

Zoological Institutions in the Middle East: Potential for a Regional Zoo Association

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Zoos and aquaria are places where animals are maintained in captivity for different purposes.

Modern zoos have set up objectives which integrate conservation, education, research and recreation (Hediger, 1969). To help reach these goals, zoological institutions have started to organize themselves into organizations. These zoo associations are found now all around the world and gather zoos, aquaria and similar facilities into a strong network of communities with clear goals. Nevertheless the Middle East has never gone through the process of the creation of a zoo association. However, zoos, private collections and aquaria in this region face the same missions, challenges, problems and limitations as anywhere else in the world.

The goal of my thesis "Zoological institutions in the Middle East and potential of a regional zoo association", undertaken for the completion of a Bachelor Degree in Wildlife Management in Van Hall Larenstein, Leeuwarden (The Netherlands), was to give an overview of the current situation of zoos and aquaria in the Middle East and to assess the feasibility of creating a regional zoo association.

The interests, the expectations and the possible investments of local zoological institutions were examined and analysed. Three main instruments of research to reach the goal were used: literature research, questionnaire and observations. A total of 69 confirmed zoological institutions were found in the region. From these, 17 are 'Zoos', 8 'Aquaria', 3 'Dolphinaria', 13 'Private Collections', 10 'Breeding Centres', 8 'Minizoo's' and 10 'Others'. Each category has its own characteristics and developments, which are briefly mentioned in Chapter 3 and Appendix 2 of the full report (available on request at jonaslivet@wanadoo.fr).

The potential of a regional zoo association in the Middle East was assessed through a survey realized via a specific questionnaire. A questionnaire was distributed by email, fax and paper. It was possible to reach only 49 institutions out of the 69 existing in the region. A total of 16 completed questionnaires were obtained. Conservation and research are two main fields in which zoological institutions from this region are actively involved: 63% of the surveyed institutions participate in conservation *in situ* and 88% state that they are doing research. Education is less developed with only 56% of the institutions involved in some form of education, but many of the institutions in this region are not open to the general public.

Nine zoological institutions in the Middle East are already members of international zoo associations, mainly based in other regions. Furthermore seven zoological institutions within the Middle East are members of the International Species Information System (ISIS).

Even without a structured framework, a certain number of collaborations and exchanges are already underway among zoological institutions in the region. Most of these exchanges are done with institutions situated in The United Arab Emirates.

All the surveyed institutions are interested in joining a potential regional zoo association in the Middle East. They expect to gain benefit from it mainly in terms of 'Exchange of information', 'Exchange of animals', 'Conference/workshop' and 'International connection with worldwide association'. The surveyed institutions are willing to support and participate in the following fields, as 'Exchange of information', 'Exchange of animals', 'Conference/workshop' and 'Technical assistance'.

Active involvement in breeding programs, conservation and research committees appear to be the fields that are most aspired to by regional zoological institutions.

From the brief analysis of zoological collections in the Middle East and the results from the survey realized, a clear potential for a regional zoo association could be drawn. The foundation of such an association would require a detailed procedure and a strong structural base to encourage the future development, success and positive development of its members.

Whatever the impetus, the decisions made by the founders during the start-up period of the new organization will have a profound impact on its success, effectiveness and longevity (Knowledge Center Staff, 2006). General recommendations about the starting steps of a regional zoo association in the Middle East are given in the last chapter of the report. A full version of the report "Zoological institutions in the Middle East and potential of a regional zoo association" on pdf is available on request at jonaslivet@wanadoo.fr.

References:

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Entrance to Al Ain Zoo, covering 400-hectare in the foothills of the Jebel Hafeet Mountains in Al Ain, United Arab Emirates. Photo by Balaji.



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