



## **ZOOKEEPING: an article getting started as a keeper useful to any zoo director and other staff**



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## GETTING STARTED AS A KEEPER

The keeper's job is considered an entry-level position. The requirements and expectations for this position may differ between the public and private sector zoos, yet these differences, in historical perspective, appear rather insignificant.

The basic requirements and work processes for a keeper, which will be reviewed in depth in this book, have remained largely the same throughout the years. In the beginning, after various selection protocols ranging from a competitive civil service examination to a more informal job interview, a fortunate applicant arrives at a new workplace, in most cases with a fresh-minted college degree. It might be noted at this point that realistically, four years of higher education have hardly been adequate to fully prepare a person for the zoo and aquarium profession, either technically or mentally. It is commendable to be ambitious and upwardly mobile, but it must be realized that a keeper's real education is beyond the scope of university curricula, and beyond the realm of immediate on-the-job training; *it begins on the first day of work, and continues throughout the keeper's career.*

Also, an inner and personal transformation is vital for a keeper to grow and develop as a professional. Such a transformation takes a couple of directions. First, from childhood our perception of an animal has been mostly nurtured by household pets such as dogs, which have been domesticated for millennia to serve our needs. By contrast, wild animals, which include a vast array of different species, have evolved and survived over millions of years in nature's harsh environments. *In the mind of the new keeper, a transformation must occur in understanding that the zoo animal is not a pet but a potentially dangerous wild animal.* (There are certain things that only experience can teach, often the hard way). Also, in a public zoo and aquarium the animal belongs to the owner institution or the taxpayers, and it should be cared for in accordance with the prescribed protocol, not the keeper's personal methods.

This leads to another fundamental area that requires a transformation from existing within a family, college campus, or other entity to that of a structured zoo or aquarium work place. In this system, higher education is no automatic pass for promotion or entitlement for professionalism. There is a linear chain of command that places a keeper at the organization's entry level. As an employee, the keeper is required to adhere to established policies and procedures at every step of work life, and bureaucratic hurdles and politics, internal and external, are not uncommon.

It takes time to build up credentials and seniority, and promotional opportunities for upper-level positions, such as curatorship, are by no means abundant in most places. In short, patience is a virtue, and the learning curve is steep. What is needed is to anchor down instead of grappling for instant gratification; to make a commitment for two to three years and dig in intellectually beneath the surface of the everyday

work routine, be it animal care or other activities. Experienced and seasoned keepers can tell you that the sense of fulfillment and rewards will come, albeit slowly. Encouragingly, the image of keepers has gone through considerable change over the decades. However, the process of change has represented a gradual path.

## THE CHANGING IMAGE OF ZOOKEEPERS A GRADUAL PROCESS OF METAMORPHOSIS

In European zoos, the position of keeper belongs to the blue-collar workforce. For example, "zookeepers in Germany are rarely college or even Gymnasium in British terms, 'A- level graduates'; most have only a Realschule education ending in the equivalent of O-levels" (Reichenbach 2003, 495). A level graduates in Britain are roughly equivalent to German pupils who have 13 years of school and the right to attend a German university; O-level graduates have the equivalent 9 or 10 years of school and are not qualified to attend university (Reichenbach pers. comm. 2004).

In the United States only a few decades ago, the typical image of zookeepers was of a mostly Caucasian, blue-collar workforce: middle-aged municipal worker type males with no college education. Some keepers were functionally illiterate even in the 1970s. The American keeper was soon to experience a metamorphosis of sorts. The shift began under the surface in the 1960s, depending on the region and individual institutional cultures. This was also the time when women began to join the zookeeping workforce. To cite an example, Pat Sass began her zoo career in June 1961 as a volunteer in the Lincoln Park Zoo children's zoo in Chicago. She was hired as a part time zoo leader in the following year; at that time women were not allowed to become keepers, and the zoo leader was a position for women working in the children's zoo only. In 1965 she became a full-time employee in the children's zoo, paid less money than male employees. In 1972 women were finally allowed to take the civil service exam for the position of animal keeper, and Sass became one of the first female animal keepers at Lincoln Park Zoo (Anon. 1999, 382). Notice that she started in the children's zoo, not in the main part of the zoo where the "ABC animals" such as elephants, big felids, bears, and great apes were housed; only the infants of great apes and big felids were kept in the children's zoo. (Women are no longer a rarity in the zookeeping workforce, but some ethnic groups are still poorly represented in the zoo world, including at the keeper rank).

