



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

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

Letter from the Desk of David Challinor
December 1, 1990

As the only zoo in the United States directly founded by Congress, the Smithsonian's National Zoo takes very seriously the responsibilities accompanying its "National" title. With much of its day-to-day operating costs funded by Congressional appropriations, the NZP can fortunately concentrate much of its resources on the kind of basic research that benefits all zoos, but which few of them can afford. This letter will describe some of these special activities that have contributed so much to the welfare of the world's zoos.

From my perspective, the research endeavors and the dissemination of their results are the greatest assets of the National Zoo. I doubt any other zoo, either here or abroad, has the equivalent of the research staff and facilities now present in Washington, D.C. and Front Royal, VA. The permanent staff includes about 20 PhD's and 3 DVM's, and their research is supplemented by an additional 15 to 20 predoctoral and postdoctoral fellows from the U.S. and abroad who work and have worked at the Zoo during the past three years.

A good example of how zoo research is put to very practical use throughout the country is the Mobile Laboratory Team of the NOAH (New Opportunities in Animal Health) Center. As many of you heard at the recent meeting of the Resource Council, this team, varying from two to five people, has developed an efficient and complete mobile laboratory that can readily be shipped by air to any part of the country. This laboratory team is currently testing the reproductive efficiency of all 240 cheetah now in the U.S. As explained at the Council meeting, the goal of this testing is to learn why this mammal is so difficult to breed in zoos. One of the most alarming results of the tests done to date is the evidence of extreme homogeneity or, in layman's language, how closely related all cheetah seem to be to each other and how little genetic variation in their genes is found throughout their entire range. The less variation there is in this respect, the more vulnerable the species is to any major environmental change.



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

As a result of this major cooperative effort between 36 participating zoos, the National Zoo is now constructing a major new cheetah exhibit adjacent to the main administration building. Not only will visitors be able to see these graceful creatures in their new spacious quarters, but they can also learn from the texts and illustrations surrounding the exhibit what and how our scientists expect to learn from their intensive study of these beautiful animals. The facility will also be a center for research into the reproductive biology of cheetah.

Big cats are not the only animals we have studied and bred with the cooperation of other zoos and government agencies. My past letters have described the research on Black-footed ferrets for which the National Zoo is the only zoo now operating a breeding program. The Golden lion tamarin release project in Brazil (about which you were brought up-to-date by Ben Beck at my house) involves 20 zoos both here and abroad.

Besides the arduous work of raising endangered animals cooperatively with other zoos, the National Zoo plays an important role in certifying professional animal care practitioners. For example, Smithsonian veterinarians were primarily responsible for establishing the Institute of Zoo Veterinarians, an organization that examines and, when appropriate, grants board certification to large animal veterinarians, that is to DVM's qualified to treat mammals up to the size of hippos, giraffes and elephants.

Zoo veterinarians are not the only group working to improve zoo professional standards. The American Association of Zoo Keepers is well represented on the staff of the National Zoo, including a past president. The International Association of Zoo Educators (IAZE) is also active here. The Zoo's librarian, Kay Kenyon, is the editor of "Library News for Zoos and Aquaria" which is distributed three times a year, and she also compiled and edited the Directory of Zoo and Aquarium Libraries.

Perhaps even more pioneering than the development of associations of animal keepers, zoo educators and librarians is the evolution of the professional zoo nutritionist. The National Zoo took this big step back in 1978 when it hired Dr. Olav Oftedal as its first incumbent. Such a need in zoos had been profoundly felt for many years, but few were qualified to be hired. Before such professionals existed, zoo staff often had to guess the nutritional equivalent of two quarts of termites to feed a Giant anteater. Furnishing the "real thing" is clearly impractical for most zoos. Furthermore, the diets for many handraised zoo newborns must be formulated and then tested and exchanged with other zoos, a job now done by the nutritionists at the four zoos which have them. All four did important segments of their training here.



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By pioneering new fields in the genetics and nutrition of zoo animals, for example; the National Zoo has been able to attract many bright young staff who have gone on to important positions in other zoos throughout the country. This "alumni" group helps insure good cooperation and free exchange of information. As a further stimulus to quality scientific investigation in U.S. zoos, the National Zoo sponsors a national competition for excellence in zoo research.

Despite the threat of hard economic times ahead, the nation's zoos must maintain vigorous progress in the improvement of animal care and breeding. The strong professional bond now forged among the zoos of all countries will insure that standards are maintained and information exchanged. The National Zoo is committed to maintaining its important and relatively special role in the community of zoos.