

The ABC's and XYZ's of the International Congress of Zookeepers ICZ



Introduction

This introduction is to lay some groundwork to increase interest in zookeepers as such, because in South Asia, most zookeepers occupy a very low position in the zoo. This is due to some cultural, social and religious conventions and also the low level of education the post requires. Zookeepers are often suspect by zoo management and government because in some cities and countries they are enrolled in and controlled by labour unions, which often don't have the best interests of the zoos or their denizens in mind (including the keepers themselves) as some union officials are not even zoo employees. Unions by nature are highly political and self-serving in order to obtain benefits ... either for their members or for their officials).

The very fact that there IS, now, an International Congress of Zookeepers gives us a great deal of hope for making some inroads into the current problems of zoos and zookeepers in this region. ICZ is interested in helping improve standards of animal care and zookeeper education in developing countries and creating a global community of zookeepers, as well as so many other high-minded ideals.

In South Asia many zoo directors are fond of their keepers but this affection often is tempered by wariness as a result of potential consequences of their labour union's activities. As mentioned earlier, the President of these labour unions is usually not a zoo staff member but a politician with different values and objectives than the promotion and maintenance of good zoos.

The fact of the matter is that IF a zoo has problems with its zookeepers, the zoo has, without doubt, problems in the zoo. The existence of ICZ can demonstrate an ideal, wherein zookeepers not only do not have to be problematic for a zoo but are, in fact, one of the strongest links in the chain holding the zoo together and guaranteeing a high standard.

In India, in the past Zoo Outreach Organisation tried valiently to use their contacts and knowledge of various national zookeeper organisations to help Indian zoo personnel and government people understand that the qualification (and emoluments) of a zookeeper needed to be higher both in formal education and, as or more importantly, with individual interest in wild animals, conservation, animal welfare for zookeepers to be optimally useful to the zoo. We failed. We will try again.

Our failure to reach the keepers individually didn't stop zookeeper organisations like AAZK (America), ABWAK (Britain), ASZK (Australia), De Harpij (Netherlands) from helping Zoo Outreach Organisation try to help zoos generally. Here are some of what they did for us :

Over last three decades national and regional zookeeper organisations sponsored ...

- **Publications** (parts of or all of many useful publications such as a Hindi version of some important animal care information.
- **Memberships in AAZK / ABWAK**
- **Subscriptions to their magazines & newsletters**
- **Animal Management Correspondence Courses**
- **SAZARC Conferences**

They shared publication permission for 100's of articles from their publications, such as

- **Taxon groups – bats, herps etc. Susan Barnard !**
- **Emergency protocol articles**
- **Animal behaviour**
- **Environmental enrichment**

Training (in amphibian husbandry (long before the amphibian crisis was realised), in invertebrate husbandry and display, animal handling, basic procedure, and other skills)

Personal attention, hospitality, advice, etc.

- **Jean Hromadka**
- **Susan Chan**
- **Susan Barnard**
- **Norah Farnam**

ZOO thanks all the zookeepers associations and individuals all over the world and wish that zoos in South Asia will aspire to raising their cadre of zookeepers to be capable of the same quality and kind of support that zookeepers in other parts of the world do.

The Conference

I can't say enough about the quality of the zoo-keepers and their presentations at the Seattle conference. The presentations included not only basic zoo management (usually of a hard-to-manage species), but also field conservation projects in many parts of the world, high tech projects which keepers had initiated and run, innovative education programmes being conducted by keepers ... and on and on. I had attended conferences earlier (MUCH earlier) and was impressed then also but now, the zookeeper standard is keeping up with the last three decades of amazing progress zoos have made.

ICZ has proposed a "Keepers without Borders" which would provide expert and able zookeepers to rush to crisis venues in any part of the world. This needs investigation before final but is an ongoing ambition. ICZ also arranged a workshop on crisis management for zoos. ICZ has become a WAZA for maximum involvement and effectiveness.

It is clear that the organised 5000 plus zoo-keepers of the world (members of IZC) and their individual and international organisations are poised to join the other global organisations and associations of the world in tackling big topics such as climate change, crises in which zoos or wild animals that need help.