

## ABSTRACT

*Volunteering in a major zoo offers a unique and varied work experience which is quite different from that offered by other nonprofit institutions, and necessitates a highly refined and coordinated team approach. Applying management principles in developing jobs as varied as exhibit interpretation, the botanical simulation of natural habitats, and customer service has allowed the Volunteer Resources Department to satisfy short term needs while laying the framework for consistent long-term leadership and growth. The principles of creating a meaningful zoo experience while sustaining a mutually beneficial relationship between paid and unpaid staff are vital to an effective operation and equally applicable to the volunteer programs of other institutions.*

# Volunteerism in a Unique Setting: Donating Your Time at the Zoo

Mary Beth McKay and Donald W. Jackson

## INTRODUCTION

Working at nearly any major zoo can be an exceptional experience whether one is a paid staff member or a volunteer. Zoos are unique facilities and the opportunity for individuals to donate their time in such an ever-changing environment will be remembered for the rest of their lives. Running an efficient and cost-effective volunteer department is a challenging experience indeed. The fundamental concepts which relate to developing and maintaining such a program are, in most ways, similar to other nonprofit organizations. Many facets of the operation, from the handling of animals and their interpretation for the public to facilitating the volunteer-assisted animal feeding program in the

Zoo's diet kitchen, do necessitate a much more highly refined and coordinated team approach.

## THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS AT ZOO ATLANTA

It is obviously much more conducive to the long-term health of any volunteer program to retain trained and committed volunteers, rather than to continually depend on frequently scheduled recruitment sessions to fulfill an organization's unpaid staffing needs. One of the most significant responsibilities of the Friends of Zoo Atlanta's (FOZA) Volunteer Resources Department involves the ability to forecast how the current volunteer needs will change throughout the short and long term.

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This has been especially critical at Zoo Atlanta in that a total of approximately \$27 million has been spent on exhibitry since its new master plan was initiated in 1985. This phenomenal growth has made developing and maintaining a comprehensive program with a team approach that much more important to providing a quality volunteer experience.

To illustrate the Zoo's impressive growth, attendance has jumped from 595,000 to 743,000 in the 3 years between 1987 and 1990. The Zoo's membership drive has been equally impressive with an increase from 3,000 to an astounding 45,836 from 1985 to 1990. Not surprisingly, the number of active volunteers who donated their services for the Zoo had expanded to over 500 by 1988 with total hours of 31,320. The 1990 figures are even more impressive with 678 volunteers donating 43,319 hours. At a conservative pay rate of just \$12.00 per hour, this is equivalent to \$519,828 in donated services and 21 staff positions. Zoo Atlanta's permanent paid staff has increased as well in the five years between 1985 and 1990, from 37 to 107 (with the addition of 75-100 seasonal staff during peak season). During this same time period, FOZA's staff has risen from 6 to 18, a growth of 300% in only 5 years.

Although such swift growth in human and financial resources, as well as program activity, is certainly a very welcomed and desirable opportunity for any institution, it does tax the ability of its support organization to keep pace with the many critical needs that are sure to rise. Without question, the willingness to strategically plan and manage paid and volunteer resources to support immediate and long-range goals is a sound investment in the future of any organization. This is especially true, however, when growth has taken place in an environment which is as fast-paced and ever changing as that at Zoo Atlanta. Difficult as it may be, it is imperative to maintain a high quality and meaningful experience for volunteers in the face of such

rapid growth. The priority is to keep departments planning for the future while responding to immediate needs.

#### CURRENT VOLUNTEER PROGRAMS

At present, FOZA recruits, trains, and staffs fourteen volunteer service areas for the zoo. These include Administrative Services, the Beastly Feast Committee (black-tie fundraiser), Diet Kitchen, Docents, Habitat (horticulture), Junior League, OK-To-Touch Corral, Research, Speakers Bureau, Summer Safari Day Camp, the Z' Team (special events), the Visitor Information Program (VIP), The Zoo Atlanta Annual Fund, and FOZA's Board of Directors. Of the fourteen available program areas, four are particularly innovative and creative in harnessing and directing the abilities of FOZA's volunteers.

#### DOCENT (EDUCATION) VOLUNTEERS

The docent program is involved with interpreting the zoo's animal collection for the enjoyment of the visiting public as well as promoting a higher awareness of conservation ethics for patrons of all ages. Docent training sessions are held bi-annually and consist of a total of 36 classroom hours, with an additional 12 hours of on-the-job training. For a minimum commitment of 6.5 hours per month, the volunteer receives a wide array of benefits from learning animal behavior to the concepts involved in the design and construction of our newest, state-of-the-art exhibits. The extensive training which each docent receives enables him or her to confidently answer a wide array of visitor questions regarding the zoo's diverse animal collection. This same high level of training and experience also allows individuals who have matured within the organization to step into volunteer leadership roles and assist in the nurturing of less-tenured docents.

