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# Lock and Shifting Safety

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- American Association of Zoo Keepers

## Introduction:

The number of locks that animal keepers open and secure on a daily basis is higher than one would initially assume. Safely operating numerous locking and shifting mechanisms is one of the most important tasks of an animal keeper's job. Ensuring safe operation of these devices is imperative in maintaining a safe environment for all staff, visitors and animals. Furthermore, it is indicative of the broader safety culture of the organization and is a great place to begin reviewing and implementing a more formal safety protocol.

## Key Factors and Considerations for Safety Protocols:

In order to establish effective lock safety and shifting protocols, animal care staff must accurately assess the risks associated with each animal species under their care. There are a multitude of factors to consider when gauging these potential risks including: the sex of the animal (male vs. female animals of the same species especially when sexually dimorphic), behavioral profiles and tendency towards aggression, individual histories and profiles, predator status, and whether or not it is a USDA-permitted invasive species. It is important to note that the knowledge gained from considering these factors do not only establish well-informed crisis management protocols but also proactive efforts to create the safest working environment.

Best management and safety decisions are made when risk assessments are considered and evaluated within the context of the institution – both the staff and physical environment. Safety considerations may be universal, but how they translate into effective policy and procedure for any given institution is unique. There is no effective “one-size-fits-all” policy. Nonetheless, there are several attributes and practices of safety-oriented animal care staff and it is imperative for all animal care professionals to develop those skills.

## Habits of Safety-Conscious Zookeepers:

The most important aspect of animal safety is to eliminate all assumptions from the decision making process. One can never rely on second hand information regarding the location of animals within an exhibit. Every keeper must make it a habit to visually locate all animals for him or herself, and physically check the security of each lock and shift door that form a secure perimeter.

Keepers must know how many animals should be in the area and locate those animals before entering any animal area. The absence of an animal in a given area is not confirmation of its location and subsequent proof that an animal area is empty. Furthermore, keepers should take note of the exhibit or holding spaces to which animals have been given access. Keepers must confirm that all appropriate service doors and shift doors are closed completely, correctly and securely in order to conclude a perimeter is secure.

Whenever leaving an area, keepers must secure all doors and locks as if they were leaving without the intent to return. Leaving unsecured doors and locks “just for a moment” puts lives at risk. Conversely, one can never assume an area is how it was left; that locks and doors are secure because they were at an earlier time. Double check everything - trust only oneself and maintain constant focus on locks, keeper service doors and animal shift doors.

## Safety Systems/Methods for Success:

Each facility has different ways of ensuring success. Selecting appropriate techniques and consistently implementing them may be beneficial to improve safety and insure safe working practices. However, none of these methods can replace the crucial act of visually confirming the location of all animals and the security of the locks and doors forming a secure perimeter. Suggested aids and techniques are described here:



## Safety Committee “Golden Rules of Lock and Shift Safety”

- 1.** Confirm the safety and location of all animals on and off-display whenever entering an animal area.
- 2.** Confirm the safety and location of your fellow keepers whenever securing animal areas and moving animals.
- 3.** Always lock up an enclosure if you have to walk away. Even if you're “just walking away for a second.” (Don't dummy lock!)
- 4.** Keep accurate tool accounts. Count when entering an enclosure and again when leaving.
- 5.** Effective communication is key.



### Whiteboards and Door Markers:

It is possible to use whiteboards or magnetic labels on all animal enclosure entrances and shift doors for safety purposes. Each door should be labeled with a name or number, as well as information regarding all animals that have current access to the area. Once animals are shifted, these labels can be moved or replaced with labels identifying the enclosure as vacant. Following this method, every door should be labeled with information regarding what animals might be encountered behind it. This technique should only be considered if the whiteboard is placed on a portion of a door that is solid and, thus, does not impede visual access to animals and relevant animal areas. It should be noted that the Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) does have regulations for machinery and mechanisms, including doors and locks, that prohibit modification that may compromise the integrity of the device. Keepers should consult their workplace safety officer or local OSHA compliance official with any questions.