In 1985 the Professional Standards Committee of the American Association of Zoo Keepers (AAZK) made a survey of keeper hiring criteria in zoos after making 282 contacts. Of these, 169 or 60 per cent of employers responded (McCoy 1985). The result shows varying requirements in many categories, such as ability to follow written and oral directions, physical strength and stamina, ability to operate mechanical and power equipment, and willingness to accept regular weekend, holiday, and after-hours

assignments. It is interesting to note in this report that for all job titles in the zookeeping workforce (e.g., assistant, trainee, keeper I, and keeper II), 107 zoos required a high school diploma while 63 required either a two- year or a four- year college degree. Thus, it appears that by the mid-1980s in many zoos in the United States, higher education was becoming a job requirement for keepers.

Today, more than half of keeper job applications received by zoos are from young persons with college educations. An experience at the Staten Island Zoo in New York reflected this trend. Between January 2004 and June 2005 a total of 184 resumes were received for keeper positions. Of these, 32 (or 17%) were from males and 152 (83%) were from females (the remaining two resumes had no clear indications of gender, but appeared to be from one of each).

Nine of the applications were from foreign countries (Australia, Canada, Mexico, Peru, and Spain). As for the applicants' educational back-grounds, 645 had at least a two-year degree. One foreign applicant had a veterinary degree; three (one from a foreign country) had PhDs; 11 had Master's degrees. Seventy-nine (excluding those with advanced degrees), or 43% of all applicants, had four-year degrees while 23 had two-year degrees. Of those who lacked four-year degrees, 59 said they expected to receive one within a year.

One of the reasons for this increasingly educated applicant pool, aside from the fact that zoos appear to be a promising field, is simply that there are so many college graduates in the US job market. "In the fall of 2005, more than 1.5 million students enrolled in America's four- year colleges or universities, a number equal to 50 percent of high school graduates that year," notes Charles Murray. The number of bachelor's degrees awarded in 2005 amounted to 35% of all 23-year- olds (Murray 2008, 67- 68), indicating a large pool of job seekers.

If we consider the situation closely, college campuses tend to encourage unrealistic expectations about the job market; those who arrive at the zoo gates fresh from campus often find a chasm between reality and their aspiration. Some new keepers may expect to spend most of their time "studying animals". There is a need for those with imagined expectations to make a realistic adjustment if they are to stay in the field, grow, and develop. The reality of zoos dictates that someone has to clean up after animals and feed them every day, and that responsibility falls on the shoulders of the keeper, regardless of his or her educational background.

As mentioned before, *changes for keepers arrived slowly*. A review of keeper job descriptions and duty outlines in operation manuals from the 1970s through the end of the last century reveals hardly any functions other than the custodial care of the animal collection. For instance, knowledge, skills, and abilities required for a keeper in a large municipal zoo included ability to move objects

weighing up to 22.6 kg (50 lbs.), seeing well enough to read standard English text, ability to stand and walk, and graduation from an accredited four- year high school (anon. 1997). Similarly, requirements for zookeeper 1 at a small municipal zoo included a driver's license; ability to walk, climb, balance, stoop, talk, and hear; and ability to lift and carry equipment and supplies such as feed bags weighing up to 45.3 kg (100 lbs.). Specific education requirements were not included (anon 1995) including one who is a recent addition from a free contact. As for current job descriptions for the zookeeper positions, the AZA website offers a wide range of examples (AZA 2010b). One from the Brookfield Zoo, in a Chicago suburb, includes a comprehensive description, given here in part:

### **Responsibilities**

- Prepare and distribute food as directed.
- Observe assigned animals closely, routinely, and objectively report to supervisor on their behavior, health, and welfare. Keep animal records as assigned.
- Observe condition of assigned area(s), animal enclosures, and equipment.
- Monitor and clean public space(s), plants, and interpretives as assigned.
- Report maintenance needs.
- Perform minor maintenance tasks as assigned.
- Clean animal enclosures, pools, and service areas. Study specific reference materials about animals in assigned area.
- Read other zoological and husbandry texts as assigned.
- Perform routines of assigned areas and specialized procedures as directed.
- Monitor visitors to insure animal and human safety and protection of park property.
- Communicate with and assist guests.
- Take initiative to facilitate guests' appreciation of animals and enjoyment of their zoo visit. Demonstrate knowledge of and implement zoo-wide and area emergency procedures as directed.
- Other related duties as assigned.

### **Requirements**

Bachelor's degree in relevant biological field or equivalent combination of training and/or experience required. Animal care facility, farm, kennel, or equivalent animal experience required. Incumbent must possess an understanding of practical principles of animal behavior and the ability to work with live animals safely. Good interpersonal skills. The ability to interact in a courteous and professional manner. Knowledge of natural history, zoology, or animal husbandry preferred. Must be capable of dealing with emergencies calmly and efficiently. Must learn and integrate information, knowledge, and direction quickly. Good decision-making skills. Must be alert and make sound independent judgments. Interestingly, the job description also states, "Spanish Fluency a plus but not required," reflecting our time of societal diversity. As for specialized skills, it states: "For the Living Coast and Seven Seas keeper positions, SCUBA Certification required within

one year of hire". This is an example of a more generalized zookeeper position.

