INSTITUTIONAL COLLECTION PLANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The role of modern zoos, (which is being used here to include any wildlife collection, wildlife centre/park) has changed from that of a facility whose sole role was the collection and exhibition of animals to that of a multifunctional organisation, which should be promoting the conservation of species and ecosystems. The World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy (WZACS) calls on institutions to pursue a strategy of integrated conservation with strategic thinking within their own organisation, and collaboration with others. It is considered that this will achieve the greatest sustainable conservation benefit for threatened species, their habitats and their human neighbours (WAZA 2005).

Within the Middle East there are many collections (both private and public) of rare and endangered animals. Unfortunately, many of these collections are operating on their own with no clear strategic plan and in Issue 2 of WME News the Director of Al Ain Zoo also commented on this problem and highlighted the need for a Zoological Association to be established in the Middle East to promote better standards of management. An important component of managing a zoological collection is the Institutional Collection Plan (ICP). This article provides an overview of the key areas to be considered when a collection creates an ICP.

What is an Institutional Collection Plan (ICP)?

Maple (2003) suggested that collection/strategic planning was the process by which the guiding members of an organisation envision its future and develop the necessary procedures and operations to achieve that future. ICP's usually mean bringing a range of complex and challenging issues within the collection into balance. Some of the defining issues might include, regulatory, policy, operational and environmental issues. The key factor according to Bolton (2001) is not how we arrive at a plan but how the results are communicated to colleagues.

Benefits of Collection Planning

An ICP must take into account an organisation's resources and limitations and will help define the zoo's identity. When plans are in place these can be used to decide what species need to be kept, moved or donated to other facilities to improve the welfare of the animals and conservation value of the collection. Careful collection planning including attention to the space available can save much hardship for the zoo in the long term.

Define Your Collection Goals

Without goals most collection plans will fail. As with all goals, these must be attainable within the environment of the collection. These can be long term or short term, but are the guideposts established to keep the plan on the right path and to help assess its progress.

Define Your Resources

What are the resources available? These might include, animals, space, financial, veterinary and support from vested interests, line managers and staff. Maple (2003) defines conservation, education, science, entertainment, and animal welfare as the five basic purposes of a zoo. Although these are the ideals, an important balance should be struck between these.

Conservation

No zoo can contribute to conservation in a meaningful way without integrating conservation into its organisational culture. Integrated conservation is achieved through a set of internal processes by which a zoo tries to manage all its activities and relationships in support of specific and well-defined conservation programmes.

Education

Whether a zoo is private or public, education should be a central pillar and part of the organisational strategy. Education goals should be integral to planning a collection, designing exhibits, developing conservation programmes and planning visitor services. If an education programmes is to be successful, zoos must exhibit animals in the best conditions possible, in enclosures that enable them to live as naturally as possible and allows them exhibit natural behaviours as far as possible (EAZA 2001).

Fig 1. Incorporating education into the plan and mission of Seaworld, Queensland, Australia. © Declan O'Donovan

Science
Resources for research are finite and must be carefully targeted. As such collaboration between institutions is essential. Priorities of research should be decided by the strengths and facilities that zoos are able to provide as well as by independent assessments of conservation need. All staff should be involved, either directly by participation or indirectly by being informed of ongoing research projects.

Animal Welfare
Singularly the most important part of any ICP is animal welfare. Areas which need to be addressed include animal health programmes, exhibit design, population management, lifespan planning, etc. A zoo should consider how an animal is fed along with its psychological needs and individual characteristics, social groupings and longevity. One of the primary justifications for animal demonstrations is public education, however, the training involved in these presentations can also benefit zoo animals, assuming the role of 'occupational therapy' (Lohman *et al.* 2005).

Animal Health Programmes
Protocols that ensure the health security of a collection need to be developed in collaboration between veterinary staff and collection managers, ensuring efficient communication between these two areas of zoo expertise. Stringent quarantine protocols are essential to the successful management of any zoo within the Middle East. An overview of the requirements for quarantine were reviewed by Bailey and Lloyd in Issue 2 of WME news.

Exhibit Design
Exhibits need to be created that are unique to each species. These exhibits should be animal centred rather than visitor centred. Familiarity with established behavioural and ecologic norms in the wild is the appropriate guideline for designers.

Population management
Basic population management should include demographic (monitoring numbers, age, social and sex structure) and genetic management (verifying taxonomic identity, and avoiding the effects of inbreeding). A primary goal of captive programmes is as support for in situ conservation (as demographic and genetic reservoirs). Zoos should be centres of expertise in small population management and involved in regional or global cooperative breeding programmes. Gender management, physical separation, chemical birth control, vasectomies and castrations are all successful methods that can be used as "conscious efforts" to prevent unwanted breeding and therefore population management

Partnerships and Politics
Zoos need other zoos in order to be relevant and effective in their contribution to conservation: they cannot independently carry out all tasks related to the conservation of biodiversity (WAZA 2005). Not all zoo collections meet the standards set down by the various regional or global zoo organisations. Many of these collections are well intentioned with highly dedicated staff and adhere to the principals and goals of the better resourced zoos. This should not exclude them from the global zoo networks. These institutions should be actively encouraged and be working towards achieving the goals set down by the various regional and international bodies. Pivotal to this has been the understanding that to be truly effective, institutions can not work in isolation, but must operate as part of a cooperative network, particularly in the selection and management of species. Zoo collections are now regarded as global assets and should not be managed in isolation or ignorance of total world animal populations. Finally any ICP needs to be reviewed and improved continually. Regular updates should be scheduled in collaboration with all stake holders.

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