

Interview of current WAZA President and Director of the Minnesota Zoo

Dr. Lee C. Ehmke*

Sally Walker, Interviewer

SRW: Lee, thanks for agreeing to an interview for ZOO'S PRINT Magazine. Let's cut to the chase ... what were the chain of activities in your life that made you a zoo man ?

LCE: As with so many of us, it began at a young age. My earliest memory is of watching with intense interest a black rhino at the Fresno, California zoo, when I was 3 or 4 years old. A life-long fascination with animals followed, which grew over time to include a love for natural places and an interest in how best to protect them.

My parents—both schoolteachers—indulged my interest as we made summer-long trips across the country, stopping at every national park, wildlife refuge and zoo en route. I also had a bedroom full of snakes, lizards and frogs.

With that early love, I also became interested in how zoos were designed, and spent hours "creating" my own ideal zoo on paper. I studied every book or document I could find on the subject, including (prophetically) the original 1969 Master Plan for the proposed Minnesota Zoological Garden.

SRW: Did you ever waver?

LCE: my interest in animals and zoos never really waned, my desire to have a positive impact on the environment took me in a different direction, at least initially. I studied political science and then law at the University of California, and in the early 1980s became a lawyer specializing in land use and environmental law.

My brief career in environmental law was satisfying, but as I saw how the zoo world was being transformed—physically and conceptually—I became re-energized and intrigued enough to pursue a major career shift, and returned to graduate school to study landscape architecture and urban planning, with a specific desire to be involved in zoological design and habitat restoration. I entered a three-year masters program in Landscape Architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, and essentially created my own program of study, working with a number of pioneers in the zoo design field (including Jon Coe and Becca Hanson).

SRW: You studied and worked with the best ... no wonder you have had such an outstanding zoo career.



Lee has many animal friends, so it is a good thing to start with this well-behaved reptile. Photo Anon.

Well, upon finishing my Master's thesis (a proposal for an 'Indian Monsoon Forest' exhibit at the San Francisco Zoo), I was privileged to join the exhibit design team at the Bronx Zoo (then and now called "EGAD"— the Exhibition and Graphic Arts Department), working for department director John Gwynne and General Director William Conway. I moved to New York in 1988, at a fantastic period in the development of the zoo field generally and the Bronx Zoo in particular. Not only was I involved in a series of revolutionary and ambitious exhibit design projects, but I was at the Zoo when its parent organization evolved to become the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), leading and reflecting the bigger changes in the role of zoos occurring globally.

SRW: A few months ago you became the President of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA). What are some of the major goals you would like to achieve while occupying this prestigious office.

LCE: In my wildest dreams I would never have imagined being asked to assume this important role. It is a huge honor and at the same time a positive



Giving a welcome address (with Andrea Calozzi, former ALPZA Executive Director) at the ALPZA Annual Conference in Lima Peru, April 2014

reflection of the international standing of my institution, the Minnesota Zoo. But it's important to note that while the term of president lasts only two years, the organizational directives and initiatives of WAZA play out over a longer period of time.

So for me, there are three major initiatives already underway that I hope to help bring to a fruitful conclusion:

- 1) the implementation of the 'Biodiversity is Us' campaign (publicly launched in May of this year);
- 2) a major update and re-visioning of the World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy; and
- 3) the adoption of a new World Zoo and Aquarium Animal Welfare Strategy.

All of these initiatives began under previous WAZA Presidents, but as a member of the WAZA Council that gave these projects the 'green light,' I am eager to see them all through to success.

Beyond that, my major goal is to make real progress in helping to clarify and define the respective roles of WAZA and the many regional and national associations of zoos, to avoid wasted effort and to maximize our collective impact.

