



Zoo Edition Archives - Winter 2003

Interview with Terry O'Connor, Interim Education Director:

WPZ: Can you briefly describe your job here at the zoo?

TO: I manage the Education Department, which means that I am responsible for all of the education programs, both on- and off-site. Part of my role is to work with other AZA (American Zoo and Aquarium Association) institutions. This gives us an infusion of new ideas; the networking helps our programs and we can share what we are doing with others.

WPZ: How did you get involved in education here at the zoo?

TO: I have a Bachelor's degree in zoology. I'm not an educator by training; I'm an educator by experience. I started at WPZ as a volunteer. Part of the work I did was behavioral research on snow leopards and fruit bats. But I found that as I was doing animal observations, I enjoyed interacting with visitors. The first job opportunity that came up at the zoo for me was in education, so my career took a different path and I've now been working in education for 21 years.

WPZ: What is the best part of your job?

TO: There are a lot of best parts of my job. It is very rewarding to help set an education project in motion and then watch it take off. I also love teaching – a high point for me is when I can help to train docents or be a part of a teacher training workshop. I enjoy the opportunity that I have to work with other zoos and aquariums through my work with AZA. It's good for our zoo programs and it's professionally and personally fulfilling for me. The highest priority is always the animals. Their needs must be weighed against those of the grounds and animal keepers, and the aesthetics of the exhibit, all while staying within the limits of time and money, and keeping construction impacts to a minimum. The wild dog exhibit, which just opened at the zoo, includes two shallow pools. The pools have to be safe for the dogs we have now, and for puppies, should we have them in the future. The pools need to be drained and cleaned, so the keepers need easy access for daily operation. They need to be kept in good working order, so maintenance workers also need easy access. And access points need to be either aesthetically pleasing or invisible to visitors. For example, the hose and faucet that the keepers use for cleaning are easily accessible inside the fake tree stump in the middle of the water bank.

WPZ: How are you involved in AZA conservation programs?

TO: My work with AZA conservation programs is related to education, a relatively new part of what a TAG or SSP does (see the Conservation Corner in this Zoo Edition for information on TAGs and SSPs). I co-chair the AZA Bat TAG, which I've been involved with for 10 years. Many of our projects are related to education about bats. One of our first projects was developing an education curriculum and kit about Rodrigues fruit bats. These materials are used for every 5th grade student on Rodrigues, an island in the Indian Ocean off the east coast of Africa. In addition to the materials developed, we saw that conservation on Rodrigues needed something broader – there was a need for an environmental educator on the island. The recognition of this need led to the hiring of Mary Jane Raboude, a native Rodriguan, to conduct environmental education on the island. Mary Jane's work is supported by contributions from AZA institutions.

After so many years of working with the Bat TAG and conservation programs for Rodrigues fruit bats, I am very excited that Woodland Park Zoo is getting Rodrigues fruit bats soon, which brings the story back home.

WPZ: What special skills do you need to work in education at the zoo?

TO: The education staff at WPZ come to the zoo with a lot of different backgrounds. Some key skills are the ability to work with people of all ages, and great communication skills. Writing is also a big part of our jobs. What I think is characteristic of people here is a love of learning – a boundless enthusiasm to learn –because to be a good teacher you have to be a good learner.

WPZ: What advice would you give to students who might want to work in education at a zoo?

TO: Learn everything you can! You might plan to obtain a background in education, life sciences or environmental interpretation. I think the best thing is to read and learn as much as you can to find out what interests you. Volunteering can also help you learn more about what you want to do. The Zoo Corps program here at the zoo is a great way to do that. It's hard to know what you want to do unless you get to try it. Beyond that, no matter what area you want to go into, find opportunities for speaking and working with people and for writing. Come to the zoo and spend some time here! If you love being here and studying animals, plants and habitats, and are enthusiastic about sharing that love with other people, then you'll enjoy a job as an educator in a zoo.