



### **Zoo Edition Archives - Spring 2002**

Interview with Zookeeper Eric Kowalczyk

**WPZ:** Have you always been interested in animals?

**EK:** Yes. As a child I spent a lot of time watching birds. One summer, I found a box turtle someone had dumped on a beach. I took it home and turned the whole garage into a huge box turtle habitat. My father had to park in the driveway.

**WPZ:** What did you study in college?

**EK:** I took classes I thought looked interesting, not ones that would lead directly to a specific job. I took some French, math and humanities, but mostly zoology. After graduation, I went on to WSU for my master's degree. I did field research studying pygmy nuthatches and got a master's in zoology.

**WPZ:** What was your first job with animals?

**EK:** My first animal jobs were both volunteer jobs at The Seattle Aquarium and in the aviary here at Woodland Park Zoo. I was hired at the zoo in 1978. I spent some time working with the giraffes, and then was assigned to the pheasantry.

**WPZ:** What do you like about your job?

**EK:** Almost every day I learn new things. I spend a lot of time cleaning and feeding, but I also get to spend time watching the birds. The more answers you get, the more questions you find. I am also the studbook keeper for five species of hornbills. This means that I manage a database that tracks all of the individual hornbills in captivity and their genetic lineage.

**WPZ:** Do you get involved in issues concerning wild as well as captive birds?

**EK:** Yes, and that's the other thing I enjoy most about my job. Working here gives me the means to "walk the talk," to be an advocate for wild birds, such as being active in events like International Migratory Bird Day. In May people focus on wild birds that migrate thousands of miles each year.

**WPZ:** Any other projects in which students could participate?

**EK:** They could adopt a hornbill nest. A project in Thailand allows people all over the world to adopt a hornbill nest. When you adopt a nest, a local villager is hired to protect it. Some of the villagers who are now earning money protecting the nests used to feed their families by poaching. They are held in high esteem in the village, and are teaching their children to care for the birds. This project helps both the birds and the local people. And, by protecting the birds' habitat, the habitat of many other species is being protected also.

**WPZ:** What advice do you have for students who want to pursue a similar career?

**EK:** If you study what interests you, and find a job you love, you will always be learning. The sky's the limit in finding ways to improve our jobs. It is up to each of us to find the ways.

