

Zoo & Aquarium Careers

American Zoo and Aquarium Association

ZOO AND AQUARIUM CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

With more than 110 million people visiting AZA institutions annually, all zoo and aquarium employees have the opportunity to educate the public about the critical need for the conservation of wildlife and wild lands. This responsibility assures an interesting and rewarding career, but the profession requires more than a commitment to conservation - it requires hard work.

Zoo and aquarium employment is not always glamorous. Much of the work requires physical strength, as well as the ability to make detailed observations and keep information up-to-date. It takes a special kind of dedication to provide care to captive animals that require attention 24 hours a day, seven days a week, come snow, rain, or shine.

The rewards for such efforts are great. Zoo and aquarium employees share in the knowledge that they are providing the best care for the creatures in their facility, as well as developing a forum for others to learn how they too can participate in the conservation of our planet's natural resources.

REQUIREMENTS

The conservation and scientific programs in zoos and aquariums have become highly technical and specialized. Although practical experience with animals may sometimes be substituted for academic training, most entry-level keeper positions now require a four-year college degree. Training in animal science, zoology, marine biology, conservation biology, wildlife management, and animal behavior is preferred. Curatorial, research, and conservation positions typically require advanced academic degrees. However, advanced academic training by itself is insufficient, and it may take years of "on-the-job training" for someone to learn the practical aspects of exotic animal care. A few institutions offer curatorial internships which are designed to provide practical experience.

Students wishing to pursue animal-related careers are encouraged to carefully review the curriculum of the schools they wish to attend, as some programs focus more on a zoological application than others.

Students who are interested in the business side of zoo and aquarium operations should concentrate on skills related to a particular area of expertise, such as accounting, public relations, marketing, personnel management, etc. Whatever your career goal, guidance counselors can offer assistance in determining the most appropriate course of study.

SALARIES

Salaries for zoo and aquarium employees vary depending on the institution and its location. Institutions located in metropolitan areas generally offer higher salaries. An animal keeper's salary can range from minimum wage to more than \$30,000 a year, depending on skills and tenure. Salaries for other employees usually compare favorably with those prevailing in that region.

POSITIONS

Listed below are some positions in zoos and aquariums and a brief description of duties. Not all positions are found in all facilities, and responsibilities often vary.

Director/Chief Operating Officer - Executes policies as directed by the governing authority. Responsible for the institution's operation and plans for future development.

Assistant Director - Assists the director and assumes charge in the director's absence.

Finance Manager/Director - Manages the institution's finances, including payment of bills, purchasing, investments, and the preparation of financial statements.

General Curator - Oversees an institution's entire animal collection and animal management staff. Responsible for strategic collection planning.

Animal Curator - Manages a certain portion of an institution's animal collection; i.e., mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, etc.

Veterinarian - Responsible for the healthcare program for the animal collection and the maintenance of health records.

Veterinary Technician - Assists the veterinarian and provides care to the animals under the supervision of the veterinarian.

Registrar - Maintains computer records on the animal collection and applies for permits and licenses to hold or transport animals.

Curator/Coordinator/Director of Research - Supervises research projects, serves as liaison between the institution and the academic community, and publishes articles in scientific journals.

Curator/Coordinator/Director of Conservation - Oversees the institution's conservation activities, including field projects. Serves as liaison with government wildlife agencies and other conservation organizations.

Conservation Biologist/Zoologist - Provides scientific and technical assistance in the management of the animal collection and assists in conducting various research or field conservation projects.

Head Keeper/Aquarist - Supervises a section or department of the institution; provides training and scheduling for keepers.

Senior Keeper/Aquarist - Provides primary animal care for a department.

Keeper/Aquarist - Provides daily care to the institution's animals, including diet preparation, cleaning, general exhibit maintenance, and record keeping.

Operations Director/Manager - Responsible for the daily operation of the institution's physical plant and equipment.

Curator of Exhibits - Creates exhibits and assists in the design of graphics.

Curator of Horticulture - Responsible for the botanical collection and its application to the animal collection, as well as daily maintenance of the institution's grounds.

Curator of Education - Plans and implements the institution's education programs.

Public Relations/Affairs Manager/Director - Promotes the institution, its mission, and its programs to the public via the media.

Development Director/Officer - Develops and manages fund-raising activities which can include writing grant proposals and attracting corporate sponsors, as well as soliciting private donations.

Marketing Director/Manager - Creates advertising campaigns and other activities to increase public awareness of the institution.

Special Events Manager/Coordinator - Develops and implements events to attract visitors throughout the year.

Membership Director/Manager - Responsible for maintaining and increasing institution memberships for families and individuals and designing special events for members only. May also be in charge of "adopt-an-animal" programs to raise funds.

Gift Shop Manager - Manages staff and all aspects of gift shop operation from buying products to designing shops.

Visitor Services Manager - Supervises the staff and facilities that cater to the visiting public including concessions and restrooms.

Personnel Manager/Director - Responsible for all personnel matters including payroll, insurance, and tax matters.

Volunteer Coordinator - Responsible for recruiting and maintaining a staff of volunteers/docents. Duties include scheduling docents for on- and off-grounds activities and keeping docents abreast of new developments to relate to the public.

Docent/Volunteer - Duties may include diet preparation, small animal care, teaching educational programs, leading group tours, and staffing special events.

Junior Keeper - Some institutions offer a summer program for high school students who wish to volunteer in a zoo or aquarium setting. Duties are often similar to those of other volunteers, but they are supervised much more closely.

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDING CAREER INFORMATION

The American Association of Zoo Keepers (AAZK) is dedicated to the important role keepers play in providing professional care to captive wild animals. Those interested in obtaining more information on becoming a keeper should contact: AAZK, 3601 SW 29th St., Suite 133, Topeka, KS 66614.

The American Association of Zoo Veterinarians (AAZV) is a professional organization dedicated to the science of animal medicine, especially that of exotic animals under captive management. Those pursuing a career in exotic animal medicine should contact: Dr. Wilbur Amand, Executive Director, AAZV, 6 North Pennell Road, Media, PA 19063.

If you are interested in becoming a volunteer, you should contact your local zoo or aquarium. More information on docent activities is available from the Association of Zoo and Aquarium Docents:

Association of Zoo and Aquarium Docents
Sue Kiebler
Columbus Zoological Gardens
P.O. Box 400
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The American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) represents virtually every major professionally operated zoo, aquarium, wildlife park, and oceanarium in North America, as well as most of their Professional employees. AZA has a rigorous accreditation program for its zoo and aquarium members to ensure quality in animal care and visitor services. One of AZA's key roles is as spokesperson on wildlife issues for more than four million individuals who support zoological parks and aquariums at the local level.