

The first Regional Zoo and Aquarium network meeting. Al Ain Zoo

11-13 Dec 2012

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Editors note: Last issue we gave a very brief 1 page summary of the meeting of Middle Eastern Zoos at Al Ain Zoo, promising more in due course. This is a more detailed summary and captures the essence of the meeting. It was drafted by Mark Craig who facilitated the meeting and had promoted the idea for some years. SRW

Mr. Ghanim Al Hajeri, Director General of Al Ain Wildlife Park and Resort, Al Ain Zoo initiated and hosted the first regional zoo and aquarium networking meeting from 11-13 Dec 2012. The primary objectives were:

- To bring together for the first time representatives from the major Zoos and Aquariums in the region to share their values and mission with each other.
- To establish a network in which everyone can feel comfortable with communication and sharing of common ideas.
- To recognize that it is a distinct advantage to be part of a networking forum that gives strength to individual institutions as a member.
- To establish support and need of a regional zoo and aquarium association.

A working environment included facilitated workshop discussion points that allowed for open dialogue among all delegates and focused on the following areas:

- Provide an opportunity for networking among zoo and aquarium professionals from the region for the first time.
- Begin a database of contact information for zoo and aquarium professionals in the region.
- Learn about the region's zoos and aquariums.
- Describe what zoo and aquarium associations are and how they work.
- Demonstrate the benefits of a regional zoo and aquariums association or cooperative.
- Explain the process of gaining membership of a regional association or cooperative through the direct experiences of guests.

- Identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to establishing such an organization in our region.
- Assess whether guests of the meeting will support and encourage the establishment of the association or cooperative.
- If all were in agreement, to plan the next steps needed to develop the initiative further.

Meeting Schedule

11th Dec 2012 Day 1

Delegates arrived from Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Three international guest speakers from Switzerland, USA and Africa also arrived. These were:

- Dr. Gerald Dick – Executive Director of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums, WAZA
- Ms. Sally Walker – Director / Founder Zoo Outreach Organization and the South Asian Zoo Association for Regional Cooperation (SAZARC)
- Dr. Stephen Van Der Spuy – Executive Director African Association of Zoos & Aquariums

Delegates were all hosted at the Danat Hotel, Al Ain and met each other informally as they arrived. An afternoon tour of Al Ain Zoo finished with a welcome dinner at the Mixed African Exhibit.

12th Dec 2012 Day 2

This historic meeting was officially opened by Mr. Ghanim Al Hajeri, Director General, Al Ain Zoo who spoke about the importance of the meeting and how success could be achieved with cooperation from all delegates. Mr. Ghanim's speech follows:

It is a pleasure to welcome you all here today for the start of the 1st Regional Zoos and Aquariums meeting. A special welcome to his Excellency Mr. Abdeldim Lhafi from Morocco and to Dr. Gerald Dick Executive Director of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums. Al Ain Zoo is an Institutional Member of WAZA and it is a particular pleasure to have Gerald here for our discussions.

To Sally Walker who established the South Asian Zoo Association for Regional Cooperation (SAZARC) and to Stephen van der Spuy, Executive Director of the African

Association of Zoos and Aquaria. A region close to ours with similar challenges.

We invite you all to enjoy Al Ain, our Zoo and discussions amongst yourselves on the values we all embrace in working and managing Zoos and Aquariums in this region. On animal management, education, conservation and indeed the business of running institutions that have animals as their core business and the communities that visit and enjoy the connections with wildlife they embrace. We have representatives from all over the region here. These include Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Morocco and of course the UAE. In all, over 35 delegates with a common passion – Zoos and Aquariums.

It is indeed a gathering of Zoo and Aquarium expertise from this region that until now has never previously met under the same roof. It is for this reason alone that we can celebrate. However we would like to go a step further. Not only to congratulate ourselves for being here but also to capture this moment and the energy in this room to develop a framework of understanding where the idea of working together on our shared challenges far out ways the individual problems we may face by working on our own.

A recent statistic tells us that every year some 800 million visitors make the decision to visit a zoo, animal park or aquarium at least once in a year worldwide. If we ever thought our institutions were a thing of the past or declining in popularity we are hugely mistaken. Zoos and Aquariums are more popular with the world community than ever before. Their mission of Education, Conservation, Research and Recreation are the cornerstone of why they remain so popular today and relevant in this modern technology world. However they must remain relevant. Move with the times, embrace modern techniques of species management. Engage with partners to undertake conservation and education initiatives.

- To display animals in an environment that best meets their natural behavior.
- To engage in the best animal

***Director of Life Sciences, Al Ain Zoo and AWPR**



Group photo of Association Meeting participants at the entrance of the Al Ain Zoo before zoo tour.



Zebra train transporting participants and staff around the zoo.



**All photos
property
of Al Ain
Zoo.**



A lavish welcome dinner at the Al Ain Zoo.



Attractive view of indoor exhibits at Al Ain Zoo





The Bird Show was a great treat for all participants at the end of their zoo tour.

husbandry techniques and to make animal welfare our highest priority.

- To benchmark ourselves on the best zoos in the world and maybe even raise the bar further. If this is our goal then we are taking our responsibilities as custodians of wildlife to the highest of priorities.

If we are able to move towards and achieve these goals then the benefits to our financial position and ongoing sustainability will significantly improve.

I believe all these things can be achieved. Not today or the next but over a period of time. What is certain is we cannot do all this alone. We must work together hand in hand as one. Our common strength as a region is stronger than any individual.

So my friends and colleagues we have an opportunity over the next few days to work together in reviewing what we have now and what we want in the future. To lay down the framework for a network of regional Zoos and Aquariums and in doing so promote and enhance all the reasons we meet here today for the long term responsible care and wellbeing of the animals we hold in trust.

