

# Zoo Work Experience for School Students

## Expectations and Reality

by Ruth Hall EDUCATION MANAGER | ZOOS SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Studies were undertaken with senior secondary school work experience students to determine what students expected from the week long zoo work experience placement and what they actually experienced. Findings showed that some areas of the experience were significantly different from what students expected, particularly relating to the tasks keepers do and the problems the students experienced. Results have led to improvements to the structure of the program.

### Background

Like most Zoos, Adelaide Zoo offers work experience placements to tertiary and secondary students. Most members of keeping, horticulture and veterinary staff supervise students on a regular basis. There are costs and benefits for Zoos in supporting work experience programs:

### Benefits

- Practical assistance with some of the work routines of the paid staff
- An opportunity for supervising staff to develop communication, leadership and supervision skills through training, overseeing and guiding work placement students
- The chance for senior zoo staff to identify good, potential, future employees
- Filtering potential future applicants for zoo-related jobs by enabling potential applicants to obtain a better understanding of zoo keeping
- Generating goodwill towards the zoo in the community through the students involved and by supporting education providers
- Supporting providers of animal-related tertiary courses: this in turn assists their viability and benefits current and future training needs of Zoos SA staff.

### Costs

- Safety of work experience students is paramount. Induction procedures, the nature of duties given and safe operating practice requirements may restrict or inconvenience the supervisors in their daily routines
- Administrative time needed to organize and manage the placement and to ensure that legal and insurance requirements are met may be quite time consuming
- Students who are not prepared to work safely or to follow instructions promptly and effectively can create stress, lost time and dangerous situations
- Time to organize and manage each placement is considerable.

Zoos SA, through its properties at Adelaide Zoo (an eight hectare city Zoo) and Monarto Zoo (a 1000 hectare open range zoo), recognizes the value of the unique experience it can provide for students and supports the concept of practical work experience programs for students at senior secondary and tertiary levels.

At Adelaide Zoo the Education Manager manages the work experience program for school students. The placements are very popular, so an application process is involved.

Each year over 120 applications are received and about 30 students are selected, on merit, to do a week of work experience, working on a different animal round each day.



The main selection criterion is a demonstrated desire to work in animal husbandry, which is supported by past experience in this area. Generally, students who claim a love of animals, a passion for saving threatened species and a devotion to their family pets, but no other practical animal husbandry experience, will not be competitive enough to win a place in this program.

Successful students have had significant experience in several areas such as:

- working with farm animals,
- commercially breeding birds, dogs etc,
- volunteer work in animal rescue organizations and sanctuaries
- work experience in veterinary clinics or pet shops
- practical and theoretical animal work at school in "Agriculture" subjects.

These students seem to come to the program with reasonable skills and realistic expectations. They also seemed to enjoy the program immensely and few mentioned problems they had experienced.

### The study

The study was designed to obtain more detailed information about what students really expected in the program and to see if their expectations were being addressed.

A survey was designed in two parts. The **Before** survey was completed before the program began, and the **After** survey was completed immediately on completion. The surveys were completed anonymously.

### The areas covered in the surveys were

#### BEFORE

- 1A. Main reasons for applying
- 2A. Things students most hoped to gain
- 3A. Main tasks expected to be done
- 4A. Main concerns about the program

#### AFTER

- 1B. Things most enjoyed
- 2B. Most important things gained
- 3B. Main tasks actually done
- 4B. Main problems experienced

For each survey question students were given up to 15 options and were asked to select up to 3 items which were the most important to them.

### 2004 Results

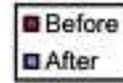
The results for three of the four areas surveyed were very easy to analyse, as the same options could be offered in the "before" and "after" surveys. However the first area was not comparable, so in 2005 the survey was repeated with part 1A changed to "Main things students expected to enjoy."

