Jobs within Zoos and Aquariums

In some parks, some species are separated from visitors and other natural enemies within the zoo's collection on islands with moats or walls. Small cages have gone by the wayside for the most part.

Birds are provided with a special lighting system that helps contain them in habitats that have no physical barriers between observers and the birds themselves. Nocturnal animals are also placed in habitats with artificial light-dark cycles. Many of the larger zoos have walk-through or drive-through habitats where birds and other animals can carry on their normal activities.

Some zoos participate in breeding programs for animals that are rare and endangered. Because of the decrease in wild habitats and the resulting reduction in numbers of many species, most zoos rely heavily on captive-bred specimens for display. In the late 1980s about 80 percent of the animals in U.S. zoos were bred in captivity, a big increase over the 25 percent common in the early 1970s.

Today's zoos and aquariums consider the psychological and physical well-being of the animals their highest priority. To achieve this, most facilities have been created to allow animals to participate in as much natural behavior as possible.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Behind the scenes housing, handling, medical, and maternity facilities carry as much weight as the areas open to the public, and often cost more than do the viewing areas.

Most zoos and aquariums are government owned and operated; some are operated by nonprofit societies; and a few are privately owned and commercially operated.

Most governmental zoos depend upon associated support groups for financial aid. The main source for funding for government zoos comes from taxes, although many also receive support from admission charges or from the sale of food or merchandise.

Nonprofit zoos must earn all of their income from admissions, sales, or donations. Privately owned zoos are self-supporting. They often distribute any profits earned above overhead costs to the owners or shareholders.

Most public facilities for the display of animals are run similar to the way small cities operate. Most employees of zoos and aquariums are concerned with administration, office procedures, or maintenance of grounds and facilities.

As within a city, though, the positions that are most vital relate closely to the care and well-being of its "citizens." These positions include curators, keepers, and veterinarians.

Professional job classifications within zoos and aquariums can fall into several categories including administration, collections, conservation, duration, education, development (fund-raising), exhibit design, husbandry, public relations, marketing, research, veterinary services, visitor services, and volunteer services.

In addition zoos and aquariums employ a large team of support staff including security guards, maintenance workers, grounds-keepers, landscape architects, and secretarial and other office workers. Further, zoos and aquariums depend heavily upon volunteers and student interns to round out the professional staff.

Although not every job title is found in all facilities, many are common to each kind of zoo. The job description, however, will vary depending on the institution. Curators and veterinarians, for example, are found in almost every kind of zoo or aquarium, even though the collections they deal with and their specific duties are very different. Aquarists, on the other hand, are usually found only in aquariums, where their specialized skills are most needed.
Depending upon the institution, some job titles whose duties are the same will carry different designations. For example, curators may be called coordinators or wildlife or conservation directors; zookeepers may be called animal caretakers, animal keepers, or aquarists.

The American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) has identified dozens of both direct and zoo-related career categories. Below is an alphabetical list of the job titles found within broad categories (departments and department names and responsibilities will vary from institution to institution) with a brief description for each. In this book only those job titles directly related to animal care, collection, and education and exhibition will be covered. Jobs such as operations or gift shop can be found in a variety of settings other than zoos and aquariums. Information on these non-zoo-related careers can be found in the Occupational Outlook Handbook or in other NTC/VGM Career Horizon books.