

History of the Zoo Keeper Profession

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Early Collections

Animal collections requiring wild animal care takers (zoo keepers in modern vocabularies) have existed since about 3,000 B.C. These were not zoos, zoo keepers, or veterinarians in the modern sense, but conceptually they were similar institutions and professions. We do not know the terminology used to describe these institutions and professions in most cases because the languages have been lost to us.

Early civilizations in Mesopotamia (present day Iraq), Egypt, China and Indus (present day Pakistan / NW India) provided the opportunity for rulers and the wealthy classes to keep collections of wild animals. These civilizations (complex societies) had individuals who kept fish, caught and kept birds, took care of wild animals, and treated sick and injured animals. The literature on this is widely scattered, but is summarized by Kisling.¹

King Hammurabi (Babylonia, 1728-1686 B.C.) established the first known Code of Laws, which included fees that could be charged by “ox and ass doctors” (veterinarians). There is also a relief from the palace wall of King Ashurbanipal (Assyria, 668-627 B.C.) showing a servant (keeper) letting a lion out of a crate into the King’s animal collection, and this crate is very similar to crates still in use today (with wood slates and a door sliding vertically on the front side).

Some ancient collections were quite large and contained a wide variety of species, although specific details are not recorded. The fate of these collections was depended on the fate of the societies. While the Chinese and Egyptian collections continued, others were replaced by Persian (present day Iran), Greek, Arabian, and Indian collections. In addition, Roman collections became increasingly important as the power and extent of the Roman Empire expanded. While the Romans maintained extensive collections of wild animals, little mention is

made of where or how they kept these animals. Our knowledge comes from when these animals
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appeared in the processions (parades) or the arena (fights and exhibitions). Nevertheless, it is obvious that someone had to take care of these large numbers of animals. We do know that large elephant facilities were maintained outside of Rome, and probably facilities for the other animals. There were also individuals (veterinarians) who cared for sick and injured animals.

Medieval collections (in what is now modern Europe, 476-1453) were less extensive but were still maintained by monarchs, monasteries, and municipalities. Some of these collections formed the beginning of Renaissance collections that became known as the menageries and zoos we are now familiar with.

On the other side of the world known as the New World, Aztec and Inca societies also maintained large animal collections. While these were only discovered in the early 1500s, they were much older than that. Montezuma (Mexico City) had the largest known collections. One collection consisted of birds and required some 300 keepers. Another collection consisted of mammals and reptiles requiring another 300 keepers. There were also fresh and salt water fish ponds, as well as veterinarians to look after the animals. Parrots were traded, kept, and bred by societies throughout South America, Central America, and in Southwestern United States. But no known collections existed in North America.

Modern Menageries, Zoos and Aquariums

European menageries began as public institutions in the middle 1700s. These were royal collections that were eventually open to the public and later transitioned into public facilities administered by municipalities or societies. Every major city had a menagerie and when the countries developed their colonies, they established menageries in these locations as well (although the rulers of these exotic lands usually had their own collections and these were often incorporated into the colonial collections).

Wild animals began appearing in the United States in the early 1700s. A lion was the first known exotic animal to make an appearance (in Boston, 1716). Itinerant animal acts in the

1700s turned into traveling menageries in the early 1800s as the number and variety of animals increased. Menageries took form as permanent wild animal exhibits in the 1850s, as did aquariums (a London invention of the 1850s that quickly spread to European cities and to the United States). By the turn of the century there were 29 U.S. zoos and 2 U.S. aquariums.

During the 1900s there was a rapid increase in the number of American zoos and aquariums, but the few (and brief) institutional histories of these places provide almost nothing about the role of zoo keepers in the development of these institutions. Zoo histories have traditionally memorialized the role of their Directors, the development of buildings and exhibits, and the appearance of important animals in the collection. For a review of how the zoo and aquarium profession developed as viewed from its publication record see Kisling.²

Zookeeping as a profession had a long, slow start and very little is known about it. Since ancient times, this work has been viewed as another form of farm husbandry. It was learned through word of mouth and experience because there was little known about the biological needs of the animals or how they should be cared for. However, as this knowledge grew, so did the skills of zoo keepers (and veterinarians). For a review of the professions and the organizations representing the professions see Rogers and Wagner.³

There are many aspects about zookeeping that we know too little about. One aspect that can be discerned concerns the growth of women in what was for a long time, a male dominated profession. Within the United States, Mary Elitch was the first woman director of a private zoo (Elitch Amusement Gardens, Denver, 1890+); Belle Benchley was the first woman director of a public zoo (San Diego Zoo, 1925+) – and she was the first woman President of the American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (1949-50); Margaret Dankworth was the first Executive Director of the AAZPA (1972-75); Patricia O’Conner was the first woman veterinarian (Staten Island Zoo, 1943+); and the first known women zoo keepers were those at the Woodland Park Zoo (Seattle, 1931+).

