

## **e-interview with Peter Dollinger, outgoing Director, WAZA**

**Q. Peter, you have been Director of WAZA for several years and have led WAZA to many improvements and achievements. Of all the projects you have initiated, which are those which you feel have had or potentially have the greatest impact?**

**A.** The greatest impact had something very basic you probably didn't even think of: the establishment of a permanent Executive Office in 2001. Before, there was no permanent Office, but the WAZA Presidents were responsible for administrating the association, a task to which some allocated more, some less resources. The shifting of the office to another President and another place every two years did not allow for continuity, which is crucial for the successful running of an organisation, work was rather unfocused and the cohesion between the membership and the structures of the Association was rather loose. It has been my task to develop this office with very limited resources to an efficient unit capable of maintaining a dialogue with and providing adequate services to the membership, building up good working relations to Multilateral Environmental Agreements, Governments and Conservation NGOs, and giving WAZA a recognizable face by the production of more than 70 publications - News, Magazines, Directories, Proceedings, other brochures and leaflets - all following a uniform design. The most successful single project was probably the development of the WAZA website. This site was established in 2002, and in May 2003 the Office took on its administration. In 2003 the site had about 30000 visits and 120000 hits. In 2008, there were more than 500000 visits and 1500000 hits.

**Q. My personal favourite, which won't surprise you, is the work we did on the "Zoo Improvement Project." That, with its assessment tool, has been very useful to me in SAZARC in generating interest in having legal norms and standards. Do you feel that it is being adequately utilized by the zoos which could make a difference?**

**A.** The tools provided by WAZA are certainly not yet adequately used. It should be recognized, however, that the *WAZA Resolution on Improving Standards in Zoos* was adopted in October 2006 only, and that it takes usually some time until WAZA policy documents are implemented in practice by the zoo community. The upgrading of the Animal Welfare and Ethics Committee to a Standing Committee in 2007 and the appointment of the members to that committee in 2008 are other important steps towards establishing a global system for assisting zoos in need of improvement.

**Q. Were there projects or problems in the zoo community in which you were very interested that did not take off or were not implemented to your satisfaction. What are they and why do you think they are slow in making progress?**

**A.** In the years 2000/2001 WAZA organised three "*In situ* Conservation Workshops" looking for a strategy on how WAZA should get involved in *in situ* Conservation. The workshops recommended that WAZA should brand suitable projects and should organise global campaigns around such projects. This recommendation was part of Ulie Seal's report adopted by the Perth Annual Conference (2001). The recommendation to organise global campaigns could not be implemented because the largest of WAZA's regional associations decided to organise on their own annual campaigns as from 2002. Even the "Year of the Frog" was not a global campaign, which would have helped strengthen the WAZA Brand, but rather a series of parallel campaigns organised by the various regional associations. The only recommendation of the Workshops, which could be implemented, was the WAZA-Branding of conservation projects. Even here I had to fight against opposition from certain quarters within the association. However, in 2003 Council agreed that I could start the exercise by giving the brand to two projects. In the following years, the programme proved to be very successful, although only about one quarter of the members actively participated by submitting projects. Nevertheless, at the end of 2008, we had 145 WAZA-Branded Projects, which could benefit from an increased publicity provided by WAZA. On the other hand, the programme allowed WAZA not only to demonstrate what zoos do for conservation but also to establish working relationships with many conservation NGOs.

**Q. The Amphibian Ark has been an impressive collaborative project of WAZA and its members as well as CBSG members. Do you have any thoughts about how it should go forward from now. There seems to be now a "Decade of Amphibians" coming up in AArk. Do you think that is the most effective way to go? I am thinking of the Countdown 2010 as a more than 10 year project and its difficulty including zoos' seeming indifference toward it. Will an amphibian decade be successful?**

**A.** Amphibian Ark is a collaborative effort between IUCN and the Zoo World. Its administration is a bit chaotic and not very efficient. One certainly will have to re-think the way the amphibian crisis should be tackled in future. The "Year of the Frog" was a campaign and as such a project with a beginning and an end. The amphibian crisis, however, is an open-ended problem and can be addressed, if at all, only by long-term programmes. The zoo associations and associations of zoo professionals (educators, keepers) in the German-speaking area have recognised this already some time ago and decided already in March 2006, i.e. before the AArk was in existence and before the decision had been taken to organise a "Year of the Frog" to jointly undertake an open-ended programme under the umbrella of WAZA (see also answer to your last question).