The 2004 results provided some useful information:

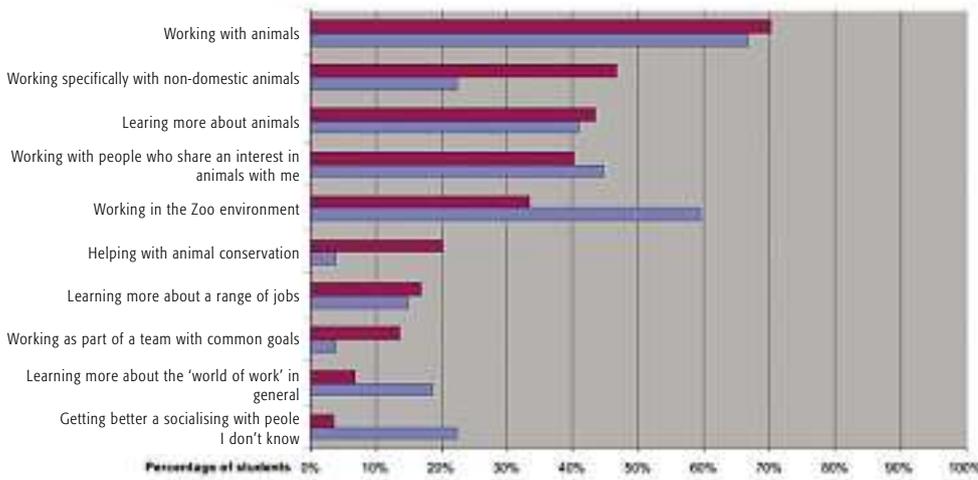
- In 2004, students actually worked in 8 animal rounds over 5 days at the zoo. One of the main problems experienced, as reported in the survey, was having to get to know and to work with so many different people. In 2005, as a result of this survey, the program was modified so students spent a full day in each of 5 areas.
- The results of the 2004 survey showed that some of the choice options in each area were unimportant to students, with none of them being chosen in the "3 most important things" by any student. These options were omitted from the 2005 survey, which then became more streamlined.

## 2005 Results

Graphically, these results are presented below and discussed.



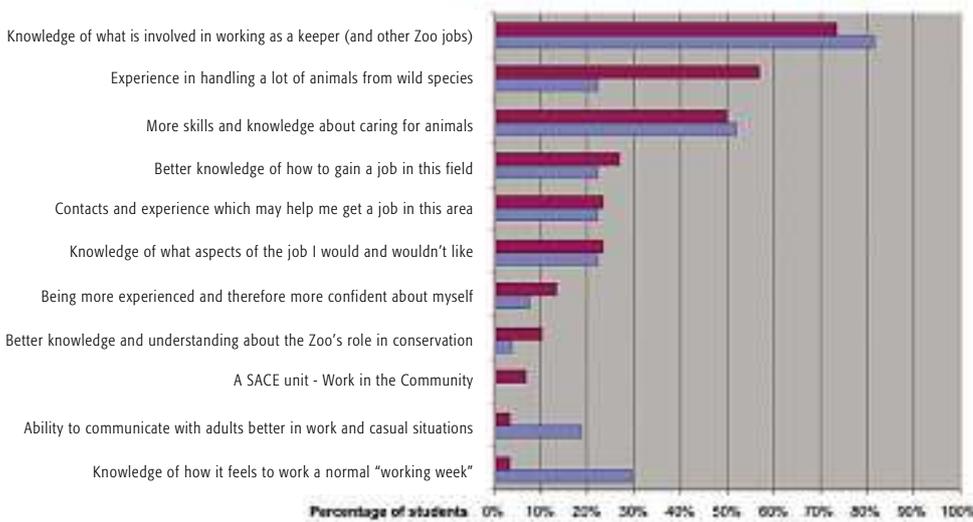
### 2005 Zoo Work Experience | What will/did you most enjoy?



#### Comments:

- As one would expect, the majority of students wanted to work with animals, but working with specifically non-domestic species was an unpredicted joy for over a quarter of students.
- Working in a Zoo environment was very important for nearly 60% of students, though only half this number were expecting this to be important.
- "Helping with animal conservation" was hardly mentioned in the **Before** survey, but highly rated by 20% **After** the program – suggesting that this experience is able to change a love of animals to a concern for conservation.
- Socialising with new adult acquaintances is difficult for most school students. Nearly a quarter of students enjoyed the experience of getting better at socializing with strangers, though it was not something they had expected.

