

ANIMAL AND PEOPLE POTPOURRI

Cogitations from a zoo dinosaur

By Ken Kawata

SNAKE HUNTERS, DANCERS, ZOO WORKERS

ONE OF THE public's misconceptions is that the animal collection is the most important thing in a zoo. Not so. The animal collection, the most visible element in the public's eye, is certainly a vital component. It can be said that animals are the life-blood of a zoo, yet they don't build a zoo. If you itemise a whole zoo in terms of monetary value, the animal collection probably ends up at the bottom. The naked anatomy of a zoo, i.e. a parcel of land, perimeter fence, infrastructure such as water and sewer system, landscaping, exhibit and public service facilities, is a commodity. But the staff is no commodity; it is people that make or break a zoo. Also, contrary to the public's assumption, zoo work is not animal work – it is people work. Even keepers deal with fellow humans throughout the work day, spending precious little time with animals (Kawata, 2013).

That being said, those who work at a zoo continue to be exposed to the wealth of animal life. And animals know more about zoo workers than those workers know about animals. In other words, workers are way below the curve behind animals, and to catch up we need a tool. For this, the most basic tool is learning. However, learning is a two-way endeavour between a person and the subject. The practice or the concept of learning may change with time, from one generation to the other. The 1980s marked rapid changes in the zoo field. The types of people went through metamorphosis, including those who work at zoos and zoo job applicants. To know where we stand necessitates us to understand where we have been.

The staff structure was quite different several decades ago. Job titles for the top positions included Superintendent of Parks, head zookeeper or manager. The organisation was simple and linear, and the middle layer was paper-thin (Doolittle, 1932). At the bottom, a group of entry-level employees took care of the grounds and animals. Also, zoos were largely a man's domain. Many job seekers sought out the stable and secure municipal employment. Men, basically white and blue-collared, who had little interest in wildlife were commonly assigned to zoo work. But among the job-seekers

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there were a few who took more than a passing interest in zoos. Rare examples were men who possessed a passion for wild animals, often from childhood. Natural history books became a common bond that attracted them. The internet, of course, was yet to appear on the horizon.

Tuatara, Kagu, Hoatzin, Quokka and Indri. Strange names from faraway lands that stirred the imagination, that made one long to step into the jungle, into impenetrable walls of towering trees, and view the myriad lifeforms there. Romance of exotic wildlife soon grew stronger in the pre-television era. The last of this breed was probably born in the late 1950s. They devoured Gerald Durrell's many volumes such as *The*

Overloaded Ark and *Beasts in my Belfry*, the source of inspiration, seed for seeking out zoo work. When they found an opening in a zoo, they wasted no time to apply, and the lucky ones squeezed through. Some became disillusioned by the realities of working life and dropped out, but tenacious ones stayed long enough to cut their teeth in animal care. At times the creatures in their care chased them around and bit them; a small price to pay. It was a time when the animal collection commanded the central arena.

Zoos' characteristics of that era slowly faded about the time the baby boomers began to enter the job market. Soon, waves of young men and women with college educations carved out the face of the nation's zoos. Many came from different types of childhood compared with old timers. In the world outside of the zoo, market researchers were keenly aware of the new generation of customers. According to some of them, the millennials are the first generation of 'digital natives' with singular needs and desires. By year of birth, some marketers classified the U.S. population thusly: Baby boom, born 1946-64; Generation X, born 1965-79 and Millennial, born 1980-2000 (Stout, 2015). This type of grouping may be applicable when we examine zoo job candidates. But looking at the newer breed of job applicants, it is doubtful that members of any age groups have ever read the kind of books familiar to old timers. To them, names such as Hoatzin and Angwantibo are enigmatic terms from a light year away. Thus a generational chasm is inevitable.

Despite all the changes, the hard-core animal advocates remain unchanged. Their

concept of 'the animal' is nurtured by household pets, with emotional attachment to individual animals. To exaggerate a bit, some animal lovers seem to live in their own solar system, speaking through their own grammar and vocabulary. Their mind rarely wanders away into wildlife or its environment. Keen observers on the employer's side probably notice them in the group of zoo job applicants. At the other end of the spectrum lies the small crowd of traditional natural history advocates. They too will be found in zoo employment applicants. Typically, many of them seem inseparable from reptiles and amphibians.

