



The Accreditation Process of The Association of Zoos & Aquariums and Animal Welfare

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INTRODUCTION

The Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) has the world's most comprehensive and respected accreditation program for zoological parks and aquariums. We are the originators of accreditation for zoological parks, and first began accrediting zoos and aquariums in 1974. AZA has been improving its program for almost 50 years, and we are widely recognized as the global “gold standard”. Among those prominent and internationally known institutions that rely on our accreditation process to be thorough, challenging, and meaningful, are Smithsonian's National Zoological Park, San Diego Zoo Global, the Wildlife Conservation Society, Disney's Animal Kingdom, the Monterey Bay Aquarium, the Audubon Zoo in New Orleans, and the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, just to name a few. This gold standard has also been met by AZA members in 12 other countries, with world-class institutions such as Fundacion Temaikken in Argentina, Ocean Park in Hong Kong, Africam Safari Park in Mexico, Seoul Zoo in Korea, Valencia Aquarium in Spain, and the Calgary Zoo and Toronto Zoo in Canada meeting or exceeding AZA accreditation standards.

AZA members place their highest priority on exceptional animal care, and that is reflected in our accreditation standards. Almost every AZA standard is related to animal welfare, and our requirements for ongoing animal welfare assessment are among the most challenging and encompassing available. This document speaks to the strength of our process, our standards, our organization, and the community we have served since AZA's inception in 1924.

ACCREDITATION AS BEST PRACTICE

Accreditation itself is the most successful means of measuring quality within a profession. Originally dominated by the educational, medical, and engineering professions, today accreditation is used by a broad array of professions to accurately and fully evaluate, and document, excellence. By its very nature, accreditation is a process whereby recognized leaders in a profession create standards by which to measure organizations within that profession. It has long been recognized that the most knowledgeable and capable experts in *any* field are the leaders working within that field. The core strength of accreditation is built on each field's recognized experts, known best practices, and a thorough, unbiased and independent process of measuring how successful—or not—institutions within that field are in meeting the field's recognized standards.

A BRIEF HISTORY

AZA was originally formed in 1924 for two primary reasons: (1) to bring zoos and aquariums together in a collective effort to save species; and, (2) to work as a group to improve animal welfare, housing, and care in zoos and aquariums throughout the United States. Although much progress was made over subsequent years in advancing more uniform animal husbandry and welfare practices, by the late 1960s it was clear that a more effective means of advancing the profession was needed.

Quality Not Quantity. Initially, AZA did not require accreditation as a prerequisite for membership. But in 1985, after much consideration of the likely consequences, AZA decided to place the importance of *quality* ahead of *quantity*, and made accreditation mandatory for AZA membership. This decision led to the number of AZA members dropping dramatically, from approximately 350 to 87, by the end of 1985. The decision to make accreditation mandatory despite the expected loss of membership was easy *only* in the knowledge that it was *the right thing to do* for the animals in our care. AZA has always placed animal welfare *first*, and AZA's willingness to take that bold step 36 years ago worked. It spurred a rise in animal welfare, care, and husbandry among *all* reputable zoological parks and aquariums in the United States. Since then, this standard of excellence has been "exported" to aquariums and zoos in 12 other countries. AZA believes just as strongly today that assuring high standards of animal welfare, care, and husbandry is paramount to the overall well-being of living creatures, *and good conscience permits no higher priority.*

PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

AZA standards are primarily *performance* standards (i.e., measuring the level of achievement considered acceptable to fulfill a performance characteristic, and choice in method for meeting the goal). This differs from *engineering* standards, where exact and precisely measured steps are required to fulfill an engineering characteristic, with little or no variation in method for meeting the goal. Engineering-based standards are typically used within fields that have clear and specific boundaries such as manufacturing or education curricula.

However, in the world of zoos and aquariums, where so many variables exist, the use of performance standards promotes innovation in applying each standard to the wide variety of species typically found in a modern zoo or aquarium. And this individual-level innovation drives improvement, as individual facilities find new and better ways to ensure that animals are thriving. Even the smallest AZA-accredited zoos typically average close to 100 species, each with differing needs. A single performance standard can be applied to all—within each institution's specific parameters and challenges, and according to the needs of each species.

EXCELLENCE IN ALL AREAS OF OPERATION EQUALS EXCELLENT ANIMAL WELFARE

The Preamble to the AZA accreditation standards extolls an “extraordinary focus on animal care, welfare, and well-being.” Although the AZA standards cover every aspect of running a successful zoo or aquarium, animal welfare is at the core and can be found throughout. Our standards are grouped in sections such as: animal welfare, care, and management; veterinary care; conservation; education; scientific advancement; governing authority; staffing; support organization; finance; facilities; safety and security; guest services; and master and strategic planning. All of these areas play a *crucial role* in the quality of animal welfare at a zoo or aquarium.