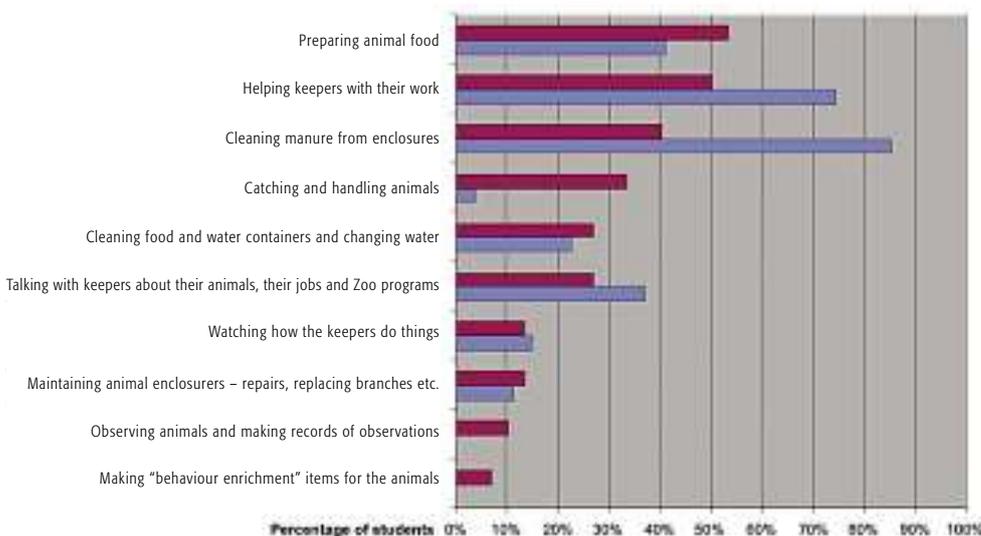
### 2005 Zoo Work Experience | What are the most important things you will/did gain?



#### Comments:

- A common misconception is that zoo keepers *handle* animals frequently. Over half the students expected to gain skills in animal handling, but under 1/4 found that this was one of the most important gains for them.
- Academic accreditation (SACE unit) rated very low in importance for these students.
- Again the personal development of improving communication skills and learning about the world of work were unexpected benefits gained by students.

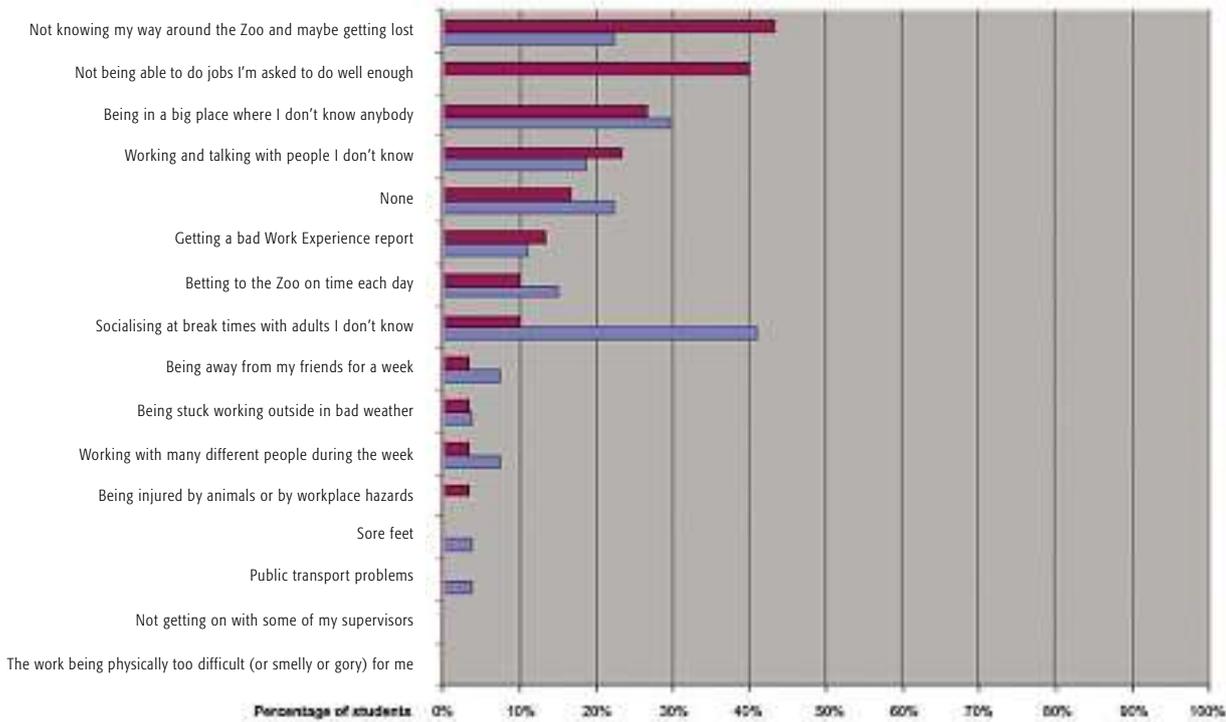
### 2005 Zoo Work Experience | What are the main activities you will/did undertake?



