



Rising to the Challenge

Careers in zoos and aquariums

In Britain, there are about 350 zoos, safari parks, bird gardens and aquaria open to the public, which employ approximately 3,000 people in full-time positions. BIAZA represents just over 100 of those collections and is the professional zoo body in the British Isles.

Jobs in zoos involving animal include zoo keeping, veterinary work, zoology and educational work. Some zoos also employ field biologists who work on field projects sponsored by the zoo.

There are many work sectors that involve animal husbandry to a greater or lesser extent. The role of the zoo or wildlife park keeper is one of the most popular, judging from the number of enquiries BIAZA receives on a daily basis.

Zoo keeper

A career as a zookeeper or aquarist offers a unique opportunity in the specialised and demanding profession of maintaining captive exotic animals for conservation, research and education.

Zookeepers care for a diverse collection of animals, from mammals, birds and reptiles to amphibians, fish and invertebrates. Many keepers become highly specialised, concentrating on a specific group of animals such as exotic birds, great apes, elephants or reptiles. Some of these keepers develop reputations that are recognised internationally.

What does a keeper actually do?

Animal enclosures need to be hygienically cleaned every day; this is the major part of a keeper's daily workload and, depending which species is involved, can be very physically demanding. Sweeping, hosing, scrubbing, shovelling and window cleaning are repetitive but essential daily tasks. A keeper must be prepared to work outside in all weather conditions, or indoors in what are sometimes tropically heated environments.

Other duties include the maintenance of animal enclosures, food preparation, and providing enrichment and training. Keepers may help design, build and repair animal enclosures; a basic grasp of DIY and gardening skills is required for the upkeep of an exhibit. Being part of a team of like-minded colleagues on an animal section can be very rewarding, as can

networking with keepers from other collections. Keepers must also liaise with other professionals within the zoo such as vets, managers and educators.

An understanding of nutrition is essential for good diet management, although in some collections diets are analysed and controlled by an employed nutritionist or manager. Keepers need to keep and prepare feeds - for example pellets, fresh produce, meat or hay - in a pest-free, clean environment. They are likely to be the people who determine when the feed is given and how.

Often food can be used for enrichment purposes; that is using a method of hiding or distributing the feed that will encourage the animal to feed in a way, or at a time, that is more natural for that species. Other enrichment methods are also used to keep animals active and contribute towards their psychological wellbeing. It is up to the keepers to use their initiative to make and provide suitable enrichment - as well as recording, evaluating and continually improving enrichment strategies.

In most animal collections, exotic animal care is largely hands-off. Even though these are not wild animals, they should be with their own kind and over-petting or humanising can lead to abnormal behaviours and decrease reproductive success. Instead, target training and positive reinforcement are used to condition animal behaviour, therefore making husbandry and veterinary tasks easier to perform.

Occasionally, keepers must accept that animals in their care are moved to other collections or are euthanized if their quality of life deteriorates. This can be quite an emotional time if a strong bond exists between an animal and a keeper. Where animals are moved to other collections, a keeper may be asked to travel with the animal and to assist staff in the receiving institution in settling the animal into its new surroundings.

Keepers must also be excellent observers, learning habits and behaviours of both individual animals and groups. Keepers know the animals in their care better than anyone else and must be able to spot subtle signs of injuries or illness and then react accordingly. These responsibilities should not be underestimated, since they are essential in maintaining a healthy and reproductively successful animal collection. It is important to maintain accurate and detailed records in a daily diary or computerized system about the events in the animal's life, identification, births, deaths, sickness, mating behaviour etc. What may seem like minor details at the time may be valuable points of reference at a later date.

Keepers have an important role in the education of visitors and in public relations for their institutions. This may involve giving prepared talks to school groups, one-to-one tour experiences, or just chatting to the public as they meet them on their daily rounds. Surveys of visitor experience reveal that interactions with keepers are highly valued by customers, and help to increase the public's awareness of the importance of wildlife conservation and global environmental issues that affect the habitats of many threatened species.

It is a keeper's responsibility to educate visitors - and they should be knowledgeable about the animals in their zoo, their natural habitat and relevant conservation initiatives. They must be open to interacting with the public at all times, maintain a smart appearance and be friendly and professional when answering questions.

What is the career progression for a keeper?

Starting as a trainee, many employers will provide the opportunity to take the Diploma in the Management of Zoo and Aquarium Animals (DMZAA) run by Sparsholt College and BIAZA. The course is a two year City & Guilds course taken as home study, a series of essays on general zoo and species husbandry topics, an exam, a specialist project and a portfolio of evidence of day-to-day practical keeping skills. Many collections will require trainees to carry out this work in their own time, so a high degree of commitment is required.