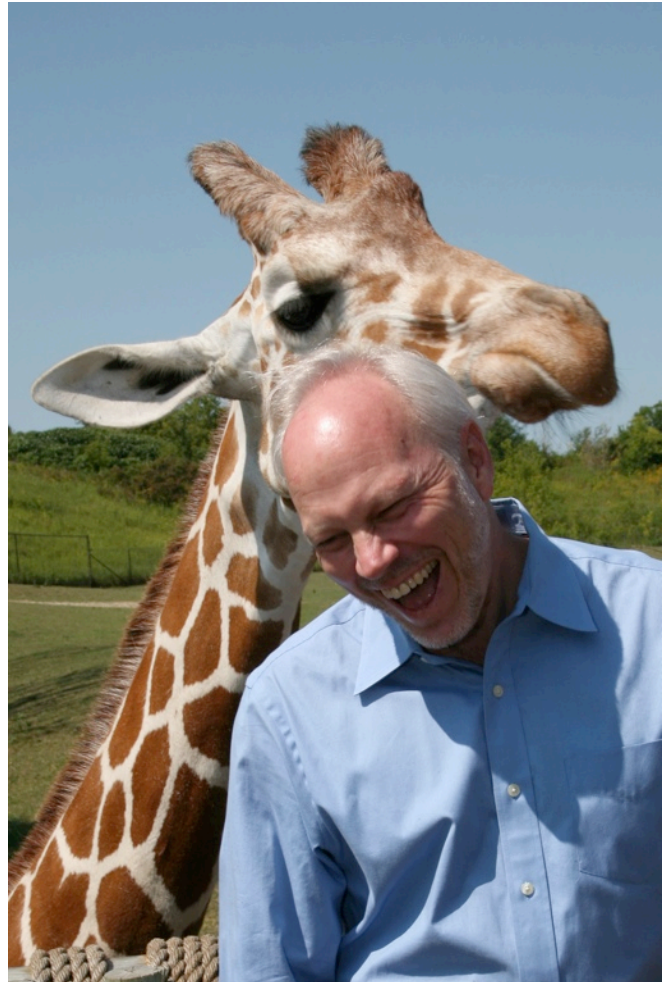


Moose--in Alaska

SRW: Those are all "golden goals"! In your role as Director of Minnesota Zoo as well as your WAZA Presidency, what are your observations and actions regarding extreme animal welfare groups.

LCE: Well, my first response is that they are growing in number, sophistication and impact. Their strategic use of social media, celebrity-driven messaging and their ability to influence political decision-makers is resulting in a number of disturbing trends.

It is of course frustrating because these groups are themselves doing next to nothing to actually address the devastation of species and habitats confronting the world. Large segments of the public around the



Fun with giraffe ... or so Lee says. How did he get so high and the giraffe so low? Probably cheating with a watch tower. Anon.

world are uncomfortable with the idea of 'animal captivity,' and unless zoos and aquariums begin to both tell their stories more effectively and to actually engage in more conservation activities, the extreme groups will have a growing base of support for their views, as poorly-informed as they may be. One of the clearest trends is that attempting to counter the emotion-driven arguments of some of these groups

with a purely rational, science-based response is not particularly effective.

Zoos must appeal to the hearts as well as the minds of our public. We can no longer simply dismiss our critics as being “anthropomorphic,” given our increased awareness of the emotional and cognitive capacity of animals. The importance of individual animal welfare cannot be treated as secondary to the practice of demographic and genetic management of at the population/species level, as has sometimes been the case in the past.

SRW: *Do you have any ideas and plans for assisting or dissolving at least some of the hundreds of the world’s dysfunctional zoos? If so, can you share some of your thoughts on this vexed zoo issue?*

LCE: One good result of the changing global sentiment about animals in captivity will be the increased pressure on dysfunctional zoos to change or close. WAZA of course has no direct authority to oversee these facilities, but can influence change by serving as the benchmark for excellence to which zoos can aspire (as opposed to being a minimum baseline for acceptance). Our formalized cooperation with the NGO Wild Welfare provides a good start on a more proactive approach. When the WAZA Animal Welfare Strategy is adopted, I hope it will be used by governments and regional associations to incentivize zoos with poor practices to improve.