There also are job openings for specialized work, typical of which are elephant care positions, which appear often. Here is an example from Tennessee:

The Memphis Zoo has an opening for a Keeper in our Elephant area. This position requires a minimum of two years of experience in pachyderm care, including knowledge of training concepts and philosophies needed to work with pachyderms and a varied collection of hoofed animals and birds, and a college degree in zoology, biology or a related field (or the equivalent combination of education and experience). Significant experience with operant conditioning is required. Ours is a protected contact program with a herd of three female elephants, including one who is a recent addition from a free contact environment. Responsibilities include providing a healthy, attractive environment for the animals in a specified area, all aspects of daily animal husbandry, exhibit maintenance, observation, enrichment, and encouragement of public interest in the animals. Must have excellent communication skills and a willingness to interact positively with the public and Zoo staff.

#### **FACING THE CHALLENGES**

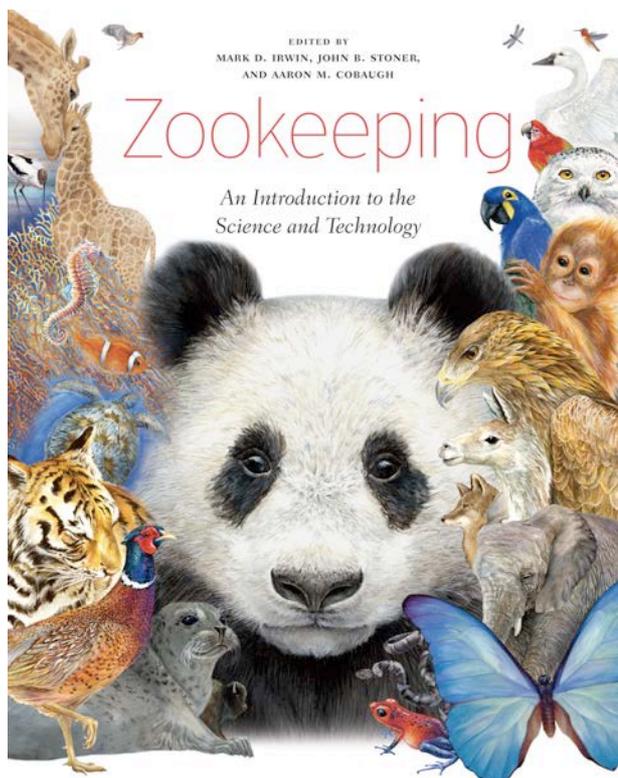
The evolution of the keeper's role, however, is almost always accompanied by perceived and often increased expectations from within the zoo or aquarium institution. This is especially true since zoos are facing the increasingly diverse demands of our time. As the "torchbearers" of the zoo or aquarium's essential component, animal care, keepers are also required to take up a broader range of activities beyond the traditional care for the animal collection. In order to meet the challenges of our time, keepers must develop diversified skills in broader areas by arming themselves with knowledge, both academic and practical, for duties such as assisting researchers, public speaking, and helping children to learn. Once out of college, the "education" is not over! True, there will be no more midterms or finals, yet in their work life the process of education has just begun; exams now come in various, subtle, and often unexpected forms. And for those who wish to advance as professionals, learning is a lifelong process.

#### **How to Order**

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#### **ZOOKEEPING: An Introduction to the Science and Technology**, by

Mark Irwin, John Stoner and Aaron M. Cobaugh, Editors

The book ZOOKEEPING, with its 674 pages, 10 "Parts", 66 chapters, and 7 other informational inscriptions was announced in ZOOS' PRINT magazine in January and it was introduced with abstracts of each of the 66 chapters. In that issue we promised to promote the volume by extracting bits that might bring about more interest from our readers and also encourage zoo personnel of all levels to investigate it further.

The volume covers more aspects of zookeeping than what zookeepers in India and rest of South Asia would understand, as there are many differences. For the most part those who can purchase this book will be wild animal veterinarians and zoo directors in South Asia. Perhaps if they learn more about the "science and technology of zookeeping" they will find ways to improve keeper knowledge and to help them rise in their profession.

Moreover, the book is in English which is not a language many South Asian zookeepers learn. Fortunately, if we extract bits from ZOOKEEPING that attract the attention of Directors, Veterinarians, Curators, Biologists, and Educators, then they might consider translating these bits or even the numerous chapters as they appear in the book for their zookeeper. Even if they fail with the zookeepers, they will become better zoo people themselves.