#### Comments:

- Reality strikes! Although these students all have good previous animal management experience, only 40% thought that cleaning manure would have been one of the main activities. In fact 85% found that it was! A good learning experience for those with an over-romantic view of the job.
- Again, many students (1/3) expected animal handling to be one of the main activities, but it was for only 4% of students.

## 2005 Zoo Work Experience | What are the main problems you foresee/experienced?

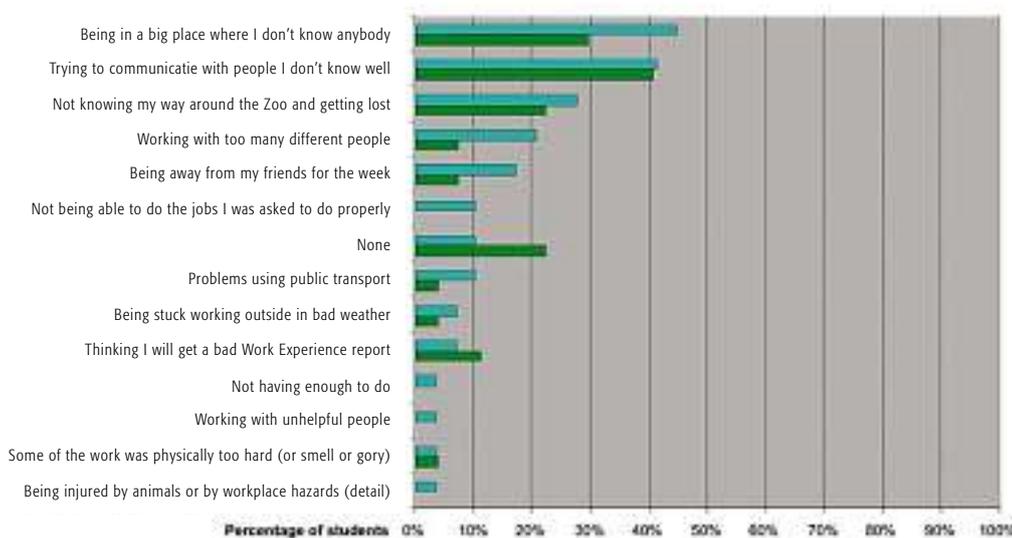


### Comments:

In this area, problems that students feared were less significant than ones they hadn't considered:

- Over 40% were worried about getting lost. About half that number did in fact experience this problem. Because of the anonymous and uncoded way the surveys were completed, one cannot tell how many students were in both groups i.e. They feared getting lost and then did. It would be interesting to know.
- 40% of students expected that they would not be able to do jobs well enough. **None** of them actually experienced this problem in a significant way. This was probably due to both the excellent support and judgement from the keeping staff and also the sound animal management experience these students already had. No doubt students felt more skilled and self-confident after the week was completed.
- The biggest problem, experienced by 40%, but only predicted by 10% was the social aspect of the program: socializing with adults they did not know well, and doing this with different people each day. Although it clearly was a concern, as noted in comments on earlier sections, many of the students also believed the experience helped them to develop these skills and some enjoyed the experience far more than they expected.

