

# **BONGOS, BIRDS, ELEPHANTS AND PLANTS TAKE TURNS AT BIAZA**

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Lesla Longley reviews the eclectic mixture of presentations at the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA) conference and AGM

**ON an exceptionally hot and sunny weekend at the end of May, more than 100 delegates from across the UK and Ireland gathered at Edinburgh Zoo for the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA) conference and annual general meeting.**

BIAZA is a professional body representing zoos and aquariums in Britain and Ireland; 98 zoos and aquariums are part of the group. The association's aim is to promote animal welfare, education, conservation and to provide support to the institutions.

The theme of the conference was "The Relevance of the Living Collection in the 21st Century" and the Ice Breaker event was held in the Budongo chimpanzee exhibit at the zoo.

The animal collection manager at Edinburgh Zoo, Darren McGarry, welcomed delegates by showing videos on Edinburgh and on the Budongo project in Uganda, which is supported by the zoo. Delegates were then free to mingle, under the watchful gaze of the exhibit's inhabitants – every so often, the chimps interrupted with loud display behaviour. I don't think it was just the chimps who were tired the next day after their antics that evening.

## **Friday**

On Friday morning, David Windmill, CEO of the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS), welcomed everyone to the conference. He emphasised the need for good communication between zoos as well as with other parties, such as government bodies and universities. Simon Tonge, BIAZA chairman, then formally introduced the meeting, and thanked Miranda Stevenson for her hard work in developing the programme.

The morning started with a series of talks on collection planning with the first session chaired by Simon Tonge.

A highlight was a presentation by Drummond Bone (BIAZA president) on “What do we make of the *Financial Times* running a magazine cover story on zoos?”. He described how the roles of conservation, education and entertainment intertwine in zoo and aquarium collections.

Sir Bone emphasised the political importance of zoos (through economic impact and job creation) and the need to improve links between zoos and politicians; that the aim of zoos should be to “create a world where as many species as possible can co-exist”, with sustainability (including financial) a necessary achievement; and that a large part of the president’s role will be in lobbying politicians and industry to become involved with work in zoos.

David Field (Zoological Society of London) discussed whether collection plans were a strategic tool or the curator’s whim, concluding that it is often a combination of both. He advised there should be a balance of priorities between conservation, education, visitor impact and research.

Kevin Buley (Chester Zoo) gave an insight into institutional collection planning, outlining the zoo’s collection protocol for evaluating species’ roles in decision-making processes.

Iain Valentine (RZSS) talked about the society’s plans to add giant pandas to their collection, highlighting the political path taken along the way involving Scottish, British and Chinese counterparts. The RZSS was able to help both staff and animals at the Wolong panda breeding sanctuary after the devastating 2008 earthquake in the Sichuan Province.

After coffee, Charlotte Macdonald (also from the host collection) defined “pure” research, describing work being done at both Edinburgh Zoo and global institutions. Examples of projects included tool use, reward delay, and predator models.

She questioned why more collections are not becoming involved in conducting pure research, and added that, although in the past non-human primates have been the focus of such research, other animals, such as corvids (for example the ravens at Edinburgh Zoo) and rodents can also be used. She concluded that there appear to be many advantages to having collections, including enrichment for the animals, engaging the visiting public and initiating relationships between zoos and academic bodies.

Kirsten Pullen (Whitley Wildlife Conservation Trust) spoke about applied research, with a focus on husbandry and welfare of animals, for example as post-occupancy evaluations to assess how animals use new enclosures. Dr Pullen outlined the usefulness of hard evidence emanating from such research in improving zoo operations and outputs.

Bryan Carroll (Bristol Zoo Gardens) talked about the integration of the living collection with field conservation. He examined the links between exhibits and field conservation projects; in some cases, support is given through finances, while in others technical support and employment of field officers and researchers may be applicable.

Jake Veasey (Woburn Safari Park) discussed captive breeding, using as an example the Eastern bongo (*Tragelaphus eurycerus isaaci*) for which he is the European endangered species programme (EEP) coordinator. A connection is necessary between ex-situ programmes in zoos and in-situ projects, with education being key.

The lunch break allowed us to bask in the sun on the Mansion House lawns in the zoo's grounds, catching up with old colleagues and making new acquaintances.

We reconvened for Neil Bemment's session, continuing the morning's theme.

Olivia Walter, International Zoo Veterinary Group (IZVG), presented a report on the consequences of the EU ban on bird imports. She discussed sources of birds for collections, and advised that zoos have a way to go before achieving sustainable bird populations.

Ben Potterton (Twycross Zoo) then talked about the use of non-EAZA (European Association of Zoos and Aquaria) or non-BIAZA organisations to improve sustainability of captive populations. A major concern was the difference in current protocols for animal acquisition between UK and mainland European collections.

Stephen Woollard (RZSS) outlined interpretation planning and design, integrating conservation, research and education in the process.

