

So You Want to be a Zookeeper?



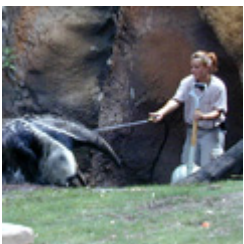
The Saint Louis Zoo receives many inquiries from kids and adults interested in learning what it takes to be a zookeeper. We also receive questions regarding careers in related fields, like wildlife management, forestry, conservation, and ecology. We're gratified that so many people like animals and want to work with them. And we're happy to help people understand how to prepare for a career in zoos, aquaria, and other wildlife organizations.



Here are some suggestions, as well as a few other websites that provide even more detailed information on what zoo careers entail, and how to prepare for them:

If You're in Elementary School

Knowing about animals, conservation and the natural world is a big part of a zoo career, and it's never too early to start learning!



- Have an adult take you on nature hikes, as well as on trips to zoos, aquaria, parks, and natural history museums.
- Read books and magazines, visit websites on natural history, wildlife and related topics.
- Watch nature shows on TV.
- See if your parents will allow you to keep a pet. Taking care of dogs, cats, hamsters, tropical fish and other small pets will teach you a lot about responsible animal care.
- Join science clubs, participate in scouting activities, and volunteer to help with fieldwork projects that take place in your community.
- Observe wildlife when you're outdoors. And bring along a field guide on birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, insects or plants to help you better appreciate what you're seeing.
- Keep a nature journal.
- Take a class on animals or nature at your local zoo, animal sanctuary, or park.
- If you live in the St. Louis area, consider enrolling in our Keeper for a Day program, for students in Grades 2 through 8. Working alongside a keeper in our Children's Zoo, you'll help care for some of our zoo animals, and go behind the scenes to learn what it takes to be a zookeeper.



- Work hard in school, not just in classes on science and nature but in all subjects. Chances are you still don't know for sure what you want to do when you grow up. So learn as much as you can in all of your classes. After all, there are a lot of different kinds of jobs in zoos -- from exhibit developer to accountant to computer programmer -- and only about one in 10 involve working with animals. Keep your options open!



Whether or not you finally decide to become a zookeeper, zoologist, or naturalist, we hope you attain a life-long interest in animals and in the natural world.

If You're in Secondary School



- Begin preparing for a zoo career by reading about animals, observing them, and associating with "animal" people. (And be sure to check out the suggestions we've listed above for elementary school students -- they could apply to you too.)
- Tell your middle school or high school guidance counselors if you're interested in pursuing an animal-related career. They'll help you choose the right classes to help prepare you for further education in college.
- If you're old enough to get a part-time job, consider working or volunteering at a pet shop, veterinary hospital, animal shelter, livestock farm, horse stable, pet breeder or even a zoo, if possible. This kind of work can help you gain valuable experience that could be helpful in a zoo career.
- If you live in the St. Louis area, consider enrolling in our Keeper for a Day program, for students in Grades 2 through 8. Working alongside a keeper in our Children's Zoo, you'll go behind the scenes to help care for some of our zoo animals, and learn what it takes to be a zookeeper.
- When you're considering which colleges or universities to attend, find those that specialize in programs of particular value to professional zoo work. These include general biology, zoology, (including specialty subjects like mammalogy, herpetology, etc.), wildlife and forestry, animal husbandry, ecology, veterinary medicine and ethology (animal behavior).



If You're in College

- Take courses in fields that will prepare you to be a zookeeper, such as zoology, general biology, forestry, animal husbandry, ecology, veterinary medicine, environmental studies, etc.

- Get a bachelor's degree in one of the above-mentioned science fields; even if it's not a prerequisite for a zookeeping position, it will help you in your job search. A master's degree is usually not necessary, unless you're looking for a higher-level position.
- Get a part-time job in an animal-related facility, including vet hospitals, humane society shelters, wildlife rehabilitation centers, farms and stables, even a zoo, if possible. In addition to good academic preparation, most zoos prefer to hire people for zookeeping positions who have prior animal-handling experience.
- Check at your local zoo or aquarium for internship and externship positions. These are normally offered to college and university students, recent graduates, and individuals with prior college coursework in the area of biology, zoology, education, animal science or related fields. Internships and externships are a good way to learn about the zoo field while obtaining valuable, hands-on work experience in animal care, wildlife conservation or environmental education.

If You're Ready to Look for a Job

- Contact your local zoo or aquarium's Human Resources department for job openings that may interest you.
- For employment opportunities at the Saint Louis Zoo, call (314) 781-0900 or visit www.stlzoo.org/jobs
- A good zoo demands a team of professionals with different backgrounds, so the vast majority of people who work at zoos have jobs that don't involve any work with animals. But if you're intent on an *animal-related* career at a zoo or aquarium, keep in mind that keepers and animal curators are in limited demand.
- Also remembers that many zoos, like the Saint Louis Zoo, are locally supported by local taxes and must recruit new talent from within the community. We suggest you contact your nearest zoo for its hiring policies.

There are other excellent sources of information on zoo careers:

- We suggest you contact the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) at <http://www.aza.org/ForEveryone/Careers>.
- Another helpful organization is the American Association of Zoo Keepers (AAZK). Its website not only carries a wealth of information on preparing for a zoo career, but also lists job opportunities for zookeepers:
http://aazk.org/aazknew/zoo_career.asp.