ENGAGING SNAKE HUNTERS

"People don't grow up with snakes in the living room. Those who are interested in herps have to seek them out on their own; they must get out of the boundaries of the comfort of their home. In the field (e.g. woods, grassy lots and streams) they have to make a concerted effort to find the subject animal, for instance, to turn up rocks," noted a reptile keeper at Staten Island Zoo, New York. "Herps do not come to people for attention. Compared to furry, feathery and cuddly creatures they are not cute and do not cater to people's emotional needs. It requires an active interest and curiosity to know the herps, and the same can be

said about invertebrates. Most parents do not like the idea of their children bringing snakes into their homes; turtles and frogs may be different, but not snakes. School teachers may not appreciate their keen interest in strange animals either. So future herpers have to break the social barriers of parents and teachers. It takes a nagging curiosity to motivate them to pursue their interest." (Matt Lanier, verb. comm., 10 March 2005)

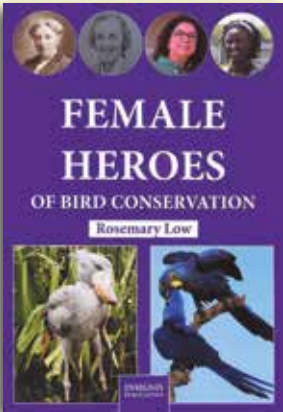
You might call this crowd the last bastion of natural history, deeply focused on nature and curiosity is their second nature. Here follow more examples.

"By way of introduction, Edward J. Maruska (EJM) and James B. Murphy (JBM) met at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago during the early 1950s. At that time, EJM was cleaning and feeding animals in the Carnivore building and JBM was an uninspired high-school student. EJM invited JBM to join the crew for lunch in the keeper office where he prepared a delicious horsemeat steak, side dishes, and steaming coffee for all assembled. All the employees shared stories of their working days in zoos and EJM's accounts were particularly amusing. At that moment, JBM decided that working in a zoo was the place to be" (James Murphy, 2021). The casual and informal workplace culture allowed


personal freedom and growth. It is doubtful that you could bring a high school student into a keeper office, cook a meal and dine together now.

In the following decades these two men made tremendous contributions to the zoo world, Murphy as a reptile curator and Maruska as a zoo director. They have published research accounts in herpetology, designed and constructed innovative exhibits, guided younger generations and, together, they have enriched the zoo world. They both have the characteristic of the innate nature of herpetologists. They often leave their work behind into field activities such as a snake hunt. Legendary zoo herpetologist Carl Kauffeld, who was on the staff of Staten Island Zoo from 1936 to 1973, including directorship, even wrote a book on snake hunting. He noted: "I invite you to relive with me the scenes of the chase in southern swamps, in western mountains and deserts; to smell the aromatic smoke from a campfire burning live-oak branches, pine cones and Spanish moss; to watch a Carolina moon come up through moss-draped oaks; to sniff the fragrance of a swamp magnolia in the Jersey Barrens and to explore a swamp of white cedar; and finally, to share with me the excitement and thrill that is ours when we come upon our unusual game after hours or even days of


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dogged search – the rattler coiled on the trail or the rat snake resting on a tree limb.” Also: “All of us have the same enthusiasm for ‘field work’ – the anticipation of seeing the plants and creatures in their natural state, whether this be only a few miles from home during our ‘day off,’ or thousands of miles away on the other side of the globe” (*Snakes and Snake Hunting*, 1957).

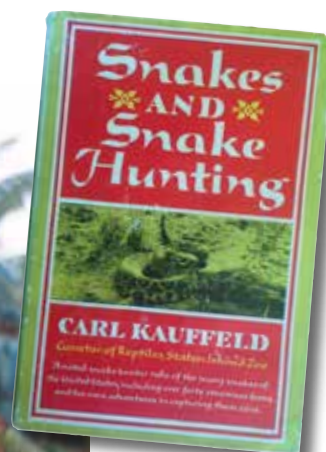
Snake hunting was commonly practiced in those days. While at Saint Louis Zoo, Richard Marlin Perkins would take 300 Boy Scout members to a snake hunt. (Of course, that did not mean 300 snakes were captured. The term ‘hunt’ is misleading, since it is a type of field trip.)