Visitor and staff responses to questionnaires asking what they think of zoos were discussed by Andrew Tribe (University of Queensland).

It was interesting to note that visitors, zoo staff and "nonzoo" wildlife conservationists had diverse ideas about what they wanted or expected from zoos. He also noted that education appears vital to promoting the role of conservation.

Stephanie Sanderson (Chester Zoo) made an unscheduled presentation on bluetongue virus (BTV), with updates on the disease's progression through Europe over the past two years, including tracking BTV-8 and BTV-1 northward.

She pointed out that, although many non-domestic animals so far vaccinated (off-license) with bluetongue vaccines have attained an immune response (demonstrated serologically), knowledge of the protection is still scant, for example, it is not known how frequently to administer booster vaccines.

Delegates were then free to tour the zoo at their leisure, meeting up again for drinks and a barbecue in the evening.

## **Saturday**

Kevin Buley chaired the Saturday morning session, which had excellent attendance.

The renowned author Geoff Hosey (School of Health and Social Studies, University of Bolton) presented data investigating the human-animal relationship in the zoo, suggesting that the way forward was assessment of a combination of behavioural and non-behavioural methods.

Stephanie Sanderson then discussed the practical aspects of managing animal welfare in zoos.

The session continued with a focus on elephants in captivity. Mark Pilgrim (Chester Zoo) summarised the role of elephants within a zoo collection, focusing on the education value of this iconic species.

Welfare of elephants in UK zoos was the focal point of a study by Chris Sherwin, University of Bristol. He assessed 77 elephants over an 18-month period, and noted that 42 per cent had multiple or severe foot problems and/or were overweight (75 per cent were overweight or very overweight).

Ros Clubb (RSPCA) presented results from a study on survival and breeding rates of both African and Asian elephants in European zoos, noting that, unfortunately, the captive population in Europe is currently not self-sustaining.

Reports from BIAZA and the AGM were presented after coffee and before lunch.

Miranda Stevenson gave an update on BIAZA, noting that there are now 98 institutions in BIAZA; approximately 40 of these are also members of EAZA.

David Field represented the Zoos Forum, and also International species information service (ISIS). The release of the first stage of Zoological Information Management System is on schedule for April 2010.

Simon Tonge outlined how zoos may request voluntary zoo inspections to become EAZA accredited, and Jo Gipps gave reports for the Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG),

showing the need for more work on the Amphibian Ark project, and World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA), and announcing Gerald Dick as the new director.

Presentations continued after lunch with Pippa Craddock chairing the session.

“Enclosure design for the eclectic diner”, was discussed by Simon Jones (RZSS), emphasising the role of plants in enclosures.

David Field presented Brian Zimmerman’s talk on the aquarium perspective of acquisition and deposition of animals, identifying private clubs and individuals as an important source of many rare species.

Commercial considerations in collection planning were outlined by Rich Storton (ZSL), primarily as a means to produce revenue for continued investment and conservation activity.

Lesley Dickie’s (EAZA) interestingly titled presentation “Mormon marriages and batting averages” highlighted the need to help other collections to improve the zoo community.

## **Lively debate**

The afternoon session and the conference were concluded on Saturday afternoon with a lively debate chaired by Miranda Stevenson. The motion was: “This house believes there is no place for white lions or tigers in the modern collection”.

The proposers for the motion were Sarah Christie and Jo Gipps. Their main arguments were that white lions and tigers are “mutants” with no conservation value, and that inbreeding often results in congenital deformities, which may be a welfare issue.

The opposers were Steve Sampson and Bob Lawrence. They argued that white animals increase media coverage of a collection, allowing opportunities to discuss conservation issues as well as elevated revenue from increased visitor numbers. This revenue may be channelled into conservation projects.

Discussion was then opened to the house, with notable comments centering on the balance between commercial viability and integrity. Everyone agreed that education was paramount, ensuring that members of the public should be given clear message that these white animals are not found in the wild but that their normal colour morph relatives are endangered. When put to the house for voting, the proposers of the motion won by a substantial margin.

The conference dinner was held in the Oasis Restaurant at Edinburgh Zoo, and any survivors made the trip to the Highland Wildlife Park in Kingussie on Sunday.



***Above. People gather on the lawn in front of the penguin enclosure before the famous “penguin parade”.***





***Left. Adult and chick gentoo penguins (Pygoscelis papua) at their nest site in Edinburgh Zoo. Sprinklers keep the birds cool in warm weather.***

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*An adult giant panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*) enjoys some bamboo.*



***Above: The two young male Indian rhinoceros (Rhinoceros unicornis) at Edinburgh Zoo vie for space in their outdoor pool.***





***Right: Giant panda youngsters at a temporary facility in the village of Ya'an after earthquake damage to the Wolong breeding centre, Sichuan Province, China. The Royal Zoological Society of Scotland was the first international NGO to provide support to the centre after the tragedy.***