

# Animal Care Internship at Leesburg Animal Park.

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### Environmental Conservation, B.S.



### Background

Leesburg Animal Park is a small family-owned zoo operating in Leesburg, Virginia since March of 2000. The mission of the park is to offer an up-close, educational experience with animals that wouldn't be available at a larger zoo. The park offers a variety of family-friendly attractions as well as over 25 public enclosures housing domesticated and exotic animals. The care of their animals falls upon the team-work of six zookeepers and some interns. As an Animal Care Intern, I assisted zookeepers in meeting the daily needs of these animals. This meant feeding, making enrichment items, hoof picking, checking temperatures and humidity, and shoveling lots of poop.

### Position

Every day was different as an Animal Care Intern. I learned how to prepare individual diets by following a manual. I made enrichment and it was extremely satisfying to watch an animal excitedly eat or solve puzzles that I had prepared for them (figure 1). I made an enrichment calendar for their African grey parrots. I was taught how to engage with the public for informal educational animal presentations (figure 2) and target training for the emu chicks and giant Aldabra tortoises. I assisted with the education of children during day camps and camel rides. Occasionally, I would be sent to help on a "Zoo-to-You" program where we would pack up animals for an off-site animal education experience at schools or parties. I was allowed to stand in during a routine Veterinary visit where I was able to watch them trim macaw and tortoise beaks and helped restrain animals as they drew blood.

My background experience working with animals really helped me understand and know when to practice caution around these unpredictable animals.

Figure 1: Sarabi the Serval rummages in a bin filled with shredded newspaper and meat that I prepared for her enrichment.



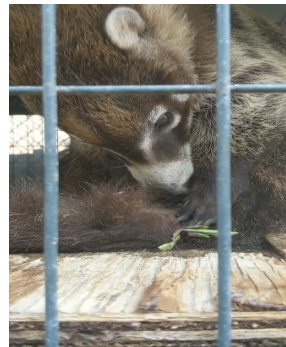
Figure 3: Endangered white-handed gibbons, Kandy (mother with baby Bako) and Chan (tan colored male), sing in front of a crowd.



Figure 2: Assistant Curator, Kerry Quinn, engages the public during a keeper talk animal show. All individuals are wearing masks and Kerry holds a ball python.



Figure 4: Amelia the Chatimundi (a species I did not know existed before starting the internship), anoints the scent of mint leaves into her tail to save for later.



### Findings

No one thinks about the hard work that goes into the ex-situ care of these animals. Zookeeping is a widely underappreciated profession because there is a lot that goes into the proper care of these animals, and keepers typically see only small salaries and little benefits. There are no vacations, sick days, or holidays when working as a zookeeper; these animals require constant care every day. From deep cleaning to veterinary visits, the care for our captive populations in any zoo is essential for conservation and animal research. Zoos ensure the genetic continuation of several species (figure 3). They educate the public and plant the seed in the next generation that these animals are a valued part of nature and are worth protecting.

My major in Environmental Science focuses on the conservation of endangered species and I truly believe that you can't know these animals unless you get down to their level. I loved participating in the ex-situ care of these animals and being able to get up close and connect with them in ways that the majority will never experience (figure 4). I can now truthfully say that I've had the experience of dancing with the macaws, peed on by a squirrel monkey, spit in the eye by a llama, head-butted by sheep and goats, and bit by both a camel and a small child.

### Acknowledgements

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