Rather than lead tours to educate and entertain the visiting public, stations are positioned around the zoo, complete

with animal artifacts and information on endangered species. The stations are interactive and promote a great deal of touching and handling of the materials on display. This is particularly valuable in holding the interest of the zoo's younger visitors. Giving the public the flexibility to move between the zoo's various docent stations has provided visitors with a more positive educational experience, and at the same time has expanded the range of innovative staffing opportunities for volunteers.

### HABITAT (HORTICULTURE) VOLUNTEERS

The ability to simulate natural habitats and therefore promote an understanding of the relationship between animals and their native environments is certainly one of the main responsibilities of Zoo Atlanta's horticulture department. Few horticulture departments in zoos have actively cultivated and maintained volunteers as a viable and productive resource. The horticulture (Habitat) volunteers work from 9:00 a.m. to approximately noon on the second Saturday of each month on a variety of projects scheduled by the zoo's Curator of Horticulture. Between 30-40 Habitat volunteers routinely attend each month's workday, out of a total of approximately 90 who participate in the program. This volunteer service area requires three hours of on-the-job training and a time commitment of three to four hours per month.

A number of important concepts have helped make the Habitat volunteer service area popular and productive. These include:

1. A telephone calling system has been established to keep each Habitat volunteer apprised of the nature and complexity of jobs which have been scheduled for the upcoming workday. This allows the volunteers to dress properly for the next Saturday's event.

2. An ample supply of pastries and either hot or cold refreshments (depending on the season of the year) is made available to the volunteers at the beginning of each Saturday's meeting, and is continually replenished as the workday progresses.
3. The Curator of Horticulture requires that all full and part-time employees report on the second Saturday of each month and work in close association with the Habitat volunteers. This has been exceedingly valuable in reinforcing to volunteers the importance with which the staff views the Habitat program. At each workday, tasks are assigned to work groups composed of horticulture staff and volunteers. This has been exceedingly advantageous in promoting a cohesive team between paid and unpaid staff.
4. Each Habitat workday produces in three to four hours the equivalent of nearly a full week's worth of paid staff labor. This high level of productivity can be attributed to the significant size of the Habitat program, the training, as well as to the effective planning and coordination of work projects. All of the equipment and materials needed to complete any scheduled landscape planting are set in place late Friday afternoon to prepare for the Saturday morning activities.

This high level of coordination has allowed major projects such as planting well over 100,000 of the 225,000 spring (tulips, daffodils, etc.) and summer flowering bulbs which have been installed over the last three years at Zoo Atlanta, accomplished with volunteer labor. In one day alone, 16,000 daffodils were planted in a combined effort of employee volunteers from a local Atlanta-based department store, and FOZA's Habitat volunteers.

5. It is critical that any volunteer, no matter what his or her interests, is given tasks that have both meaning and substance. Habitat volunteers have completed a wide array of horticulturally-oriented projects from the planting of thousands of flowering bulbs of all types, to major landscaping in the zoo's two newest naturalistic animal exhibits, each of which cost over \$1,000,000 to design and construct. Involving volunteers resulted in a savings to the Zoo of over \$100,000 in associated landscape expenses.

Jobs which have "long-term" significance and/or visibility are preferable to those whose value can only be measured in hours, days, or weeks. For example, daffodil bulbs will bloom each spring for many years after planting. By the same token, the installation of trees and shrubs in and around an animal exhibit also gives a horticulture volunteer long-term satisfaction. In essence, the Habitat volunteer is guaranteed the opportunity of coming back year after year with his or her children, or even in some cases grandchildren, to admire a particular job well done.

By contrast, a project such a raking leaves would not be as desirable, due primarily to its short-term intrinsic value. Within a few weeks there would be no lasting evidence of all the hard work that went into such an endeavor.

#### DIET KITCHEN

The animal diet kitchen trains volunteers to prepare meals for the animals and deliver these prepared diets to exhibit areas. Twelve hours of on-the-job training along with a minimum time commitment of four hours per month are required. Working with a trained dietician and delivering food preparations to animal habitats are definite benefits of Diet Kitchen volunteers. By matching the schedules, skills, and interests of unpaid staff to the commissary work routines,

the dietician has been able to greatly increase the efficiency of her entire operation. She has developed a procedure for scheduling the commissary's many job responsibilities to take advantage of the highly motivated and trained volunteers. For example, she now prepares the week's ape (dry feed) diets only on Saturdays, the day when the largest number of volunteers is scheduled.

Having noticed the energy and enthusiasm of teenagers at the zoo, the dietician has now developed a set of guidelines for Jr. Zoo Crew volunteers to work in the commissary with paid and unpaid staff. Their benefits include gaining a knowledge of both animals and nutrition, working in a structured environment and job experience. For these efforts, the staff dietician gains a higher level of volunteer productivity along with the satisfaction of developing a positive and creative educational experience for today's youth.