Another method of ensuring success is to keep a whiteboard in the keeper area. Use electrical tape to make a diagram of the building and its animal holding spaces. Keepers can then mark which animals are in which exhibits or holding areas. This board can then be consulted for a summary of animal exhibit spaces.

### Verbal Communication:

Verbal confirmation can also be used to check animal locations, locks, and doors. This method requires keepers to clearly vocalize the location of the animal once they are found, that all doors and locks are secure, and the empty animal area they wish to enter. For example, "There is one animal in this building. This animal is currently located in Exhibit 2 and I see that the shift gate between Exhibit 2 and Holding Unit 2 is closed. I can safely enter Holding

Unit 2." Taking the time to verbally verify this information forces keepers to slow down and confirm each step, again minimizing the room for error. This information can either be relayed to a second person or spoken out loud as a verbal checklist for oneself. In addition, be sure to visually and verbally confirm the location of any staff or volunteers that are also in the area and may have operated security doors or accessed any relevant animal areas.

### Two-Person Protocols (and Beyond):

Some facilities have instituted a two-person protocol for working in dangerous animal areas. Such protocols may be advantageous if a social grouping of animals are being moved, or complex shifting systems are laid out over multiple levels of a building that require more than one set of hands to operate. The concept behind this method is that two pairs of eyes are better than one – a second person can help to verify the security of all locks and doors. In an emergency, this person can also call for help. However, a second person can also be a distraction if excessive or unnecessary conversation occurs. While shifting, entering, and securing animal areas it is of the utmost importance that each person's full attention is given to the task at hand.

If keepers are working in a two-person team it is also important that there is clear communication and well-understood roles for each keeper. This can include designating one person to operate doors while the second observes and follows behind to check locks. For two-person protocols to succeed, verbal and visual confirmation in addition to a well-established protocol with clear expectations is necessary.

If there are additional keepers, facilities, or horticulture staff working in dangerous animal areas beyond the designated shifter(s), or keepers must separate while shifting is occurring, two-way radio communication should be utilized. This allows for all staff members to keep track of animal movements and the location of their fellow staff members. Such communication is effective so long as it is conservative, judicious and requires verbal confirmation of the message from all intended recipients. The more frequent and lengthy radio communications are, the more likely staff members may be to "tune it out" – negating its potential effectiveness. This certainly is the case if multiple departments or animal areas are utilizing the same radio channel and not all messages are directly pertinent to those receiving the messages.

### Lock Maintenance

The "human side" of lock safety is not the only consideration, however. The physical facilities in which animals are housed, and the tools to

secure them, must be in top working order. The structural integrity of perimeters and doors should be under constant evaluation and, most importantly, locking mechanisms should be kept in tip-top shape to minimize the risk of failure. The first sign of failure is often a "sticky" lock with a core that is difficult to turn and subsequently unlatch. Lock maintenance and quality checks should be a part of regularly scheduled preventative safety measures. Consult manufacturer directions for frequency of maintenance and recommended lubricants, which vary amongst manufacturers. For instance, some manufacturers recommend graphite whereas others recommend specific formulations of spray lubricant. Furthermore, physical medium, graphite powder vs. spray, can have an impact; powder seems to be the medium that has a longer-lasting lubrication effect.

### Conclusion:

Securing locks and safely shifting animals is key to maintaining a safe environment for animals, staff and guests at zoological institutions. Furthermore, it is the essential safety responsibility of the animal care professional in his or her day-to-day work. Each institution and its needs are different, but it is clear that the path to safety success with securing and shifting animals always includes thoughtful and clear protocols, effective communication, attentive staff and well-maintained facilities and tools. The Safety Committee encourages all animal keepers to take a critical look at how this practice plays out at their facility, how it reflects the broader safety culture, and subsequently brainstorm ways to improve upon this daily task to make a positive impact on staff, guests and animals. 🦁

