



So you want to be a Zoo Keeper, Animal Trainer, or Aquarist?

There is a distinct difference between enjoying being around animals and considering a career in the care of exotic animals. The field of animal keeper (in any form) is highly competitive and entry into the profession will require both pre-planning in the form of “career sampling” and obtaining applicable certifications, followed by pursuit of a college education combined with practical experience in the form of Internships with captive exotics.

Career Sampling

Prior to committing to an animal major in college, take the time to volunteer at a local zoo or aquarium. This will allow you to immerse yourself into working around exotic animals in some form, and provide you with a glimpse into the world of professional animal care. The very first thing absorbed as a volunteer is how keepers or aquarists must learn and understand the behavior and natural history and apply that knowledge to the diverse collection and individual animals under their care.

Volunteers may or may not work directly with animals in zoo or aquarium collections. It varies in each facility and also is very dependent upon safety and health protocols, combined with the interest and aptitude displayed by the volunteer.

It is very important that the Volunteer opportunity closely mirror the schedule maintained by animal keepers, meaning; a forty-hour work week that includes weekends, holidays, evening programming and working in inclement weather. All of these facets of the profession are very real. It is difficult for a person seeking entry to the profession to comprehend working every Thanksgiving, Christmas and Fourth of July, in the freezing temperatures, rain, snow and heat while families and significant others are enjoying the holidays.

Certifications and Training

A current Certification in First Aid/CPR is a great foundation for your resume. If you interested in career as an Aquarist, you may wish to obtain SCUBA certification and investigate Occupational Safety and Health (OSHA) 24-Hour Hazardous Waste Operations (HAZWOPER) training in order to respond to an oil spill and assist in shorebird rescue. Investigate other

safety training opportunities, adding a Certificate of Completion in safety disciplines to your resume.

The profession of animal care is now a digital world. Familiarity with MS Word®, MS Excel® (or similar) along with varying Smart devices is normally a job requirement.

Education

Most recognized zoo or aquarium facilities will require a Bachelor's degree from a four-year university program in an animal-related field, combined with practical experience in the form of an Internship, or two-year Associate's degree from a college program specializing in zoology, combined with practical working experience with exotic animals, and/or an associated Internship.

Smaller zoological facilities or animal sanctuaries may sometimes hire on practical experience alone. This practical experience without formal education may lead to future employment in a larger facility, but this type of career track is becoming very rare within the profession.

To view a list of High School prep classes, College and University degree programs please visit our **College Degree Programs** page.

Internship

Practical experience in the form of an exotic animal internship will expand your resume and enhance your 4-year University or 2-year College degree. Internships come in many forms (paid, unpaid, stipend, paid housing) and are an invaluable avenue to gain practical experience with a variety of exotic animals. Exotic animal Internships available within your community may be advertised in local media outlets. You may also visit the **AAZK Employment** page to view internships available in North American facilities. During your Internship it is crucial that you maintain detailed notes of the work performed and the species under your care so that you can expand your resume with detailed information which is critical in a competitive job market.

AAZK also maintains a list of continuing Internship opportunities available as in-situ conservation fieldwork around the globe.

[LINK](#)