#### VISITOR INFORMATION PROGRAM

The Visitor Information Program (VIP) volunteers approach and greet patrons entering and leaving the zoo, track visitor feedback, and answer general information questions. A total of eight hours of classroom time and 12 hours of on-the-job training are required, along with a minimum commitment of four hours per month. This program has allowed the zoo to upgrade the quality of its customer service, in addition to providing a mechanism for informal visitor feedback. Visitor feedback and VIP suggestions are recorded on a daily basis and consolidated into a weekly report for the senior managers of the zoo and Friends of Zoo Atlanta. Each year, the suggestions and comments along with their resulting improvements are summarized. These changes are reported to the volunteers as positive feedback and to reinforce to them the program's value and effectiveness.

The Visitor Information Program is a cooperative project between the zoo's

Operations Department and FOZA's Department of Volunteer Resources. The program was formulated by staff from both departments with input and recommendations from volunteers. A full day's training module was developed to present the program's proactive customer service approach in joint training sessions scheduled for the VIP team of paid and unpaid staff. During the program's first year, several volunteers served in an advisory capacity. A volunteer chairperson was selected the following year to assist in planning, training, and recruitment, and a "Leadership Team" was appointed within eighteen months. This Leadership Team was formed to assure the effective operation of the program, and is responsible for the selection of "Coordinators" who work with volunteers to assure that recognition, training requirements, time commitments, etc. have been successfully completed. These leadership positions have allowed the volunteers to take more responsibility for the success of this service area, especially as it relates to active volunteer participation.

#### RECRUITMENT AND TRAINING

The concept that it is much more efficient and cost-effective to retain existing volunteers of proven quality than it is to continually recruit and train replacements is just as true in a zoological setting as it is in any other institution. However, demonstrating quality and value at the outset of a potential volunteer's experience is critical to setting the stage for a meaningful and long-term experience.

To accomplish this at Zoo Atlanta, all potential volunteers are introduced to the entire volunteer program through FOZA's Volunteer Choice Safari. The "Safari" is designed to immerse volunteers into the uniqueness of donating one's time at the zoo and is held twice a year (spring and fall). New volunteers are acquainted with an overview of each of the nine program areas available. After introductions by both the Director of the zoo and FOZA, volunteer guides

lead the potential volunteers in small groups on "Safari" through the zoo. Stopping at each of the nine "encampments," the potential volunteers are given a short presentation on the benefits and opportunities of each service area.

In addition to the training sessions for each service area, all new volunteers must also attend the ZOOMaker's Enrichment Series (ZMES). These quarterly workshops (two to four hours each, depending on the program selected), introduce volunteers to the mission and goals of both FOZA and the Zoo, and further educate them on volunteer and customer service procedures. The ZMES concept also motivates volunteers by providing them with the "inside scoop" on zoo animals, exhibits, and activities.

#### VOLUNTEER LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

In April of 1990, the Director of Volunteer Resources and the Executive Director of FOZA developed two very important strategy groups to assist in the long-range planning and overall development of the volunteer program.

*The Volunteer Resources Committee* was restructured as a standing committee of the Friends of Zoo Atlanta Board of Directors to assist in the more broad-based policy decisions of the volunteer program as well as advocate for program support. The committee meets monthly with a membership selected from the organization's Board of Directors as well as volunteer service area leaders and staff.

In an effort to best assist the Director of Volunteer Resources to promote an even more responsive volunteer program in 1991, the committee has selected three prime areas in which to concentrate its efforts and expertise. These include recruitment (especially as it relates to seniors and weekday volunteers), recognition, and the Volunteer Council agenda.

*The Volunteer Council* was designed to operate as a representative group, teaming volunteer service area leaders with staff managers in all program areas. The

Council's mission is to promote professional volunteer management within the zoo, and meets on a quarterly basis for informative sessions.

### *Service Area Leadership*

The expansion of more tenured, experienced volunteers into leadership roles supervising their peers builds their self-esteem and gives them a greater sense of program ownership. This ownership ties them more strongly to the success of the particular service area. They are willing to set standards that volunteers must adhere to and will take steps to assure that these standards are met. Expanding leadership into new areas and increasing levels of involvement within service areas will also improve the retention of volunteers over the long-term.

### SUMMARY

Zoos are unique educational facilities which offer an array of desirable oppor-

tunities for volunteers. Because of Zoo Atlanta's ambitious reconstruction effort over the last five years, FOZA's volunteer programs have been forced to grow just as rapidly in order to adequately fulfill the many needed areas of support. As discussed here, a number of creative and innovative approaches have been implemented in each of the service areas to assure the needed balance between quality and growth. Selecting visible, meaningful jobs, being prepared with supplies and equipment, encouraging leadership development and teambuilding between volunteers and staff, and planning staff work around volunteer skills and availability will go a long way toward sustaining an active volunteer program. These concepts are readily applicable to a wide range of non-profit institutions.