the AAZK conference, held in Columbus, (Ohio, U.S.A.) in 2000. At the time of our first meeting, little did we appreciate the difficulties that were to lie ahead of us, nor the personal journey that each of us from the organising committee were about to embark on.

Representatives at this meeting were from the seven major professional Associations for Zoo Keeping; the American Association of Zoo Keepers (AAZK), Association of British Wild Animal Keepers (ABWAK), Australasian Society of Zoo Keeping (ASZK), Asociación Ibérica de Cuidadores de Animales Salvajes (AICAS), Association Francophone des Soigneurs Animaliers (ASFA), Berufsverband der Zootierpfleger (BdZ) and Foundation Harpij (De Harpij). As a result of this meeting, it was believed that a common conference for Zoo Keepers from around the world would not only improve the levels of communication between Keepers from different regions, but also serve as a basis for supporting the development of Zoo Keeping as a profession in regions where professional Zoo Keeping Associations did not currently exist.

The primary objectives for holding a conference for Zoo Keepers at an international level was to promote the development and application of professional animal welfare and husbandry techniques amongst Zoo Keepers, which would in turn benefit the wild animals under their care, and contribute to the conservation of wildlife.

Whilst our objectives were clear, the practicalities of what we were about to undertake were (at times) almost overwhelming. Whilst as a group we had the support of our respective Associations there was no funding allotted to this project, and we were faced with holding a major international conference, but with no money to do it with. Thankfully the group had enough confidence in what we were trying to achieve, that planning for the event proceeded and the required funds were found along the way. During the course of planning this event, the group also had to come to appreciate the cultural and social differences that existed between the members of the group. Added to all of this, were the personal tragedies that many members of the group experienced in their own personal lives, with these events instead serving to bring the group closer together and even more determined.

Eventually, all of the planning and work of this group paid off, and the first International Congress on Zookeeping was held at Avifauna in the Netherlands between the 4th and the 7th October 2003. Over 300 Keepers from 27 different countries attended the conference and the variety of workshops, paper presentations and other developmental opportunities which were included in the programme. In addition, the tours to a number of zoological facilities within the region allowed everybody to view "behind the scenes" and experience some of the

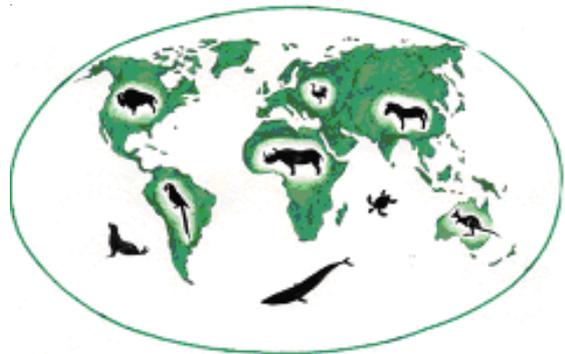
most modern practices in animal husbandry, exhibit design, and visitor and education facilities.

Whilst a concern of the organisers of this event was "how would the 300 Keepers from different cultural and social backgrounds intermingle and develop constructive networks in the space of only a few days?", it soon became apparent that this was not going to be an issue. From the "opening night" on the first day, it was very gratifying to see people that had never met before, and that came from differing social, political and cultural backgrounds, interacting, networking and discussing their roles as Zoo Keepers in such a constructive and positive way.

At the close of the conference program, all those that had participated agreed that the event had been one of the most "life changing and constructive professional events" that they had ever attended. The experiences and knowledge of participants prior to the conference ranged from those that were studying to become a Zoo Keeper to those that had decades of experience in this profession, but all had gained a new understanding, knowledge and appreciation of their role and responsibilities as Zoo Keepers during the course of the event.

As a result of the overwhelmingly positive reaction and response to this conference, it was decided to hold an "International Congress on Zookeeping" (ICZ) every three years. The next ICZ is due to be held from the 7th to the 11th May 2006, on the Gold Coast (Queensland, Australia). One of the objectives of the second ICZ is to expand the diversity of those that can attend this conference, and I would encourage all that work in the field of zoo husbandry to seriously consider attending this event.

Should you have any questions or suggestions or comments, please feel free to contact me directly at tidbinbilla_n_r@bigpond.com and I will endeavour to assist you in any way I can.



* International Liaison Officer, ASZK/ Chairperson, ICZ, [<tidbinbilla_n_r@bigpond.com>](mailto:tidbinbilla_n_r@bigpond.com)