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ON THE COVER

The Crocodylian Biology and Captive Management training course is offered annually in the spring. Like all of the classes offered through AZA's Professional Development Program, this week-long course is a significant learning experience. "Anyone involved with the keeping of crocodylians should attend this class. You learn the most time tested techniques from the masters who use them." (Student, May 2010). The cover shot is of a Nile crocodile at the Wildlife Conservation Society's Bronx Zoo.

JULIE LARSEN MAHER ©WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY



The Rhino Ate My Homework!



Going back to school while working a full-time job is a difficult endeavor, especially when you're not working the typical 9-to-5, and you have a rhino to blame for missing your midterm. Fortunately, if you want to pursue higher education that relates to your career, the Zoo and Aquarium Leadership Degree (ZAL) through George Mason University (GMU) is extremely understanding of what zoo keeping jobs demand and are more than willing to assist their students in any way they can.

The Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies concentration in Zoo and Aquarium Leadership prepares students for advancement in zoos and aquariums in response to the needs of the industry today. The concentrations are specialized in Collections Management, Administration and Conservation Education. Each concentration in the ZAL has guidelines to follow that include both online and AZA Professional Training Courses, but no two students follow the same path. There are times when students can substitute classes to better suit their individual needs and aspirations.

Personally, I have been working on my degree nonstop since the fall of 2007 in Collections Management and I look forward to graduating in May 2011. The past three years have been quite the juggling act with work, taking online courses and attending bi-yearly, week long AZA Professional Training Courses in Wheeling, W.Va. This program was ideal for me because like most zookeepers, my schedule did not allow me to take conventional courses during the day or even in the evenings.

The hours we work fluctuate daily between early and late shifts. Our days off may change from week to week. And let's not forget about not having "real" weekends or the chance to have an actual holiday off. Then there are animal illnesses, births, and transports to add to the mix, in turn adding overnight watches, travel, and cross your fingers ... overtime. Our plates are full and we all soon find out that our lives are going to be hectic.

This year has been even more overwhelming for me because not only am I toiling over my master's thesis, I also bought a house and I recently became engaged. Balancing it all takes time management and strategic planning, especially when it comes to allocating my vacation time. Five days go to each AZA Professional Training Course I attend. I am especially mindful in planning vacation for 2011, so I can attend my last required AZA Course, go to graduation, and take a honeymoon.

It may sound a little unusual - taking vacation to go to school. But there are, in fact, a lot of dedicated students taking these classes with their own finances and personal time. Although I have to use my vacation hours, I am fortunate that Busch Gardens offers financial aid for my tuition through its Education Assistance Program.

I have always wanted to continue my education beyond my bachelor's and I wanted a degree that was pertinent to my career as a zookeeper. ZAL was that degree for me and it has immensely opened my eyes to not only what zookeepers can do beyond their day-to-day routine, such as being a studbook keeper, but also the essential business side of the zoological and aquarium

field. I have taken courses ranging from Public Relations and Marketing to Law, Government and Ethics. All have given me a newfound understanding toward our administration's decisions, which before I began the ZAL Program, at times seemed imprudent to zookeepers.

The online courses have a syllabus listing the goals and objectives of the course, all of which are flexible and can be tailored to each individual. There are no set times you need to "meet" online with the rest of your class. Coursework is done at your own pace and assignments are due weekly. I have yet to meet a professor who isn't willing to adjust to my needs if there is any conflict with a due date, particularly if the delay is work related.

The GMU professors are non-zoo people and find the field fascinating. They enjoy hearing what I do and the challenges I face in my career. One time an impromptu overnight rhino watch was needed, which impeded my plans to finish my midterm that was due the next day. After the watch I e-mailed my professor the extenuating circumstances and was granted three more days to finish my midterm along with some well wishes for the rhino.

I was not sure what to expect when I attended my first AZA course. But as a GMU student, it's especially nice to start putting faces to the names I see on my online class list. Even the instructors and the AZA staff begin to know you by name and each February and November it's like seeing an old friend. In November of 2009, I realized just how remarkable the instructors, AZA staff and fellow students are. My birthday happened to fall on the week I was attending Population Management II. Now, I feel that turning 30 is a pretty significant milestone and celebrating it in Wheeling, W.Va., was not high on my list of places to be. But, unbeknownst to me, Susannah Brooks, the former Professional Training Program Specialist, and her unidentified accomplices had a surprise birthday cake waiting for me. Several of my classmates, most of whom I had only met a few days earlier, took me to the infamous and only bar/restaurant at Oglebay - GlassWorks Grill - for a celebratory drink.

Despite the adversity I encounter between graduate school, working full-time and balancing life in general, I find that being a GMU student and attending the AZA Professional Training Courses rejuvenates my enthusiasm for my career. The profession tends to take its toll on an individual's passion and dedication. More often than not, there seems to be more negative press about zoos, poaching, and human caused disasters - like the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico - than good press. It can feel like you are fighting to keep afloat and you start asking yourself, "Am I really making any difference?" But by talking with other students and professionals I realize that I am not alone in my feelings. Everyone has the same frustrations and challenges at their institution and with the world. But I also recognize that there are good things happening because of what everyone is doing as a whole. Your classes will be entertaining, inspiring and one of the most exhausting things you have ever done. But it's a wonderful learning experience and I feel that everyone should take at least one AZA Professional Training Course to find out for themselves.

SARA WUNDER IS A SENIOR KEEPER
AT BUSCH GARDENS, TAMPA

By Sara Wunder