

Volunteers

in Johannesburg Zoo

by Louise Gordon

People who want to be part of zoo life and who want to work with animals besiege zoos. They dream of having all the zoo animals as part of their own personal pet collection, with very little insight into the dangers that are associated with wild animals. We are often contacted by people who want their four-year-olds to work in the zoo because they love animals. These parents want more involvement than offered by attending educational holiday programmes, normal school visits and the like.

Johannesburg Zoo's mission is to become a world class African zoo with education as a core function. It is our duty to make sure that a sense of appreciation for animals is cultivated in youth so that they become environmentally aware and actively involved in conservation education projects. Good zoos should be part of the community, and this can be achieved by cultivating an appreciation of the role zoos play. In Johannesburg Zoo we currently have three programmes involving our community on a regular basis, in different age groups – the Honey Badger Club, the B.E. M.A.D. Club and our Adult Guides.

Children's interest in animals is stimulated from a very young age and this interest, we all know, is important to harvest. The dilemma that most institutions in South Africa face is, how to keep these interested people busy without them taking up too much time, especially the children's groups. Most institutions run on pretty tight budgets so, ideally, volunteers should be able to make the load lighter, yet in most cases they often cost more time than their actual worth.

In Johannesburg Zoo we have worked with a variety of volunteers over the years. One of the groups was the Young Volunteers, aged 12–17. They visited the zoo on weekends and school holidays, formed their own cliques and practically started running certain sections of the zoo. We ended up with a situation where very few staff members had the time or interest to become involved. We had to change the system and manage it more efficiently, despite a lack of staff.

We decided, therefore, to form clubs for the youth groups and to train the adults as guides.

Our first club, the Honey Badger Club, was launched in May 2003 for ages 7–14. They are the most interested but also the most difficult group, as they need constant supervision. This club started off with 11 members, all excited and

ready for action.

A roster was developed for the year, each meeting having a different theme. The format used is based on an information session consisting of a slide show with biofacts, an animal activity session, which can be anything from decorating night-rooms to making frozen food buckets and stuffed pine cones, to a behind-the-scenes tour, to grooming ponies. Children love art and each session is completed with a craft consisting of items that can be re-used or recycled. The focus is on a conservation message to take home – re-use and recycle instead of just throwing it away.

We dress them in bright green t-shirts, which you cannot miss. This is part of the marketing strategy for the programme, and gives them their very own identity.

We meet once a month on a Saturday, from 9:00 –14:00. The annual fee is R250-00 and includes the t-shirt, a nametag and an entrance voucher for the family. The year ends off with a sleep-over at the zoo, which is hugely popular. Today, 10 months down the line, the membership has grown to 50 and is still increasing.

The club fulfills the need of children wanting to be involved at the zoo. Parents want their children to be interested in nature and they need a safe place to leave them. As it is only one Saturday per month, it does not make a huge impact on their busy schedules.

We are very happy with the results as parents are now paying to have their children "work" at the zoo. We know that a large number of club members will always retain an appreciation for zoos, and that we can manage this kind of system.

This was just the beginning of our zoo clubs. We still had to cater for the teenage market, which has always been difficult – zoos are simply not cool enough for most of them. Yet we had individuals phoning on a regular basis, so we decided to be brave and launched the B.E. M.A.D. Club for 14 to 19-year-olds.

Behaviour Enrichment Makes A Difference, or the B.E. M.A.D. Club, is run on the same basis as the Honey Badgers, except this time the t-shirt is sky blue. We meet once a month, on the same Saturday as families may have children in both age groups

The aims of this club include getting teenagers to start thinking of the ethics of animals in captivity, the role of zoos, how to get involved in



many species benefit from frozen food buckets made by club members

conservation and make a difference.

The format is based on an information session, a behaviour enrichment project and a public information tour, planned in conjunction with the behaviour enrichment officer. We use re-usable items or items ready for recycling. Projects include making feeding objects (pine cones, ice buckets, tyres filled with food and more) for the animals, making feeding devices, recording animal behaviour and informing the public of the findings. We have found that we attract quite a following when we are busy with a project such as feeding the animals, hence the birth of the feeding tour. Club members are very much part of this as they do the feeding and interact with visitors.

The club fulfills the need of teenagers wanting to be part of the life of the zoo. They learn more about the needs of animals in captivity and the importance of sharing knowledge. It fulfills our aim of accommodating the teenagers, doing behaviour enrichment projects on a regular basis and offering the public an opportunity to participate in a fun tour whilst we are raising funds and awareness. This club was launched on 7 February 2004 and the numbers are increasing every day.

We often receive calls from frantic parents with regards to school projects. These have to do with community service and often involve children who are not really interested in joining the clubs. This is how we make it work for us.

It is difficult to assess the demand of community service projects as we are contacted on an ad hoc basis. Now and again a teacher phones to ask if we could accommodate groups ranging from nine to 17 years of age and from one

to 20 children at a time. A formal programme has been designed, which can be repeated as many times as needs be, consisting of window washing, weeding, cleaning the farmyard enclosures, making frozen buckets, litter clean-ups and much more. We start off with the “working” aspect and end with a short fun animal session.

Marketing is done through “word of mouth”, and many return visits with families and new family memberships have resulted.

The last group to touch on is the adult group. In previous years we had guides who volunteered but today, in South Africa, we have very poor communities who cannot afford the expense involved. All our adult “volunteers” are therefore paid a stipend.

The minimum age is 22 and a training course that includes both theory and practice is compulsory. The Marketing Federation of South Africa has endorsed the course, the first such to be so accredited. After successful completion, adults become involved in our tour system. They do tours night or day, seven days a week. Without them we would not be able to run the system, which has an approximate income of R1,000,000 per year. Refresher courses are free of charge throughout the year and socials are organized on a regular basis. The guides are available for different projects at no extra cost. This contributes to lowering the cost of functions and, overall, brings many benefits to the zoo.

By making use of volunteers you cement the zoo in people’s minds, raise funds and fulfill some of your educational goals. It certainly pays, providing the structures are there to ensure their efforts truly benefit both the zoo and the volunteers themselves.

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