## 2005 Zoo Work Experience | Main problems experienced in 2004 and 2005.



### Comments:

This graph looks at the results of the **After** results in the 2 years of the survey.

In 2004, students worked 6 half day rounds and 2 full day rounds. This program provided more variety for students, but involved 3 hand-overs during the days and 3 extra sets of people to work with! Students did not complain about this situation and they were overwhelmingly positive in comments about the program, but the study did reveal the difficulties for the students in so much location change.

The 2005 results indicate that there were less problems experienced in all areas, with over 20% declaring "None".

## Program changes

In 2007, the program has been expanded, with Children's Zoo staff accepting one student per week, working entirely in that part of the zoo. This has doubled the number of students able to undertake the program. Applicants were able to give preferences for the type of program worked: across five zoo rounds or all in the Children's Zoo. Already it is evident that students working in the Children's Zoo alone are thoroughly enjoying it. Some advantages of working in this section all week are:

- They work with the same staff and become very familiar with the people, site and routines
- Keepers in the Children's Zoo are very positive about work experience students and value their efforts more than some rounds, especially where the risk of injury to students or stress to animals is higher
- Animals from all major animal groups (mammals, reptiles, birds, fish, amphibians and invertebrates) are managed here
- There is much more animal handling, to condition the animals for human contact, in this section. Most students really enjoy this experience.

## Conclusions

Evaluation is a useful tool for people managing educational programs. This survey provided an interesting insight into the zoo work experience program and its impact on school students. It provided more direction for Zoo Education staff in how to best induct and support students undertaking the program. The keeping staff found the information very relevant and interesting. It also reflected very well on the values and commitment of the young people taking part in this program. ♦

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Adelaide Zoo work experience program has evolved over the years and will continue to do so. Having useful information is a way of identifying problems and indicating areas where change is required. When introducing changes which affect other people, like animal management staff in this case, survey information can be valuable in supporting the argument for the change.

The zoo work experience program depends greatly on the professionalism, goodwill and flexibility of the very busy keeping staff, Assistant Curators and Curator. All Education staff members are also involved in organising students on a day to day basis. The support of all these people is greatly appreciated.

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# The Safari of the hidden ideas



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**Many educators probably don't agree with the idea of the *Tabula rasa*. In fact, many people who work as educators in zoos and aquariums know that visitors bring their own mental schedule. They also know that a huge set of intuitive ideas, prior knowledge and implicit theories will be the background with which visitors will interpret the available information on their visit. These facts will also be the background with which they will use educational and interpretive devices.**

**Tabula rasa** THE DOCTRINE OF *TABULA RASA* SAYS THAT THE MIND DOESN'T HAVE A UNIQUE STRUCTURE AND THAT ITS ORGANIZATION RESULTS FROM THE ENVIRONMENT, THROUGH SOCIALIZATION AND LEARNING. THE CONCEPT OF *TABULA RASA* IS VERY POPULAR AMONG THOSE WHO THINK THAT ANY HUMAN CHARACTERISTIC CAN BE MODIFIED WITH APPROPRIATE CHANGES IN THE SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS OR IN THE PEDAGOGIC RESOURCES. IN THE FIELD OF INFORMAL EDUCATION, TO AGREE WITH *TABULA RASA* SUPPOSES THAT THE USERS OR VISITORS OF MUSEUMS, ZOOS OR AQUARIUMS ARRIVE AT OUR INSTITUTIONS PREPARED TO LEARN OUR CONCEPTS AND MESSAGES WITHOUT CARING ABOUT THEIR PRIOR KNOWLEDGE.