

Educating Interns

investing in our future

by **Tanya Paul** | Wildlife Show Supervisor | Oregon Zoo | United States of America

Investing in a good intern program has both short-term and long-term benefits. Properly trained interns can allow an organization to extend resources, expand programs that might otherwise be left undeveloped and supplement husbandry practices. More importantly, a well-structured training program is an excellent educational opportunity, one designed to meet the needs of interns and produce excited, experienced and dedicated future zoo employees.

Education is a key mission statement component of many zoos and aquariums. We connect visitors with wildlife and inspire our audiences to make a difference in conservation efforts. A recent multi-institutional research program conducted by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums found that a majority of park visitors leave feeling a connection with environmental and conservational issues (Association of Zoos and Aquariums, 2007). While most zoo and aquarium education programs are aimed at elementary-aged children and their parents, we often overlook an important audience: young adults embarking on their collegiate and professional journeys.

Over the past several decades, aquariums and zoos have evolved in mission and action (Tribe and Booth, 2003). Currently, national and international accreditation standards exist to ensure high quality education, research and animal care programs. At the Oregon Zoo, we believe it is our responsibility to ensure the industry continues to raise the standards for animal care and conservation. To

that end, we have chosen to focus on educational opportunities for interns. These high school and college students represent potential future park employees and may ultimately influence the future of worldwide conservation efforts.

Before starting an intern program, it's important to note the difference between interns and volunteers. Although both may be unpaid positions, the goals of participants in these programs are quite different. In fact, internships run by most private organizations in the United States are governed by the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and must follow strict guidelines (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). Legally, most non-profit organizations may offer positions for interns to volunteer for charitable reasons. However, for-profit internships are guided by criteria that focus on these opportunities as learning experiences. Indeed, this is the primary factor for most interns, who are typically looking for hands-on experience or want to enhance their resumes.



Photo © the Oregon Zoo



An intern spends time learning the basics of zoo keeping.

The recruitment and interview process for an intern program should attract candidates from a broad geographical range. It's essential to have clear application requirements, so decide in advance the type of experiences and skills you require as prerequisites for candidates. This should assist in focusing the creation of application fields or supplemental questions. However do not just rely on the application; be sure to interview candidates to ensure their goals align with that of your institution. Proper placement is critical to their success, and thus the success of your program. Much of the internship should involve mentoring and support from the lead staff, so it is essential to have them participate in the screening process. Finally, interviewing all prospective interns on the phone, including local candidates, will help keep the selection process unbiased.

Once interns are selected, they should go through the same administrative process as volunteers (if the interns are unpaid). Set up a system to track their hours in a database, and also consider creating an orientation to ensure they have a basic understanding of policies and expectations. Design the internship orientation as you would

for an interpretive program, addressing Maslow's theory of basic needs (1943). Creating a simple welcoming packet, including a map of your facility, will help interns adjust quickly.

While the application and orientation process might be the same for all interns at your institution, it is important to remember that internship positions can be as varied as the skills required to run a zoo or aquarium. Some examples include animal care, marketing, conservation research, facilities maintenance and volunteer management. However, the majority of a zoo or aquarium's internships are typically designed to provide participants with practical knowledge and learning experience in animal husbandry, conservation and education. In order to ensure animal and human safety, as well as allow interns the opportunity to learn hands-on animal and/or park-related skills, internships should have a structured training program.

To help maximize learning opportunities, interns should commit a minimum of 20 hours per week to the program. You may even consider increasing this time to 32 hours per week (four 8-hour days)

for a total of 12 weeks. This increased obligation will ensure candidates are committed to capitalizing on their experiences. Remember that when creating an internship schedule, it is also important to consider current resources, including staff availability for training and project needs. One enhancement to any internship is a training manual. Consider creating a manual that includes park protocols and basic information that applies to all internships. Individual departments may then wish to add supplemental reading materials specific to each area. With an eye towards environmental responsibility, the manual can also be offered on a flash drive to reduce paper waste. You can also email a PDF of the manual so interns can familiarize themselves with basic procedures, such as important safety information, in advance. Clearly outlining expectations of preparedness will allow everyone to make the most of an internship.

A manual can be a great tool for staff as well, helping keep an internship program organized. A solid internship should be structured to build on skills and information over the course of the program. For example, keeper interns may begin by focusing on basic husbandry tasks, such as cleaning, diets and enrichment. Once these skills have been mastered, they can go on to learn about animal behavior, handling or training. An education internship might first focus on interpretive skills before moving on to curriculum design or creation of thematic programming. Providing information in the manual in a logical and progressive manner will keep both interns and staff on track.