**Q. Coming back to the Zoo Improvement Project, you have visited a number of countries and regions where there were large numbers of zoos needing improvement where the economic and environmental legacy of the countries seem partly to blame. Do you have a view on why zoos are bad and why they can't improve?**

**A.** There are many reasons for this but the main problem may be that there are probably about 15000 establishments worldwide calling themselves zoos but that only about 10% of these are members of a zoo association. The other 90% see keeping wild animals primarily as a source of income or as a hobby. They are usually short of funds, are inadequately staffed, have no mission and vision statement, no collection plan, and most of them have no higher aspirations with regard to environmental education and conservation. Another aspect may be that zoos are a low priority for many governments and that, therefore, there is no legislation appropriately governing the establishment and management of zoos and providing for bad establishments being closed.

**Q. What do you see as the greatest potential and duty for zoos today ... it is more of education, or of research, of breeding or of in situ conservation vis a vis funding conservation projects?**

**A.** Conservation breeding has proven to be a last resort for saving species. However there are many more species at risk in the wild than could ever be preserved *ex situ*. Similarly, the *in situ* engagement of zoos may be crucial in a number of cases but will not save the world. Therefore I believe that the educational role of zoos, entrenched in the UN Agenda 21, has the greatest potential and that it should be the top priority of the zoos to educate and motivate their more than 600 million visitors per year.

**Q. On the topic of zoo education itself, where do you see zoos falling down in their potential the most? Or going beyond expectation?**

**A.** If zoos have failed in one respect, then it is that they usually avoid talking about death: In particular, they do not convey that sometimes it may be unavoidable to kill animals with a view of keeping a breeding programme alive and viable. I am sure that the largest problem for long-term conservation breeding at zoos will be the lack of understanding by the public that nature is based on surplus, i.e. that always more animals are born than are necessary for maintaining their own species, and that these surplus animals will end up in the food chain, thus ensuring the survival of other species.

**Q. How do you see zoos exploiting the tremendous resource of IUCN to make themselves more relevant and generally to enhance their contribution to conservation?**

**A.** Zoos make available staff to the Commissions of IUCN, in particular to SSC, and these commission members could, on one hand, convey the zoos'

concerns to their SSC-Specialist Groups and, on the other hand, they should give a better feedback to their institutions, because the Specialist Groups could serve as ideal platforms for advising zoos when considering to get involved in *in situ* conservation projects.

**Q. You are now Director of the German Zoo Directors Association (VDZ). What are your plans for it ?**

**A.** The Zoo Associations in the German-speaking area have agreed to engage in a long-term amphibian conservation programme consisting of several elements: (a) training of staff, (b) improving and expanding amphibian exhibits, (c) informing and educating the public, (d) *ex situ* conservation breeding, (e) upgrading the zoos' properties as amphibian habitats or getting involved in the rehabilitation and management of amphibian habitats in the zoos' neighbourhood with a view of increasing local biodiversity, and (f) supporting or implementing amphibian conservation projects in developing countries. I have guided this programme while still at WAZA and will continue to do so as Director of VDZ.

Another point will be to increase the perception of the zoos' conservation role. This will be done by expanding the association's website [www.zoodirektoren.de](http://www.zoodirektoren.de) and by producing leaflets and brochures for distribution by the member institutions, e.g. in the context of "2010 – The Year of Biodiversity".

These activities will take place in close cooperation of VDZ and the other zoo associations in the German-speaking area, and of course VDZ members will continue to participate in activities initiated by WAZA or EAZA such as WAZA-Branding of conservation projects or participating in EAZA Campaigns. Dated 22.12.2008



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