

Careers at a Zoological Park

Introduction

Can you turn your love of animals into a career? The good news is that there are many types of jobs that involve working with animals, most of them within zoological parks. Although only some of them involve direct contact with animals, all zoological careers play an important role, whether directly or indirectly, in caring for the animals. Although job descriptions, responsibilities, and criteria may vary within the zoological community, similarities can be found with members of the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA).

The competition for any job in a zoological park is keen. Because zoos and aquariums are becoming increasingly important community resources for environmental education and species conservation, jobs in these institutions are in high demand. But hard work will be the key. It's assumed that a person applying for a job in a zoological park loves animals, but it's more important to a prospective employer that the person is hard-working, responsible, and well educated. For instance, with more demanding technical and scientific jobs, solid research skills might be considered with more weight than how much an applicant cares for or loves working with the animals. Therefore, you will likely need some type of schooling and internship experience.

Animal Services

Caring for the animals in a zoological park can be extremely rewarding and challenging. The majority of the opportunities to work with animals are found within the Aquarium, Aviculture, Mammals, Animal Training, and Education departments. In some parks, individuals work on teams to manage exhibits that display a number of different animal species. These people care for fishes, mammals, and birds at the same time, instead of specializing in one group. Select members of the Animal Care, Aquarium, and Animal Training departments are trained with a multi-disciplinary approach, allowing each to fulfill any need the animals or the area might require.

Overall job requirements include good health and physical condition and a willingness to learn and reach higher levels of knowledge regarding animal care. In addition, animal-related jobs in an aquatic park require that you have scuba and CPR certification as well as the physical fitness to pass a rigorous swim test.

Although many of the jobs within a zoological park require a period of on-the-job training, managers and supervisors also look for people with a college degree or those who are working toward one. Previous experience working with animals is considered as well. Volunteer work, including docent or research assistant positions, can also be beneficial to an applicant by expressing dedication and a sense of career direction. As an employee reaches an upper level position, he or she may be required to complete research projects in his or her field.

1. Aquarium

Members of the Aquarium department are responsible for maintaining all exhibits and systems for fishes, invertebrates, amphibians, and reptiles such as sea turtles and alligators. With previous experience, the entry-level position in this department is an aquarist. As experience is gained, however, there are more opportunities in supervisory and management positions, including Curator positions.

2. Aviculture

Aviculture literally means "the culture of birds," or the care, housing, and feeding of birds. Aviculturists feed, monitor the health, and clean the exhibits of a park's bird collection, from penguins to macaws, ostriches to hummingbirds. They also often raise young hatchlings, a task requiring enormous amounts of time since most chicks must be fed regularly and frequently. During peak hatching times, some zoological institutions hire temporary seasonal help to assist the aviculture staff in caring for the newcomers as well as the existing collection.

3. Mammals

In addition to providing daily care for the mammals that are not part of shows or training programs, members of this department also rescue and rehabilitate ill or injured wild mammals. In some parks, Animal Care Specialists care for animals according to park location, while in others, each Animal Care Specialist cares for a particular type of mammal (primates, antelopes, dolphins, etc.). Applicants with a college degree are preferred, but years of experience are helpful as well.

4. Training

Animal trainers have one of the most visible jobs within a zoological park--the one most people ask about, and one of the most difficult to get. There are a very limited number of openings in this field. Background experience helpful for a position in this department would include courses or knowledge in zoology, behavioral and experimental psychology, animal behavior, public speaking, communications, education, and theater.



Good health and strong athletic fitness are mandatory. Expect to undergo a rigorous swim test when applying for an animal training position at an aquatic park. In addition, the ability to communicate with the public in a positive manner and plenty of patience are required of anyone who would like to become a trainer. Because they announce and narrate at the shows in which the animals perform, confident public speaking skills are essential for animal trainers.

Due to the specialized nature of the work, an on-the-job apprenticeship is necessary. Even if an individual has had previous experience training animals, he or she must go through a period of time during which he or she becomes familiar with the individual animals' personalities and training methods used before he or she interacts directly with them.