While a manual can help interns develop a solid foundation in their chosen area, one way to evaluate an intern's comprehension is through periodic testing. Many interns are students, often looking to gain college credits for their



Photo © the Oregon Zoo

Wildlife show interns help educate the public about native species.

participation. Interns can be given regular written or oral exams that cover information found in the training manual.

In some cases, it may be beneficial for interns to pass a hands-on exam, to demonstrate their practical application of skills. For example, an education intern might be asked to present a short thematic talk to demonstrate their understanding of basic interpretive skills. Requiring interns to pass these exams ensures they are equipped to move on to the next topic in the internship.

Beyond demonstrating competency in zoo and aquarium research, education or animal care, interns can also gain life experiences. Incorporate opportunities for interns to participate in exercises to improve their job skills. Near the end of the program, ask them to submit an updated resume and cover letter, which can then be reviewed by staff. Interns may even be asked to participate in mock interviews, to help them gain real-world experience. These interviews can be conducted by employees from the intern's area, who can give feedback on how the intern candidate answered questions and offer tips for improving.

Alternatively, you can allow them to assist with screening the next set of interns, taking time to discuss the strengths presented by another candidate's application. This ensures interns will finish the program with the skills to secure the job they have been trained to do.

One of the challenges any institution may face when adding a newly-developed intern program depends on the existence of an established volunteer program. If your zoo or aquarium has a large, dedicated volunteer base, you will want to be sure to continue to recognize their commitment. However, in the beginning you may find some volunteers are uncomfortable with how interns gain responsibilities. It is important that volunteers understand the different demands placed on interns, including the exams and time commitment. One solution is to incorporate skills that your volunteers possess into the intern training

program. For example, the intern is interested in exhibit design, pair that individual with a volunteer that enjoys construction or maintenance projects. This ensures that the educational aspect of the internship remains central in the program, while building relationships between volunteers and interns. Volunteers can then look forward to mentoring interns, and both groups respect the others' contributions.

Interns that complete an intensive training program will likely find success when they enter the competitive job market. At the Oregon Zoo, many interns in the Living Collections department go on to be hired as temporary keepers, at our institution or even other facilities. Since the adoption of a more structured, education-based approach, 70% of graduates from the wildlife show internship program have gained employment at zoological or aquarium institutions.



Photo© the Oregon Zoo

Conservation interns learn about the importance of native Western pond turtles (*Actinemys marmorata*).

While the interns benefit from such a rigorous program, they are also giving back to the facility. Over the course of the average Oregon Zoo internship, each intern contributes around 300 hours. Even with the focus on educating the intern, about half of a participant's time is a net contribution for the organization. This time allows the staff to invest in developing and implementing the program. The structure of the internship, including the participatory, hands-on nature of the curriculum, allows interns to pursue independent project hours, completing tasks that may otherwise need staff supervision. The hours that are gained from work completed by interns may be re-invested into the program.

Aside from the hours our interns give, staff gains from the experience as well. Employees that otherwise do not have managerial duties are able to take the lead on an internship. The highly-structured internship makes it easy for staff with little or no management experience to administer the program. Once they receive their supervisor's approval, Oregon Zoo employees may choose to mentor one intern per quarter. They screen resumes, interview and choose their own interns. They may be responsible for the majority of training, scheduling testing and completing evaluations. This is a great opportunity for staff (perhaps even temporary or seasonal employees) to gain experience in a supervisory capacity.



Photo © the Oregon Zoo

An intern assists a visitor donating to a hooded vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*).



Photo © the Oregon Zoo



Working with keepers, an intern helps transport penguins to a new habitat.

Running a quality internship program can require more energy than the interns offer in return. There is no doubt that we benefit from our interns putting in a lot of hard work, but there are many hours spent mentoring and educating them as well. Our staff gets to refine their teaching, delegating and supervising skills and the zoo and aquarium community ends up with an experienced member of the next generation of keepers and educators. Finally, the interns benefit from a one-of-a-kind learning experience that will help them in their professional endeavors. Developing and implementing a structured internship program is truly an investment in our future.

Author Contact: Tanya Paul |
Tanya.paul@oregonzoo.org

REFERENCES

Association of Zoos and Aquariums. (2007). Why Zoos and Aquariums Matter: Assessing the impact of a visit to a zoo or aquarium. Silver Spring, MD: Falk, J.H., Reinhard, E.M., Vernon, C.L., Bronnenkant, K., Deans, N.L. & Heimlich, J.E.

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50(4), 370-396.

Tribe, A. & Booth, R. (2003). Assessing the Role of Zoos in Wildlife Conservation. *Human Dimensions of Wildlife*, 8, 65-74.

U.S. Department of Labor. (2010, April). U.S. Department of Labor - Wage and Hour Division - Fact Sheet. Retrieved from <<http://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs71.htm>>.