

A Change in Keepers

Ecoparque Interactivo (Interactive Ecopark), city of Buenos Aires.

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The zookeepers' job is a unique work that requires theoretical and practical knowledge of the species biology, customer service and, of course, animal husbandry and welfare.

Inside the zoological institutions, keepers are one of the biggest assets. In Argentina, until a few decades ago, these job positions were filled by staff with a profile and training based in taming the animals, showing them threatening objects or yelling at them. The zookeepers' teams were even lead by bosses whose methods were all about exercising power through control, authoritarianism and the lack of willingness to implement new working tools and techniques, such as training and enrichment. This, plus the lack of an appropriate training and common background, generated different schools inside the institutions, weariness inside the teams and the lack of a long-term commitment.

However, nowadays, significant changes are occurring globally, inside a transformation frame, and a new management is being implemented, based on leadership, inspiration, enthusiasm and, especially, through the training of zookeepers, the incorporation of the new tools and concepts, and the priority of animal welfare.

The *Proyecto Ecoparque Interactivo* (Project Interactive Ecopark), since June 2016, started to walk this path of historical transformation that will take place in three stages, with partial openings in 2019, 2023 and 2025; and includes among its goals of transformation, the incorporation of these global changes. A new structure was created in the organization chart "*Gerencia Bienestar Animal*" (Animal Welfare Management) that is in charge of veterinarians, biologists, nutrition and animal care. All these areas are in permanent communication and dedication to establish interdisciplinary working plans aimed to improve the animals welfare. These plans

include transfers, veterinarian treatments, dietary changes and training, among others.

The zookeeper's team, together with the animal behaviour team, are part of the "*Cuidado Animal*" (Animal Care) area, who since April 2018 started to make changes inside the work teams and modifications in animal training. In only four months, we had a 27% more trained animals, working with 76 animal groups, meaning that in august 2017, we worked only with 30 groups, 39%, and in august 2018, we worked in 50 groups, 66%. In addition, the presence of supervisors was increased, work meetings were implemented and the communication between different teams was improved. Besides, the attendance to conferences and workshops through talks and presentations is encouraged, as well as training in animal care and tools such as ZIMS.

We believe that this is the beginning of the change towards a future generation of zookeepers who understand and believe in the importance of good professional practices that must be used with animals in our care in zoos and aquaria. Argentina has the chance, not only to have an association that works hard to achieve the professionalization of the zookeeping profession, but it will also have the commitment of all the institutions to keep on working for all animals' welfare, as we are doing today.