Animal Welfare, Care, and Management (AWCM). This section contains the more obvious standards on animal welfare, including social groupings, habitats, providing animals with choice, protection from weather conditions, water quality, seasonal and temporary traveling exhibits, animal transportation, handling of education animals, among others. Standard 1.5.0 is at the core of all welfare as it requires each institution to do annual animal welfare assessments on *each of the animals in residence*. We even offer a detailed guide on how to develop an animal welfare assessment process to meet this standard. During accreditation inspections (or at any time the Accreditation Commission may request), these assessments are reviewed by AZA to assure they are being done properly. This process involves personnel from the animal care staff up to top leadership levels, and assessments must be done, at minimum, annually and upon any change in the animal's environment (noise, new neighbors, loss of companion, etc.). Many AZA institutions conduct welfare assessments several times a year. And unlike many welfare processes that focus on a limited number of animals every few years, AZA's standard requires assessments for *all* animals at least annually. Another related standard (1.5.8) requires all institutions to have a welfare reporting process that staff can use should a concern arise, and the process requires a quick and transparent response and action, with appropriate records and documentation.

Welfare in All Sections. While the AWCM section contains many of our core animal welfare standards, *all* aspects of an institution affect animal welfare. Therefore, at the beginning of all sections, AZA's standards contain a “Welfare Considerations” box, explaining how the standards in that section relate to animal welfare. Below are just some examples, with italics added for emphasis.

Veterinary Care. Good veterinary care is critical to good animal welfare. The “Welfare Considerations” box at the beginning of that section states:

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums must assure the health of all animals in their care. In addition to a strong foundation of professional animal care staff, the utilization of a highly qualified veterinarian and veterinary staff, and the access to modern veterinary facilities is required. All concerns regarding the health of animals must be assessed, treated, and corrected as a priority utilizing the expertise and resources of the veterinary team and as also available through AZA and AAZV.

The section contains standards regarding the veterinary care program, the veterinary staff, pharmaceutical procedures and use, equipment, preventative medicine, nutrition, and more. All are considered crucial to good animal welfare.

Conservation: Conservation ethics, practices, messaging, and funding help improve the welfare of animals in the wild *and* their counterparts in human care. Animal welfare should be considered as a component of field conservation projects supported by AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, and the standards in this section reflect that expectation.

Education: AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums must be innovative and dynamic conveyors of their science-based mission and goals. Knowledge creates awareness that leads to change, and impacts animal welfare in both AZA-accredited institutions *and* in the wild. Educated communities are overwhelmingly more supportive of actions and practices that promote the care, welfare, and conservation of wildlife.

Scientific Advancement: Studies performed or supported by AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums advance knowledge and understanding of animals and the individual needs of each species. *Through knowledge gained, AZA-accredited institutions help to improve the welfare of animals both in human care and their counterparts in the wild.*

Governing Authority: It is critical that an AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium's governing authority provide the institution with attentive and consistent support *to assure the institution's ability to continuously provide good animal welfare.* Consistent and strong leadership and support by a governing authority may help avoid or mitigate shortfalls and other conditions that could potentially affect the quality of animal welfare within the institution.

Staff: AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums must have a sufficient number of properly trained staff to care for the animals and assure good animal welfare, maintain high quality operations, and work to continually evolve (modernize) the institution. Continuing professional development of staff is required to ascertain that staff is up-to-date with the latest information and best practices, including animal welfare.

Support Organization: It is important for an AZA-accredited zoo or aquarium's support organization *to recognize and understand the components of good animal welfare and to support the institution in areas that will enhance its ability to continuously provide good welfare to the animals in its care* (for example, funding staff training and development, etc.). Support organizations that are primarily focused on individual institution memberships should support animal welfare *through communications with the membership* about the care provided daily by the institution to assure good welfare for the animals in its care.

Finance: A healthy, stable financial condition *is critical to assuring the institution's ability to continuously provide good animal welfare.* An inadequate financial position and/or contingency plan *have a direct and negative affect on the quality of animal welfare* and continued modernization of the institution.

Facilities: The condition, size, appropriateness, and functionality of animal areas have a *direct impact* on animal welfare. AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums must consider these factors when assessing welfare for each individual animal or group of animals in their care. Institutions are required to incorporate commonly accepted welfare guidelines *and follow a documented process for assessing animal welfare and wellness, especially the spaces in which they live.* All facilities within an institution reflect the organization's commitment to quality and modernization.

Safety/Security: One of the three core principles upon which AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums operate is safety. Facilities must be properly maintained, infrastructure sound, proper practices in place, staff aware and trained, and a culture of safety inherent throughout the institution. *All concerns regarding the safety and welfare of individual animals or groups, visitors, and staff must be thoroughly assessed and corrected promptly if warranted.*

Guest Services: Visitor perception drives success. AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums must continually strive to provide diverse, high quality experiences for all guests. *Leadership in animal care and welfare requires building and maintaining living environments that present well to the visitor and support healthy animals engaged in natural behaviors.* This is among the top factors that guests cite as leading to a positive impression of the institution and an overall inspiring experience.

