

The Journal of the American Association of Zoo Keepers, Inc.

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Animal Keepers' Forum



September 2016, Volume 43, No. 9



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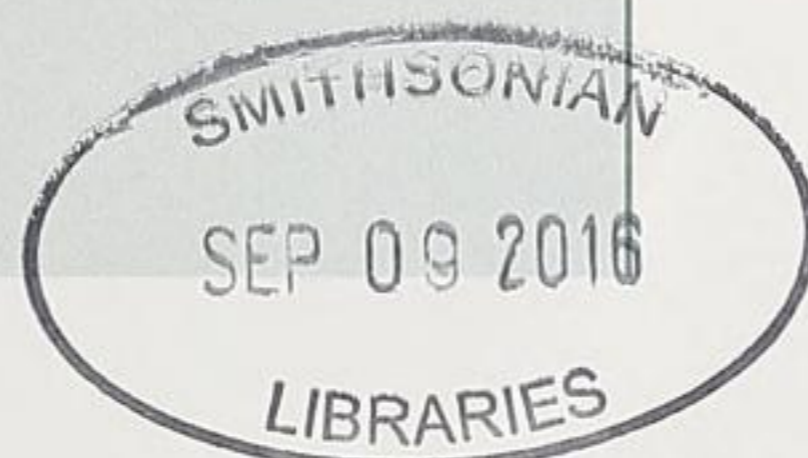
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MISSION STATEMENT

American Association of Zoo Keepers, Inc.

The American Association of Zoo Keepers, Inc. exists to advance excellence in the animal keeping profession, foster effective communication beneficial to animal care, support deserving conservation projects, and promote the preservation of our natural resources and animal life.

About the Cover

This month's cover photo was taken by Dave Johnson, a zoo keeper from Denver, Colorado and the founder of the Katie Adamson Conservation Fund. It is of a mother Greater one-horned rhino (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) and calf. Dave has led seven trips to Nepal for his community, calling their collaboration "Team Nepalorado". They visit with many Nepal communities and center their work in the Chitwan and Bardia National Park areas. Their work is considered a fusion of cultures in the name of conservation. They will be traveling again in November with eighteen excited animal nerds.

Since 2011, the population of these rhinos has increased in Nepal to 645, an increase of almost 200 individuals. When Dave and his fellow concerned travelers began embarking on this journey they were losing 10-12 rhino every year in Chitwan National Park. Now they have only lost one rhino in the last four years, and have several years with no poaching incidents of tiger, rhino, or elephant in their entire country. They are extremely proud of their global conservation status and have increased the protected area in their country to include almost 26% of the total land mass.

Dave has written three children's conservation books including one about a little orphan rhino they encountered back in 2010. Her name is Narayani and she is growing up at the Central Zoo in Kathmandu. In her honor they are trying to build a wildlife vet hospital in Chitwan National Park. This rhino species has been clawing its way back since a low mark of 200 animals back in the 1980's. With strong protection, community efforts, and buffer zone management the population has risen up to 3400 animals in Nepal and India, the only countries where they still roam in the wild.

Articles sent to **Animal Keepers' Forum** will be reviewed by the editorial staff for publication. Articles of a research or technical nature will be submitted to one or more of the zoo professionals who serve as referees for **AKF**. No commitment is made to the author, but an effort will be made to publish articles as soon as possible. Lengthy articles may be separated into monthly installments at the discretion of the Editor. The Editor reserves the right to edit material without consultation unless approval is requested in writing by the author. Materials submitted will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed, appropriately-sized envelope. Telephone, fax or e-mail contributions of late-breaking news or last-minute insertions are accepted as space allows. Phone (330) 483-1104; FAX (330) 483-1444; e-mail is shane.good@aazk.org. If you have questions about submission guidelines, please contact the Editor. Submission guidelines are also found at: aazk.org/akf-submission-guidelines/.

Deadline for each regular issue is the 3rd of the preceding month. Dedicated issues may have separate deadline dates and will be noted by the Editor.