Professional organizations established in the United States include: American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums (AAZPA, now AZA, 1924), American Association of Zoo Veterinarians (AAZV, 1946), and American Association of Zoo Keepers (AAZK, 1967).

Early books on the captive care of wild animals include the following: *A Handbook of the Management of Animals in Captivity in Lower Bengal* (1892, a book written by the Indian Director of the Calcutta Zoo), *Disease in Captive Wild Mammals and Birds* (1923), *Wild*

Animals in Captivity (1950), *The Psychology and Behavior of Animals in Zoos and Circuses* (1955), *The Management of Wild Mammals in Captivity* (1964), *Zoological Park Fundamentals* (1968 and revised in 1982 as *Zoological Park and Aquarium Fundamentals*), *Zookeeper Training: A Suggested Guide for Instructors* (1968), *Man and Animal in the Zoo* (1969), *General Principles of Zoo Design* (1972), *Zoo Design: International Symposium on Design and Construction* (1975, 1976, 1980), *Capture and Care of Wild Animals* (1975), *Breeding Endangered Species in Captivity* (1975), *The Chemical Capture of Animals* (1976), *Zoo and Wild Animal Medicine* (1978), *Restraint and Handling of Wild and Domestic Animals* (1978), and *Behavior of Captive Wild Animals* (1978). The only zoo related research journal published since *Zoologica* (1907-73) has been *Zoo Biology* (1982+). Other important publications include *International Zoo Yearbook* (1960+) and *International Zoo News* (1950s+).

The complexity of professional knowledge increased significantly during this time and the number of publications did so as well during and after the 1980s. Institutional and other histories of zoos and aquariums increased as well. Nevertheless, there is still a great deal yet to be learned about the history of the zoo and aquarium keeping profession.

Zoo and Aquarium Etymology

Little is known of the terminology used for animal collections or the individuals who cared for the animals in ancient societies prior to the Roman Empire.

amphitheatrales magistri : wild animal trainers (Latin)

bestiarii : performers who worked with wild animals in the exhibitions (Latin)

magistri : common servants who took care of animals (Latin)

negotiator ursorum : bear dealers (Latin)

piscinarii : a fish pond owner or keeper (Latin)

procurator ad elephantos : individual in charge of state owned elephant herds (Latin)

veterinarius : animal doctor (Latin)

vivarium / vivaria : general term for place where live wild animals are kept (Latin)

aviary : enclosure for keeping birds (Latin / European, 1577)

menagerie : collection of animals (French, 1712)

zoological park / zoological garden : collection of animals used first to describe the London Zoo (English, 1829)

zoo : an abbreviation for zoological garden or park first used in Britain to describe the Clifton Zoo but popularized in a music hall song at the time (English, 1847)

aquarium : a self contained aquatic environment for keeping fish and aquatic life and first used by the two individuals who invented the modern aquarium (English, 1854)

oceanarium : a public aquarium with at least one very large aquarium tank for keeping sea mammals, first used to describe Marineland at St. Augustine, Florida (English, 1938)

conservation park : new term for describing zoos (English, 1990s)

References

1. Kisling, Vernon N. *Zoo and Aquarium History: Ancient Animal Collections to Zoological Gardens*. Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2001. Chapter 1: Ancient Collections and Menageries.
2. Kisling, Vernon N. "Journals: Profession and Trade." IN: *Encyclopedia of the World's Zoos*, Catharine E. Bell, Editor. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001 -and- Kisling, Vernon N. "Zoological Park and Aquarium Libraries and Archives." IN: *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*. New York: Marcel Dekker, 2003 (2nd ed / 3rd ed due in 2009).
3. Rogers, Rachel W. *Zoo and Aquarium Professionals: The History of AAZK*. Topeka: American Association of Zoo Keepers, 1992 -and- Wagner, Robert O. "The Independence of AAZPA." IN: *Regional Conference Proceedings*. Wheeling: American Zoo and Aquarium Association, 1996.