Al Ain Zoo will be hosting the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums Conference in 2015. This will be an honor for us all and the first time such an important conference has been hosted in this region. Let us have this date also as a goal for the establishment and recognition of our own Zoo and Aquarium Association. To take this opportunity now and make history by being the founders of this new Arabian Zoo and Aquarium Association.
Thank you

Each delegate was then introduced and provided a short presentation on their Zoo or Aquarium. The presentations continued throughout the course of the day and provided all delegates with a view of the region's current status of its Zoos and Aquariums.

13th Dec 2012 Day 3

The day was arranged to get maximum discussion and participation by the delegates.

Workshop Plan

All delegates broke up into four working groups with each group facilitated by an Al Ain Zoo staff member. A series of questions were asked of each group. All ideas and comments were recorded on flip charts and each table presented the results of their discussions.

Question 1

What are the major problems facing your Zoo today?

Zoos and Aquariums within the region may have different problems that could be related to their Country, funding, management, animal collection, staffing, expertise, language, history etc. What is a problem for one Zoo may not be a problem for another.

Question 2

Given the common problems we have just heard from our first discussion, what are the opportunities and benefits that a regional zoo and aquarium network could do to assist?

How would a zoo and Aquarium 'association' help solve these problems or not. Would working together on these problems be a benefit to individual zoos? This question is to tease out some ideas on the benefits of a network of zoos.

Question 3

What do you consider are the strengths within the Arab region that would make a regional zoo and aquarium association possible?

What is it within our region that would make an Association work well? Is it geographic location, a shared common language, support from various governments, contacts with WAZA etc.

Question 4

What do you think are the challenges that need to be overcome to establish a regional zoo and aquarium association in this region?

Given all the discussions that have taken place today and based on the summaries of each discussion topic, what are the obvious challenges we will face? However with each challenge comes opportunity.

Conclusion

All groups came together for some general discussion. A last question was asked to all delegates:

Do we all support the formation of a regional zoo and aquarium association?

There was a unanimous agreement by a show of hands that all supported the formation of a regional zoo and aquarium association. A final question was asked of all delegates. What would the name of such an association be? A number of names were provided by each table but the preferred and agreed name was the:
Arabian Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZAA)

At the final session a draft agreement was presented to all delegates. This agreement incorporated the positive comments, general cooperation of delegates and unanimous wish to be part of their own zoo and aquarium association. The agreement was unanimously accepted by all delegates

Agreement

On this day 13th December 2012 at the 1st regional Zoo and Aquarium networking meeting hosted by Al Ain Zoo the delegates agree that:

A regional Arabian Zoo and Aquarium Association be established.

This organisation will communicate, collaborate and cooperate with its members the strengths and opportunities we all share.

We will share information about our animal collections for the benefit of these animals.

On return to our countries we will engage with our national institutions on a regular basis.

Al Ain Zoo is willing to provide office space and staff time to coordinate communication within the region and to establish a working group of members to move forward in the establishment of our Association.

The Way Forward

Al Ain Zoo to develop a regional office and lead communication and coordination.

A group of delegates will form a working committee and draft a framework for membership.

Ongoing discussions and a draft Constitution and Code of Ethics to be drawn up.

This working group to meet on a regular basis and be in communication.

1st AZAA Conference in Dec 2013 at which the AZAA draft constitution and Code of Ethics presented.

Al Ain Zoo to lead discussions within the UAE for support of a National Zoo and Aquarium Association.



The Inaugural function before the regional association discussion meeting at Al Ain Zoo.



Left : Mark Craig, Facilitator of workshop & Director of Life Sciences, AWPR

Right: Mr. Ghanim Al Hajeri, Director General of Al Ain Wildlife Park and Resort

Left down: Gerald Dick, Exec Dir, WAZA

Middle down: Sally Walker, Chair, S. Asian Zoo Assn.

Right down: Stephen van der Spuy, Executive Director PAAZAB



By 2015 AZAA to be a fully Regional Association member of WAZA.

Through 2013 Al Ain Zoo will continue with coordinating the various components that make up a fully operational AZAA. This will include :

The strategic goals of the Association

These can include:

- To harness the collective knowledge and resources of zoos and aquariums for the benefit of all members to promote animal welfare standards and provide animal exhibit displays that meet the animal's requirements
- To conserve whenever possible biodiversity
- To educate the public on animal conservation and exhibit management
- To work with each other in a harmonious environment of cooperation and knowledge sharing
- To establish and maintain community awareness campaigns through community engagement and education

- Establish and maintain a regional standard and accreditation system.
- Develop the effectiveness of species management programs that are disciplined and inclusive
- Build member's participation in conservation and education programs through cooperation and collaboration
- Work to promote the awareness of AZAA within the region and on the world stage
- Meet the changing needs of the membership

Conclusion

The three day meeting and workshop enabled for the first time in the Middle East region a coming together of like-minded, zoo and aquarium community members that were focused on working together. An environment of cooperation and knowledge sharing was created that placed value in the strength of shared aspirations rather than individual goals.

This combined strength of purpose enabled the historic agreement to be made for the establishment of the Arabian Zoo and Aquarium Association.

There is a long way to go but a massive first step has been taken. Al Ain Zoo will coordinate this journey for the long term benefit of all regional participants.

Special thanks are given to the initiative and vision of Mr. Ghanim, Director General of Al Ain Zoo without whom this first step would not have been possible.

Editor's Note:

I attended this meeting and would like to comment that the Al Ain Zoo team, who organised, coordinated, managed and facilitated the three day meeting did an excellent job, achieved with a professionalism that was both seamless and respected. Sally Walker



Working Group hard at it on the second day of the meeting, during the working group sessions following presentations on the first day. All groups made good contributions and easily found consensus.