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A Work of Passion

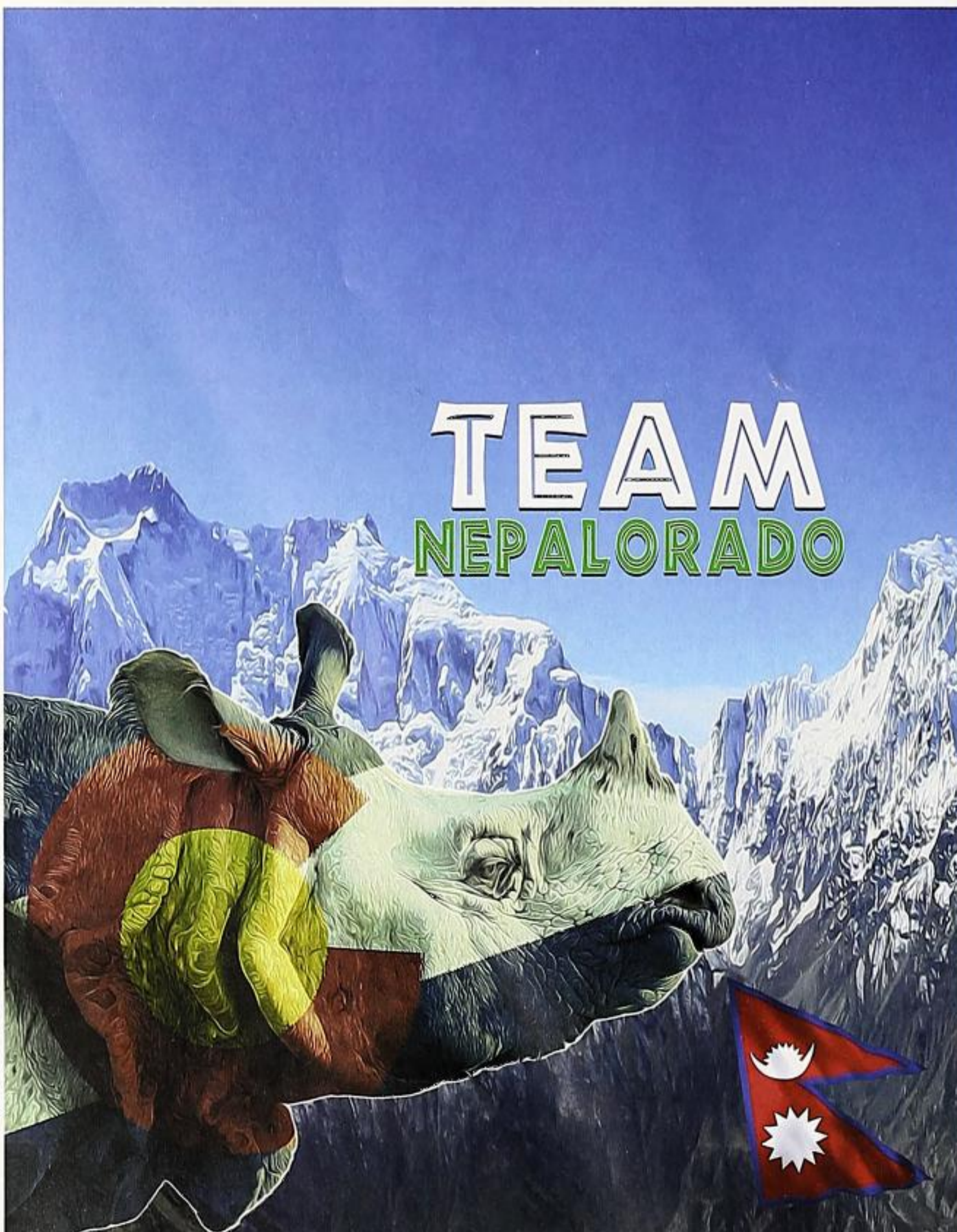
Dave Johnson, Zoo Keeper/Conservationist
Katie Adamson Conservation Fund
Denver, Colorado

I am a zoo keeper. Whenever someone asks me about my career that is the stock answer that I always get to utter with pride. I have been working with animals since I was fifteen-years-old. I was born to do this job, and I do not know why. When I was little, it was my birthday wish to always go to a zoo or national park to see animals more closely. Every birthday was the same and I just never could get close enough. I gave my pacifier to a spider monkey, ran alongside cheetah after climbing a public barrier, and stuffed crackers in all of my pockets so the deer would mob me in the deer park. My Mom got berated by staff because she could never control me around the animals. My art work was only wildlife, my television favorites were Wild Kingdom and Grizzly Adams, and my poor brother still needs counseling because of all the times I netted him with a shawl and tried to put a radio collar on him. Destiny called to me and I answered. I am a zoo keeper, and it is a job of passion that I am so very proud of.