SRW: *Do you have favorite (wild) animals? Please share what and why? And were you hooked on animals as a child also?*

LCE: I’ve already mentioned my early and on-going love for and fascination with animals. I adore rhinos, of all species, and have a particular fondness and concern



Sue and Lee in Tanzania. Whew! We were getting a little worried about Lee and the animals. Susan Chin, partner and friend is Vice President for Planning and Design and Chief Architect of Wildlife Conservation Society

for Sumatran rhinos. One of my first projects at the Bronx Zoo was designing an exhibit for Rapunzel, a beautiful Sumatran rhino brought in as part of a well-intentioned but ultimately unsuccessful effort to create a captive reservoir population of this extraordinary animal. Her gentle demeanor, silky reddish hair and surprisingly vocal nature were beguiling, to say the least. It saddens me to think this incredible species may vanish in my lifetime, despite the best efforts of the zoo and conservation communities.

On the other hand, a conservation program that the Minnesota Zoo has been supporting with funding and by providing the services of a full-time conservation biologist—the black rhino ecotourism project in the Kunene region of Namibia—is today one of the best examples of community-based conservation that seems to be working. It was a meaningful “full circle” moment for me to visit the project and think back to the zoo rhino experience that inspired me, oh so many years ago.

SRW: *Previously you were some years at the Bronx Zoo as a landscape architect. As Director of Minnesota Zoo do you get*

opportunities to design exhibits there also?

LCE: I’ve already touched on this, but yes I spent twelve years as a member of the interdisciplinary design team of the Wildlife Conservation Society (headquartered at the Bronx Zoo). I began as a landscape architect/exhibit designer and progressed to become the Director of Planning and Design there. I worked on some of the most interesting and influential exhibits ever attempted in zoos, including *Baboon Reserve* featuring a mixed species environment of geladas and other Ethiopian wildlife, and the *Congo Gorilla Forest*, which even today stands as one of the most outstanding and innovative zoo exhibits.

I was also able to assist in the planning and design of other facilities with ties to WCS’s international conservation efforts, including most successfully the Uganda Wildlife Education Centre (UWEC) in Entebbe. I had the distinct pleasure of visiting UWEC this spring, as it hosted the joint meeting of the WAZA Council and PAAZAB, and it has clearly become a model and success story for what is possible for a



Never too far from wild animals ... dead, alive, sculptured ...zoo people can't resist any of them.

conservation/education-focused zoo in the developing world.

I still get to participate in exhibit design here in Minnesota, and am quite proud of some of the low-cost, in-house renovations we've accomplished (like our Minnesota Trail), as well as some larger, award-winning efforts like *Russia's Grizzly Coast* and the *Heart of the Zoo*. With a 485-acre site and a newly-approved master plan, the Minnesota Zoo promises many future opportunities to design and build outstanding, progressive exhibits.

SRW: *Are you preparing for climate change in your zoo? What precautions and changes are you taking up?*

Minnesota, because of its location in the very center of North America, has always been a land of climactic extremes: very cold in the winter, and hot and humid during the summer. However, it is clear that global climate change is exacerbating and extending these extremes. Just this year, we have experienced the longest, coldest winter in memory, and we have just concluded the spring with the heaviest recorded rainfall in the state's history. This is impacting our collection planning: musk ox, an arctic tundra species we have exhibited since the zoo opening in 1978, will be phased out as they do not do well here in the increasingly hot and humid summer months.

Our Conservation staff are engaged in field studies to try to explain the recent rapid decline in the population of moose in Minnesota—an iconic animal for our state—and the evidence strongly suggests heat stress in the summer months from rising ambient temperatures is a contributing factor.

SRW: *Lee, is there any issue or issues that you would like to address in this interview, in order to raise them to the majority of our readers, e.g. South Asian zoo personnel.*

I am really looking forward to visiting India in November of this year, to be part of the first WAZA Annual Conference ever held in South Asia. While the challenges of funding, public perception and positioning of zoos as conservation agents are shared around the world, it is particularly acute in a region where there are extraordinary contrasts between the needs of human society and the sustainability of what remains of the region's biodiversity. I look forward to engaging with colleagues who share the same ultimate goals, but a completely different cultural context.



Sue Chin received the prestigious recognition of Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (FAIA), a rare honor given only to a few licensed architects.

SRW: *Lee, thank you very much for sharing your history and present with us. You are a very busy man and we also thank you for your time.*