5. Education

Zoological parks are one of the best ways to learn about the wildlife with which we share the planet. Although curators, keepers, aviculturists, and aquarists are usually glad to answer visitors' questions, the Education department of a zoological park is eager to make each visit a fun learning experience for everyone.

Members of this department provide visitors and students with information about animals and plants in the park's collection. Through behind-the-scenes tours, special classes for all ages, instructional field trips, outreach programs, informative animal exhibit graphics, and multimedia educational resources, members of the Education department strive to help the public understand and appreciate the earth and its diverse wildlife.

6. Research Staff

Some positions within a zoological institution have an important effect on the lives of the animals, but the individuals who work in these positions don't always have much direct physical contact with them. Filled with people who have dedicated their lives to animals, these positions are near the top of the zoological career ladder. Although titles may vary across institutions, all individuals in this department are considered researchers.

A wide variety of information is gathered by researchers who study animals both in zoological parks and in the wild. Observing an animal's diet, breeding behavior, and social interactions with others of their species provides clues on how to meet all their needs in a zoological park. Studying animals in a zoological park, however, is often the best and sometimes the only way to observe and record behaviors that would be difficult or impossible to study in the wild, especially those of very rare or endangered wildlife. What researchers learn from animals in zoological parks plays an important role in creating and maintaining Species Survival Plans, and setting criteria for preserving habitats and ecosystems.

a. Behaviorist: Behaviorists observe an animal's behavior as it relates to breeding, as well as its response behavior to changes in its surroundings, specifically to provide insight regarding an animal's natural history. They are responsible for maintaining accurate records and conducting behavioral research studies on animals. Some of a behaviorist's observations result in exhibit changes that make the environment more stimulating and/or comfortable for the animal. Typically behaviorists have a MS degree.

b. Registrar: The registrar maintains extensive records on the animal collection. Specifically, a registrar documents animal births and deaths, updates and manages studbooks, charts pedigrees, handles paperwork when animals are transferred or loaned to other institutions, and tracks the offspring resulting from breeding loans. A registrar usually has a BS degree.

c. Geneticist: By studying animals' DNA and determining how closely individual animals are related, geneticists assist in the development of breeding programs and Species Survival Plans. A geneticist at a zoological park also proposes and conducts research projects involving endangered species management programs in parks and in the wild. MS degree in biology or genetics is required.

d. Research Biologist: A research biologist plans, conducts, and reports the results of studies on animals in the institution's collection. He or she may chart the dynamics of herd members, determine the optimum brooding temperature for bird or reptile eggs, or study how long a certain species of mammal nurses its young. The information a research biologist uncovers is helpful to the people caring for animals in a zoological park, while also contributing to the understanding of how species in the wild live, and how human activities may affect them. This position requires a MS degree and many years of work experience within a zoological community.

e. Field Biologist: Field Biologists document the findings of wildlife research outside of a zoological park. These findings provide information helpful to the care and management of the animals in a zoological institution's collection. In addition to designing and implementing studies and research projects, field biologists assist in creating conservation programs to protect species in the wild. This position also requires a MS degree and many years of work experience within a zoological community.

7. Veterinary Care

Diagnosis and treatment of health problems in animals is a true challenge. Often, the first (and sometimes only) sign that an animal may be ill or injured is a slight change in behavior. The veterinary team uses laboratory tests and years of experience to diagnose and treat animals. Medical and surgical training is extremely helpful for all positions. These teams usually include a staff veterinarian (DVM), one or more veterinary technicians, and a laboratory manager.

Animal Support

Most zoos and aquariums are mini-cities that require other jobs to support the care of animals, such as water quality specialists, horticulturists, and design and engineering professionals. The physical structure of enclosures, amount and type of plants in each exhibit, and a clean, safe water supply are as important to the well-being of a park's animal collection as the right kind of food. Although these positions don't involve hands-on contact with animals, the people in these positions find great satisfaction through their indirect role in caring for animals. These positions can include a horticulturist, water quality technician, landscape architect, etc.

For more information:

<http://www.seaworld.org/infobooks/ZooCareers/>