



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

National Zoological Park · Smithsonian Institution · Washington, D.C. 20008

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor
March 1, 1990

In my last letter, I discussed the trauma of mourning by keepers whose animal charges had died. Few people outside of a zoo have a very clear idea of what a keeper does and of the skills and talents necessary to be a good one.

As in many other professions, the nature of a keeper's work has changed markedly in the past two or three decades. As the performance standards for keepers were raised to reflect the rapidly expanding knowledge of animal care, so the character of the people entering the field altered markedly. In the mid-1960's, all keepers were male, and many of the ones I knew at the Zoo were rather withdrawn, with their behavior mirroring that of many stable grooms and kennelmen of the 1930's and '40's. As I remember, these men seemed dearly to prefer the company of their charges to that of humans.

In the '60's, the social turmoil of the outside world reached the National Zoo and most of the other major American zoos. The first shock wave occurred when young college graduates applied for keeper positions at the National Zoo, and the aftershock was the hiring of the first female keeper in about 1969. This infusion of imaginative, educated young people on the staff led to much improved exhibition and care of our animals. Thus has the legacy of the 60's benefited the Zoo even in the 90's, a sociological phenomenon not unique to the Zoo. For all their difficulties, the 60's shook many organizations out of their habitual resistance to change.

It took several years for the social adjustments between the old and new arrivals to reach an equilibrium at the Zoo, but as change is inevitable, a new order was soon established. A successful foray of one of the Zoo's first female keepers occurred when she brought a three-month old orangutan to the Senate hearing for the Smithsonian's appropriation. The guard at the entrance to the Senate office building refused her admittance to the building, much less into the hearing room. While they argued, Senator Bible walked by, and on learning the cause of the commotion, waved his arm and assured the baffled guard that all



1889-1989

"...for the advancement of science and
the education and recreation of the people."

David Challinor
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Page 2

was in order and that the keeper and her charge should proceed to the hearing. Such is the power of a senior Senator. The keeper and her charge "performed" flawlessly during the Smithsonian's brief "show and tell" before the Chairman called the hearing to order. Capitalizing on the good mood of the Chairman, the Zoo Director's subsequent testimony was not only well received, but the Zoo's 10-year master plan was approved and funded for its first year.

Since this episode, Congress has continued to support the Zoo as it has brought its exhibits up to date. Now more than half the keepers are female, and the collection benefits accordingly. Great new changes at the Zoo are planned to complete its evolution to a biopark so that by the next century, it will be a very different place with as much attention given to plants and insects as we once allotted to the traditional mammals whose presence on exhibit was considered mandatory for a Zoo.

These monthly letters allow me to share with you the excitement of the continuous evolution of a century-old zoo. Change and life are synonymous, and I and my colleagues expect the next century to be as lively and rewarding as the last.

P.S. I have also enclosed a copy of "Tigertalk," our in-house newsletter which will bring you up-to-date on the fires in Brazil's tamarin reserve.