Back to Kauffeld, who one day was leading a snake hunt in South Carolina but which ended up empty-handed. Carl then told his students that everything around them was worthwhile. “It’s all part of the web of life in the coastal plain ecosystem. Just smell the pine trees and Spanish moss. Listen to the rustle of the whispering pines caused by the gentle breeze, the birds singing all around us, and the cricket frogs calling from the vernal pools... While there may be bad days in the office, there is no such thing as a bad day in the field, just stop, look, and listen. The marvels of nature are all around you, learn to recognise and appreciate the big picture, and take the time to enjoy all that’s out there” (Kawata, 2001).

It appears that the process of the hunt, to hit the trail deeper into nature, is as important as bagging prey. Let us call Carl and the like-minded people the herp crowd by comparison to the mammal crowd. Mammal people are the mainstay of any zoo animal staff structure. You would never expect to hear the kind of observations by Kauffeld from the mammal crowd. The herp crowd, intensely curious about the world around them, immerses themselves into natural habitats. They are intimately familiar not only with reptiles and amphibians, but also with birds, mammals, insects and plant life. By comparison, I have never heard of the mammal crowd even uttering such names as Vagrant Shrew, 13-lined Ground Squirrel or Northern Pocket Gopher, which are members of the local fauna around them. Their world is confined to charismatic exotic mammals with public appeal such as great apes and large felids.

OF CURIOSITY AND COMMITMENT

What drives a person into intense observations? The answer points to one of the common human traits: curiosity, the mother of learning. “...no single publication can provide all necessary information, or answer each person’s questions about animal husbandry, welfare, and ethics. It was human curiosity that brought visitors to



Above: A classic work (1957) by American herpetologist Carl F. Kauffeld (1911-1974). **Left:** Marlin Perkins (1905-1986) served as director of Lincoln Park Zoo and later of the St. Louis Zoo

the first menageries centuries ago. It is this same curiosity that keepers must cultivate to help determine best practices of care, and clear ethical guidelines for how animals should be treated. If in doubt, ask” (Barber & Mellen, 2013).

Stepping outside of the zoo world for a moment, the founder and CEO of a software firm noted: “Curiosity is the most important human trait. How much do you

“It was human curiosity that brought visitors to the first menageries centuries ago”

know about the world of work that you’re not in yet?” (Adam Bryant, 2015) Curiosity, however, is not something that can be taught; it must come from within. And it often takes irrepressibility and child-like innocence to hatch curiosity.

At a resort and hotel in Colorado Springs, Colorado, a 46-year-old man is responsible for managing a fishing camp and also provides fly-fishing lessons and guides trips. When asked if he had an especially memorable client, he said: “Last year there was an 11-year-old girl who was intrigued by everything, including bugs. She’d drag us out of the lodge at first light and beg to go back out after dinner. Every fish and every rock in the river was a miracle to her. She was gracious and grateful and wasn’t missing her video games. I never promise that people will catch fish, especially big ones, but on her last day here, she got the biggest trout ever caught on the

property” (S. Tarrant, 2016). I wish I could track her down and encourage her to work at a zoo when she grows up. If she keeps it up, follows her curiosity and settles into the zoo field, it would be a big catch for us all.

We all know that there are ingredients that make a person a desirable zoo worker, but let me get off that topic for a moment. For more than four decades as a curator, I observed young people new in the field with their freshly-minted college degree. Based on that experience I would like to offer a comment. It is understandable that you feel uncertain about the future, that you are unsure about what you want in life. However, consider for a moment that you have been lucky to have a paying job, and that as an employee you are obligated to your employer, the zoo, to give the best of what you have. If a zoo is not for you, get out quick. If that is not the case, then by all means make a commitment to put down the anchor for a couple of years, and dig in. Preferably, you will find the pleasure of working in this field. “The wonderful thing about the zookeeping profession is that the keeper will never stop learning. They can continue to develop professionally and pass on techniques during their career and even after they retire” (Stoner, 2013).

PLANTIGRADE VS. UNGULIGRADE

The zoo field is a uniquely specialised discipline, and I would like to think that those who work there are in it not for personal financial gain (a zoo is a poor place for that!), nor for climbing up the ladder in society. I would also like to think that in the zoo field we are in for a lifelong learning process,

that we are all motivated by passion and self-discipline. On a tangent, let me wander away from the zoo field for a moment and take a look at a unique human endeavour that demands passion and self-discipline.

