

# Zoo Education and Conservation Outreach in Action: *An Exciting Twinning Relationship Begins*

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The following article was written shortly after Donna's return from a 16-week volunteer work stint at Guyana Zoo.

My experience in Georgetown, Guyana's capital, was always challenging, often overwhelming and rich with learning. My only goal prior to my departure for South America was simply to establish a positive relationship with staff at Guyana Zoo. I thought this could be achieved by having no expectations, taking my lead instead from staff members who could best express their interests and greatest needs at the zoo.

I started slow, trying to get a feel for the atmosphere at the zoo. One of the first things I did was to spend at least a day with each zookeeper. Zookeepers are not the people many children dream of becoming 'when they grow up' in Guyana. I could see right away that keepers were not well respected, and this effort from my side did not go unnoticed.



After several weeks, I sat down with the zoo manager, Mr. Peter Khatoo, and devised a work plan. Some of the highlights of this plan included assisting in the Nature School with the development of teaching materials and lesson plans, creating education signage for the exhibits, conducting informal computer training sessions with management staff, designing and developing captive enrichment initiatives, forming a pioneering education volunteer programme – a first for Guyana Zoo – and a weekly zookeeper training programme.

Both of the training programmes turned out to be

a lot of fun. The zoo staff competed in a weekly grudge match between the 'Tapirs' and the 'Jaguars' to see which team knew most information from the previous week's class. Zoo management had warned me early on that the keepers would probably need several reminders throughout the day to ensure that they turned up for that day's class. This was never necessary. In fact, as the class progressed, interest grew and keepers would come to me at lunch requesting their 'animal fact books' so they could study for the upcoming review quiz. At the end of the training programme, I held a graduation ceremony and, as part of the ceremony, I recognised all the staff who had 100% attendance – this number included more than half of them.



The Education Volunteer Training Programme was also a wonderful experience, the participants providing a breath of fresh air to the zoo every weekend. I trained seven of them, mostly young university students. Their enthusiasm and love for animals buoyed me up every Saturday after a week full of challenges. These volunteers have been trained to rove the zoo grounds while informally educating the public, to lead formal tours and to present interpretive talks to groups of visitors. From the start of the programme, I trained them to be self sufficient, as management support was not guaranteed. This resourceful group of young people will be important leaders in the future educational development of Guyana Zoo.

The staff and volunteer training programmes were a success to be sure, though it would be unrealistic to present my experience at Guyana Zoo in only a positive light. Many a day went by in which every project I attempted blew up in my face. Things that would take me a couple of hours at home would take all week, and even then, I may not have advanced the cause any further (though I would be completely exhausted!). The zoo is bogged down by political corruption, a lack of funds and a society still living the legacy of a 19-year dictatorship. People are not paid enough to 'go the extra mile' and they are very tired (zookeepers work seven days a week, for example!). People are used to seeing animals in unhealthy conditions, and their compassion is muted.

My participation at the zoo became more significant as time progressed, and it was important for me to have spent the length of time there that I did. Staff began to trust me only after several months had passed. After proving myself to be reliable, individuals were more inclined to come to me with questions and comments. To this end, I think the biggest compliment I received was the following statement from one of the zookeepers: "Other people who have come here have worked with the animals; you, Donna, worked with us". For me, this was the essential thing - I wanted the zoo staff to experience a feeling of self-respect, of being valued. As the staff gathered animal knowledge, they became more outspoken about sharing this knowledge. This was exciting.



But, obviously, it was not only the Guyana Zoo staff that benefited from this exchange. I, too, learnt a great deal: cross-cultural communication, patience and acceptance, veterinary care, public relations and exhibit design. All of these things I learned in a very hands-on fashion, for my involvement at Guyana Zoo included participation in all of the zoo's functions.

In addition, I had a committed group of staff members back at Calgary Zoo rallying behind me. I sent bi-weekly updates via e-mail, and these were circulated through Calgary's education department. In this way, people were able to follow my progress. My requests for educational materials, specific veterinary expertise and enrichment guidelines were met with a host of resources sent by numerous Calgary Zoo folks. This support made me feel that the Calgary's outreach efforts did not fall on my shoulders alone; we were a team of people assisting



Guyana Zoo. And, we were a team of people growing and learning through our exposure there.

I feel that it is essential for 'first world' zoos to work at whatever level possible with developing world zoos. The latter are typically located in regions rich in biodiversity, and are very important sources of animal education and nature appreciation for local populations.

In many cases these zoos are the only places where this kind of learning occurs - I know this to be true in Guyana. Families and school groups access the zoo as an affordable recreation option. As 90% of Guyanese live along the coast, and access to the interior is limited, opportunities to observe animals in the wild come few and far between.

The preservation of tropical animals cannot be achieved without the local population's awareness of the intrinsic value of these creatures. At a local zoo, people can observe animals, wonder at the things they do, and appreciate their existence. This is a good starting point for conservation.

So what's next?...I will be heading back to the Guyana Zoo for another four-month stint. While there, a second Calgary Zoo staff volunteer will join me for a month. In this way we will introduce another Calgary person to the equation, through someone who already has an established relationship with the Guyana Zoo staff. I'm looking forward to my return!