Master and Strategic Planning: As a science-based institution focused on animal care and welfare, conservation, and the continued advancement of visitor and community engagement, a strong commitment to master and strategic planning for continuous change and evaluation is the foundation of adhering to “modern zoological practices and philosophies.” Strategically assessing all aspects of operations and routinely renovating and/or replacing old exhibits with new modern habitats that are designed *with animal welfare in mind*, is something that is expected of all AZA-accredited institutions. In addition, continuous and careful planning for new and innovative education programs and guest experiences reflects commitment to professionally recognized best practices and modern philosophies.

STAYING CURRENT AND CREDIBLE

AZA’s accrediting process is itself a living entity that changes and improves as the science of animal care and welfare makes new and exciting discoveries. New standards are introduced, and existing standards are revised, as new information comes to light. In the last ten years, for example, AZA has introduced approximately 40 new standards, and upwards of 100 revisions have been made to existing standards.

The AZA Accreditation Commission consists of 12 voting experts in the fields of zoo/aquarium operations; animal care, welfare, and husbandry; and veterinary medicine. In addition, there are three non-voting Advisors. Each of these individuals must annually sign an agreement to *always remain impartial in their judgement* and to keep confidential the information learned during the inspection. A degree of confidentiality must be established between the accrediting body and the organization being evaluated so as to gain access to private and protected information regarding financial assets, debts, salaries, and other legally protected data. It is also important to establish a “safe” environment in which discussion can flow freely when conducting interviews with employees, volunteers, former staff, and/or members of the public who wish to share information—positive or negative—with the accrediting body.

An accrediting body *must be capable of acting without bias*, and *must* be trusted to take appropriate and independent action whenever standards are not being met. To do otherwise eliminates the credential’s credibility, and defeats the purpose of the process itself. AZA holds a responsibility to the public, and to every institution it accredits, to maintain the integrity of the process. The 15-member Accreditation Commission is tasked with fairly, fully, and independently evaluating each case before rendering a decision and to assure that oversight is strong and integrity upheld.

Enforcement. Any accreditation program, no matter the field, requires a strong enforcement policy to be certain that standards are being met at the time accreditation is granted and throughout the period of accreditation. If standards are not enforced, they become—in effect—meaningless. If standards are not maintained, corrective and if necessary, punitive action *must* occur. Under AZA's program, there are a number of methods used to achieve this:

Special Inspections. Special inspections are required whenever AZA has evidence that standards are not being met. If these inspections show no evidence of compromised standards, no action is taken. However, if an inspection confirms that standards are not being maintained, the Commission can take action from requiring immediate correction to removing the institution's accreditation. In the last ten years a dozen special inspections have been performed. All resulted in successful corrective measures being made.

Deny Accreditation. If standards are not being met at the time of application or at any time during the period of accreditation, the Commission will deny or rescind the accreditation. In the last ten years there have been 16 institutions denied accreditation. Of those, a few were denied during the regular accreditation review process. The rest were AZA-accredited and later denied for failure to maintain AZA standards.

Table Accreditation. If standards are not being met the Commission may table the institution's accreditation—an indicator that concerns exist and are being addressed, but are not yet completed. Over the last decade, 37 institutions have had their accreditation tabled. Tabling lasts for one year during which the facility must correct every area of concern noted, and then a second inspection occurs. All of the tabled institutions successfully addressed the noted issues and regained accreditation.

Progress Reports. The Commission requires progress reports as a method of monitoring progress being made by institutions that have been identified as not maintaining one or more accreditation standards. There have been well over 300 progress reports reviewed since 2010. When a progress report is reviewed, if the Commission is not satisfied that the facility has fully addressed the areas being corrected, they will continue to monitor the case via progress reports until considered finished and complete.

Concerns Expressed by Public or Staff. According to ticket sales and other measures, it is estimated that approximately 500,000 individuals visit AZA-accredited institutions *daily*. That very public presence provides us with another enforcement tool in the form of comments and concerns received from guests at our institutions. Each case is carefully investigated and, if confirmed, results in one or a combination of the above steps to resolve the situation. In this same vein, staff at the institution and/or colleagues within the profession contact us if they have any concerns about an AZA-accredited institution.

IN CONCLUSION

The goal of AZA's accreditation program is, in the end, all about good animal welfare and what it takes *in every facet of the operation* to assure this. Each step in working toward AZA accreditation results in better animal care, which is the reason AZA began its accreditation program nearly 50 years ago.

No matter what the field, whether it be zoos and aquariums, hospitals, educational institutions, or any other profession, *an accreditation credential is only as good as the process and organization behind it.*

AZA is the premier accrediting body for zoos and aquariums in North America, and the widely acknowledged "gold standard" for zoo and aquarium accreditation globally. AZA's accrediting materials, including our standards, related policies, application, guide book, and inspector's handbook are available to the public for download online. AZA is committed to continuously strengthen and improve our program, both in process and substance.

A good accreditation program is never finished evolving, nor should it be. By continuously raising and enforcing professional standards, experts in the AZA zoo and aquarium community promote continuous improvement in providing great animal welfare in humane, healthy, and stimulating environments for all animals in our care. And through our accreditation process, AZA assures that its member zoos and aquariums employ modern zoological practices as basic tenets. *Animal care and welfare, and the quality of animal life in our accredited institutions, is AZA's top priority.*