My home now is Denver, Colorado, far removed from the mountains of North Carolina where I grew up, and the nature center that helped to mold me. That first job led to a mountain lion study and a degree in wildlife biology. My brother and I were both whitewater rafting guides and summer nature counselors. We grew up on the Appalachian Trail

and had a wander lust. I followed my heart around the country, from a wild animal park in South Carolina, to a bear job in Alaska, and on to a wildlife education center in Kentucky. Always the animals called to me, and I followed my passion with tumbleweed ease. Colorado ended up capturing my heart and my soul. The community here is uplifting, and the outdoors breathtaking. The zoo gave me a chance to find my new home and I wanted to make it amazing. This new home kindled something in my roaming heart, and I stayed. It then cultivated something else inside of me. It made the zoo keeper passion erupt, and it made the man in me want to make a bigger difference. When you are a zoo keeper, sometimes the passion gets the best of you and it takes you on journeys you never believed to be possible. Zoo keepers are dreamers and difference makers, and our zoo is packed full of them.

Before opening up a new pachyderm exhibit in Denver, I wanted to help our community grow and get excited about new species and wonderful new opportunities coming their way. I started running races to make conservation money for elephants and rhinos. I began writing children's conservation books about the animals I love. Then I began to lead people from our community over on amazing explorations of the wild world. In 2010 I ran my first marathon. It was in honor of our oldest elephant in Denver. She had lived in our zoo for a half century



and was a city darling. Then I took my first trip over to Nepal to start a conservation project for pachyderms. Seven times we have crossed over to share this experience with all who will follow. We call ourselves Team Nepalorado. It's a fusion of cultures in the name of conservation. It's a chance to divvy out the passion.

My first book came out in 2012 about our elephants and a little local girl named Sissy Sally Sassafras, who was a melting pot of all the little kids that come to our zoo excited about seeing the animals we care for. I see them every day. In them there is Sissy. In a frozen tent in Alaska I wrote poetry about her twenty years ago, dreaming of the day when I would make this heroine come to life. That next year I wrote a book about an orphaned rhino in Nepal that had captured our hearts. Her name was Narayani. This rhino and Sissy were going to be impactful in some way, I just felt it. We built a solar powered electric fence, bought anti-poaching motorbikes for the rangers, and are now building a wildlife vet hospital in Nepal. Part of this hospital is going to be an orphanage for rhinos, allowing us to give back to a species on the brink. When we started this project there were 10-12 rhino poaching incidents annually in Chitwan National Park. Now they have had only one poaching incident in the last four years. They are raising the bar for countries that are trying so desperately to save these last five species. Our team is so very proud of the strides that have been made and the partnerships that have been built.

We started climbing mountains for rhinos in our AAZK Chapter a few years ago. Now I lead people up our fourteeners every summer and this August we will be tackling Kilimanjaro for the first time. We will visit Mkomazi, the rhino orphanage in Tanzania, and begin protecting species on two continents. Now we will be covering both of our zoo rhino

species and helping to protect and educate about the greater one-horns and black rhinos of the world. We have eighteen people heading over to Africa for this next conservation initiative. We are creating a passion explosion and a conservation virus that is spreading amongst our people, it is glorious to witness.

Now I have my next book out. It is called "Zodiac Kids" and it makes this a Sassafras Series. From elephants to rhinos, and now to global conservation strategies, Sissy Sally takes us on a mission of passion. Twelve animals picked as totems for people to follow and to help protect. Children can now be part of the solution and a big avenue of change. She is leading the charge. We are trying to get this book series sold in every state and make conservation the new cookie! I am partnering with kids, churches, schools, sports teams, and anyone else who wants to make a stand. We are asking for Rhino Warriors to step up to the plate and sell books for your peers instead of sweets. Profits will be split in half for any courageous follower of our mission.

Zookeeping is a passion and a career built on dreams and desire. Ask any keeper about their animals and about conservation and most will talk your ear off about their lemur, or gerenuk, or orangutan. We are a community gathering for a last big stand. We have a fight on our hands. We are no longer just rakers of yards, shovelers of dung, and hosers of barns, but now we are on the frontline of species protection and education. The future generations look to us for answers and for solutions. I am so very proud of my career and how my life has turned out as an animal nerd. Never be afraid to stand up for what you believe in, or question whether you can do more. It is part of what makes us who we are.

I am a zoo keeper and this career defines me. 🐘

Top: Team Nepalorado
Bottom: Photographing wild elephants.



The author in Kathmandu.