A shabby Detroit storefront was an unlikely location for lavishly romantic piano music emanating from a tinny tape player. There, a couple of former ballet dancers, Robert and Norma Taynton, had a small studio for children. At 82, Robert had stooped shoulders and Norma, 83, sometimes needed a cane. However, "Except for stamina and agility, little has been relinquished. The standards and discipline they required of themselves and of their hired dancers, and the tact that made them favourites of stage-hands across the country, have been applied for the last 40 years to the training of young dancers in Detroit." Norma guessed she had trained perhaps one true dancer for each 500 students. "The other 499, she expects, will sit down and be a good audience for the dancers" (Gerstel, 1990). That ratio sounds so eerily reminiscent of the zoo field. Out of 500 who enter zoo-employment, perhaps, years later there will emerge one prominent high achiever. If we are lucky, that is.

Bears and we humans are entire-foot walkers (plantigrade). From six to seven years of age ballet dancers practice three hours a day and force themselves into transformation, modifying themselves from plantigrade into digitigrade (toe-walking as in dogs and cats), then almost to the point of being unguligrade (toenail walking as in horses) to achieve artistry. It requires gruelling physical discipline on the bodies of young people, which are stretched and twisted into unnatural postures. Injuries can keep them idle for months. Once past that stage, professional ballerinas dance for 10 to 12 hours a day, six days a week, for years on end. Actor Natalie Portman took up a leading part in the movie *Black Swan*, which opened in 2010. As a child she had ballet training and "I really thought I was better than I was." Then came a rude awakening that she did not know what she was doing. Portman remarked: "That it's supposed to look easy and painless and carefree and light and delicate and just pretty, and underneath it's, like, really gruesome" (Bloom, 2010).

Moving on to another type of dance, it does not get easier; the student first feels pain. Commonsensical assumption is nowhere to be seen. "About half way through my first flamenco class, when the instructor, Jorge Navarro, said, 'Lift your arms like the world is on them,' I figured I was home free. That's how I feel all the time, anyway. But by the end of the class, feet throbbing, I was ready to surrender and I am no stranger to dance. Growing up as an

overprivileged suburban child, I had years of ballet, jazz, even modern dance classes. My summers were spent – heaven help me – at a camp where I taught Israeli folk dancing. But never had I encountered anything as complex as flamenco, which blatantly defies three of America's favourite words: 'easy', 'now' and 'young'" (Witchel, 1999).

Not only the accumulations of intense practice, but also the number of years plays a large part in other disciplines of arts. That applies to singers, as well as dancers. It is said that "even for the most promising bass-baritones, true mastery typically does not emerge until a singer is in his mid-30s, or even his 40s" in the opera world (Williams, 2016).

You may be asking: "How do such accounts fit in the zoo field? We are scientists, not dancers or singers! Such comparisons are irrelevant". It may appear that way from a perspective of a younger person, armed with a four-year degree, so confident that education is now completed. If I may be immodest, let me ask: have you made even one-tenth of an effort made

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by Khalina Hollifield, an eight-year-old girl in Tayntons' dance studio in Detroit? It requires endless practice and gruelling physical discipline on the body of a young woman. At a critical and formative early stage of your career, did you spend, let us say, five to eight hours of your own time every week, studying animals and zoos? Have you ever spent hour after hour on end in a library, steeping into books and technical periodicals, not only about zoos but also *in situ* wild animals? No? Here follows a quote from someone who spent decades being in charge of South Africa's principal wildlife sanctuary and in the process acquired first-hand knowledge in wildlife ecology.

"It is so easy to misunderstand the factors governing the actions and reactions of wild creatures living under natural conditions. At the beginning everything seems simple: from the experience of a few years every problem of animal behaviour appears to have been solved. A few more years pass, and this mental complacency becomes shaken. Finally, towards the end of a lifetime spent in observation, the student begins to comprehend how little he really knows. Successive incidents will have

occurred tending to stultify conclusions so apparently well founded that they had become firmly established in the mind as proven facts, and he may often be left with an impression of all his efforts and studies having been largely futile.

"Nowhere is the truth of the proverb about a little knowledge being a dangerous thing more obvious than in matters connected with wild life. Man, today, has such absolute power over the existences of other creatures of the earth, that any action taken as the result of inaccurate observation, or faulty deduction, may not only cause irreparable mischief, but may defeat the very interests which it is intended to serve" (Stevenson-Hamilton, 1950).■

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