Zoo keeping is a highly popular career choice so securing a job isn't always easy. Pay in the industry does reflect the fact that organizations rarely have problems recruiting keepers; often they will receive many applications for each advertised post. Some entrants to the profession could be disappointed with typical pay scales, considering the training and education which is usually required. That said, the job is very rewarding in many other ways, particularly when an animal shows it can trust you. Many zoo keepers consider their role a vocation rather than simply a job.

Once qualified, progression varies between different animal collections, the next steps usually being Senior Keeper, Head of Section, Head Keeper and Senior Head Keeper. However, it is normally the case that a position needs to become vacant before promotion can occur. Moving between zoos, often needing to relocate to do so, and applying for more senior roles is often a quicker way of moving up the ladder.

Further study or experience can be gained in other areas of animal management such as science and research, studbooks and in situ conservation. There may be opportunities to attend meetings or symposia for enrichment, taxon working groups or ABWAK, etc. Giving presentations at such events and collaborating on co-authored scientific papers provided opportunities for professional networking and personal development. Good zoo keepers are eager to keep learning for their own benefit and that of their charges.

How do I get into zoo keeping?

The educational requirements for an entry level zoo keeper vary, and there are specialist courses on Animal Management and Zoology available at colleges and universities. Hot Courses (www.hotcourses.com) is a good website with links to various relevant courses. Some zoos also offer apprenticeship schemes which are well worth looking into.

If you are looking to become an aquarist, most aquaria require you to have a degree in a relevant subject area and some prior knowledge of maintaining aquatic animals in captivity. It is normally considered preferable to have at least started scuba diving training, and to be able to demonstrate previous experience of interacting with the public.

As previously stated, competition for zoo keeping jobs is fierce and although having good qualifications is a valuable asset, practical animal care experience will put you ahead of the pack. Having additional transferrable skills will also help you stand out. These may include experience of dealing with health and safety requirements and writing risk assessments, an understanding of employment law, involvement in fundraising initiatives or dealing with the media, report writing and public speaking.

Doing work experience or regular volunteering at your local zoo (for those zoos that offer work experience) is an excellent way to get your face known. However, working with domestic animals or native wildlife is also great preparation for zoo work; sanctuaries,

stables, kennels or catteries, for example. Most importantly, if you get the chance to get some experience, do it well, work hard, be enthusiastic and amenable. Any volunteering placement you undertake should include formal feedback on your performance and written evidence of your achievements.

Contacting a known member of staff at the zoo you would like to work in or their Human Resources Department might be helpful. Please consider that people in zoos often deal with a high volume of queries from people who would like to work for them, so you will need to be patient.

Zoo keeping is a demanding job requiring dedication, commitment and patience. Keepers must be prepared to work weekends and public holidays (even Christmas Day). Caring for animals is not a 9-5 occupation; keepers frequently end up working unpaid overtime and need to be flexible about their days off. They must be reliable people who are willing to learn and improve their performance in a co-operative setting.

To download the BIAZA directory of those collections offering volunteer and work placements, click [here](#).

Veterinary surgeon

What do vets do?

Vets treat a huge variety of animals, ranging from domestic pets to farm and zoo animals and those requiring assistance in the wild. Most vets work in general practice, while others work in the State Veterinary Service, universities, research establishments and the pharmaceutical industry.

What do I need to become a vet?

Good grades (usually 'A' grades) in three science 'A' level subjects, usually Chemistry, Biology and Physics or Maths. Work experience in a veterinary practice, farm, kennel, cattery, riding stables or zoo is desirable. Training involves a five-year course at university.

Zoologist

What do zoologists do?

Zoologists specialize in the scientific study of animals including their anatomy, physiology, classification, distribution, behaviour and ecology. People may specialize in different areas: For example, a person who specializes in ecology is an ecologist.

What do I need to become a zoologist?

A minimum of 5 GCSE grades (A-C) and at least 2 'A' levels (Biology and Chemistry are the best combination). A BSc degree in zoology or applied zoology, such as agricultural zoology or animal psychology is also needed. You may need to contemplate specializing and taking a higher degree (MSc or PhD).

Seasonal education assistant

These positions usually run through the busy summer season, with duties including delivering presentations, leading sessions and tours for visiting school groups and assisting with fundraising activities and other events.

These posts are advertised locally and nationally during spring for the forthcoming season.

Minimum wage usually applies.

Explainer/presenter

These posts focus on interactions with the public, delivering formal and informal talks around the collection. They are often seasonal and minimum wage usually applies.

Education officer

This role varies between collections, but can include teaching Keystage 1-4 sessions, delivering presentations and lectures, animal outreach to surrounding schools and groups, fundraising for conservation campaigns and running summer schools/activities.

Completion of a degree is essential and a PGCE is very desirable. These positions are advertised locally and nationally.

Finding a job in a zoo or aquarium

Many of the zoo positions above are regularly advertised here on the BIAZA website:
www.biaza.org.uk/careers/Vacancies.