

# Zookeepers' Specialist Potential

## in public conservation education

by Ing. Eva Podhorska, Decin Zoological Gardens, Czech Republic

The project "The use of zookeepers' specialist potential in general public conservation education" was realised in Decin Zoo during the period of July – December 2002. The aim of this pilot project was the involvement of zookeepers in the zoo's public educational programmes.

The keepers from Decin Zoo participated successfully in six different educational activities and the results of their work will influence future programmes.

The project involved our keepers testing the following activities in their leisure time:

### Preparation of information brochures and flyers

The keepers presented their own proposals (photos, texts) for the publication of three informative promotional items. Following their ideas, our expert graphics adviser created comprehensive design conceptions, resulting in the following publications:

#### **Through the Eyes of Zookeepers –**

a simple, informative leaflet in the nature of an invitation to the zoo with brief descriptions of unusual zookeeper activities viewable by the public

#### **Through the Eyes of Zookeepers –**

a brochure listing activities available to the public (animal feeding with commentary, interactive facilities for children, panels with interesting animal information)

#### **Animals' Stories or What Do(n't) You Know About Animals in the Zoo? –**

unusual and popular zookeepers' stories about their experiences with animals, supplemented with photographs.

This printed material is aimed at the general zoo visitor, schools and other organisations and is offered free of charge. It has been written in a friendly, non-expert way with many colourful photos, and the public seem to really like the results.

The keepers continue to take photos for use in other material we want to publish. We provide them with cameras whenever they are required.

### Environmental enrichment design project

Working alone keepers tried to design the basic structure of certain species' enclosures. After consultation with the Curator, two proposals were put into effect:

- enrichment of monkey exhibits with new ropes, in the form of ladders, swings and climbing ropes, and sections of tree trunks hollowed out to produce holes in which food items can be hidden
- enrichment of parrot enclosures with steel rods for making fruit 'kebabs', allowing the birds to nibble food items in the way they would in the wild.

### Creation of special information panels at animal exhibits

The keepers produced this interpretation using information considered to be of interest to the visitors, including the sorts of 'personal' stories about individual animals that only keepers would know. This material is presented in a way that allows regular up-dating of information as and when necessary.

### Interactive educational facilities

The keepers also planned and produced various interactive facilities targeted at children. These demonstrate particularly fascinating behaviours and are located near the enclosures of the animals concerned. Visitors can investigate, for example, how horses see the world around them or how kangaroos jump.

### Animal feeding with keeper commentary

The keepers produced talks to be given simultaneously with the feeding of certain species. Using a mobile sound system keepers explain the feeding behaviour and relate this to the species' survival, as well as covering other matters of interest such as the degree of threat of extinction facing the species in the wild.

### Recording of expert data through the use of computers

After being given training and a limited access to the zoo's information system, keepers were involved in the process of recording and using 'expert' computer data. They broadened their experience by familiarising themselves with the EAZA and ISIS special database programmes.

The keepers greatly welcomed these opportunities to participate in the preparation and delivery of educational programmes for the public. The results of their work have met with positive response from visitors, and Decin Zoo continues today to benefit from the project.

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