



Zoo Edition Archives - Winter 2002

Excerpts from an interview with John Bierlein, Woodland Park Zoo Manager of Planning and Interpretive Exhibits:

WPZ: What does your job at the zoo entail?

JB: I help plan how the zoo looks and is understood as a whole. I coordinate different aspects of the zoo exhibits, including signs, landscaping and all of the props that go into an exhibit, such as artifacts and artificial vines, trees and rocks.

The goal is to make the exhibits look as real as possible while addressing the needs of the animals, their keepers and zoo visitors. For example: I work with construction teams to make sure the exhibit is as natural and correct as possible; horticulturists to be sure that the plants in the exhibit are like those found in that environment; and cultural anthropologists to make sure that human aspects are included and accurate.

WPZ: How did you get started in your career?

JB: I was a student at the University of Washington, considering medical school, when conservation and ecology were beginning to be taken seriously as areas of concern and study. I've always had a love of nature and biology, so I chose to study botany and forestry. The forestry program was designed for park rangers and naturalists who would be working in national and state parks. While I was in college, I volunteered for environmental organizations, teaching people about the natural world. During the summers, I was a wilderness ranger in the Wallowa Mountains of north-east Oregon, maintaining trails and orienting hikers and campers. I packed in all of my botany books and lived in a 10'x12' wall tent.

Because I worked and volunteered all through school, I knew when I graduated what I wanted to do and where to look for work, and I had the experience to get a job I wanted.

WPZ: What was your first job?

JB: After graduation, I worked part time as a teaching assistant at the UW and volunteered at the brand new Discovery Park. I was hired to work part time, and became one of the city's first park rangers.

Creating environmental education programs in parks was difficult at that time, since the rest of the city parks were primarily community centers and playfields. A natural park like Discovery Park or Camp Long needed a very different way of thinking and planning. So I went back to school and earned a Masters degree in Public Administration. This degree helped me in writing grants and making innovative programs happen with very little money.

From Discovery Park, I went to Camp Long and established education programs there, then I moved to the zoo. My first project at WPZ was to provide strollers for zoo visitors. Later I became Education Program Curator and then I went on to become involved in creating zoo exhibits. I've done a wide variety of jobs here!

WPZ: What advice do you have for students who might want to work in environmental education and exhibit design?

JB: Follow the path with heart, and as you walk, you will begin to see other things that are needed, things you can't anticipate when you begin. I never thought I would have a desk job, wear a tie or work at a computer, but sometimes where you think you are going is not where you end up. Be flexible and cooperative, for me that has allowed me to best serve the zoo's overall vision and be able to share my passion for nature with other people.

