The World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy recommends that zoos and aquariums endeavour to develop structured training programmes available to all staff and volunteers. (WAZA (2005): Building a future for Wildlife – The World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy). Whilst the Umgeni River Bird Park management has made this document compulsory reading for all management staff, the training of the staff at this facility were neglected in the past. Previous managers and directors focused on educating the visitors of this park and assumed that the staff either knew all they needed to, or didn’t need to be educated more as their true value was not fully appreciated. This started to change in 2012 with the appointment of a full-time education manager and also a new general manager. One of the training initiatives was that I was fortunate to be elected as a sponsored delegate in 2014. At the same time, new conservation education programmes have been developed, for example the creation of an organic vegetable garden in the park using compost created from organic matter we used to send to a land-fill site. The staff training initiatives as well as the progression in the conservation education programmes at Umgeni Bird Park are discussed in this paper.

In September 2014 I presented a paper at the 22nd Bi-annual International Zoo Educators Association Conference in Hong Kong entitled Staff Education – the Key to Successful Education Programs. Little did I know when I was preparing that presentation that the problem I thought I was alone with was actually a reality in many facilities around the world.

In the same way, almost all our staff has signed up over the last two years to do our first-aid course. Whilst this ensures we always have three first-aiders on duty at any time, like the fire-fighting course,
this is something they are able to use in their own home environments. When looking at our staff training program for the year, we take into account not only programs that will be of benefit to our park, but ones that will also benefit the staff in their own lives. This year we have also drawn up separate training programs for different staff sections in our park. These sections include keepers, maintenance, show staff, management, curators and education staff. This split will allow us to focus on areas that are specific to each department and ensure that we have an effective training program.

One of our largest programs for 2015 is the establishment of an organic garden in the park. We are lucky to have a large piece of land in the park which was previously operated as a nursery for many years before being closed down. This land has been open since 2012 and we have discussed many options for using it over the years. In September 2014, after returning from the IZE conference, I was inspired to start a compost heap using the organic material which used to be sent to a landfill site for disposal. My general manager was very enthusiastic and two weeks later the ground had been cleared and we started preparations for the compost bins. In seven months, we reduced the amount of material going to the landfill site by more than 50 cubic metres and around 2 tons of waste! As well as plant material, there is also a separate compost area for meat waste. Once both heaps have decomposed for 3 months, they are mixed together and the resulting compost is being used in our new herb and vegetable garden. The growth of plants in this garden has been phenomenal and exceptionally fast. The first plants we established in February 2015 and in just over a month we are already harvesting the first crops from plants that should take two months to produce fruits. There are currently 30 species of herbs and vegetables being trialled in this garden and we use no poisons at all to control pests. Through this we have been teaching the staff about the importance of recycling, composting, organic gardening and also how to grow their own vegetables at home. This program has been very successful with all the staff taking an interest in the garden and also requesting seedlings to take home to plant in their own gardens. As well as using produce from this garden in our park to reduce the need to purchase from suppliers, surplus will be donated to a local school to use in their feeding program for their children. This school will also be invited to come to the park at no charge not only to see the garden, but more importantly to teach them about the park, birds and conservation.

In addition to on-site training, we have plans this year to take all the staff on excursions to other facilities in our area. This exposure we hope will not only give them ideas on what can be done in our own...
park, but also give them an opportunity to interact with other staff in the zoo industry and allow them to share ideas and establish relationships. This is one of the most important things that attending the IZE conference did for me and I know the relationships and friendships I made there have changed my life. Having a limited budget or manpower does not mean that we have an excuse not to do more training with our staff. For us it has been the incentive to find ways of training that can be done in-house, or adapted into an existing program. Our staff are our biggest assets and it is time we remember that and do everything we can with what we have to educate and train them every way we can for their own benefit and the benefit of our facilities.

At the beginning of 2015 our park undertook an Operational Standards Audit conducted by PAAZA (Pan African Association of Zoos and Aquaria). We had been planning for the audit since 2013 but were still nervous about meeting the criteria. Admittedly our biggest concern was whether our staff would remember all we had been teaching them for the past two years. We had nothing to fear. Not only did we pass the audit with flying colours, it was even commented that our staff could not be faulted and that all their answers and work ethics matched to the extent we were asked if we had given them a script beforehand! Whilst this may not sound like a big deal to many people, it showed us that the hard work and time we had invested into the staff was more than worth it.

None of this though is possible without the support of our directors and section managers. At the same time, they have often been the hardest people to convince of the need to educate and broaden the knowledge of our staff. Since 2014 though, we have had their full support and the results have been astounding. One case that stands our regards one lady who was hired with no experience or background other that the fact that her mother worked at the park for many years. Faith started working in the kitchen preparing diets for the birds and from the beginning showed a desire to learn more. In 2013 Faith was promoted to staff supervisor and we spent the year training and teaching her about all aspects of the park and more about the birds in the different sections of the park. At the beginning of 2014 she was promoted to Assistant Curator and continues not only to learn more herself, but is also now teaching the rest of the staff as she goes. Nobody could have foreseen in 2011 when we hired her that Faith would be in the position she is now. All it took was time, training and passion. This is just one success story out of many we have had in the last two years due to our staff education programs.

You are invited to attend the 23rd Biennial Meeting of the International Zoo Educator’s Association hosted by Fundacion Temaiken Buenos Aires, Argentina October 18-22, 2016

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