

Recap of the May 2002 Regional Conference Hosted by Toledo Zoo

by Judy Thompson, Director-Conference Advisory

"Conservation. Teach It. Live It" was the focus of the AZAD Regional Conference hosted by Toledo Zoo May 3-5, 2002. It was a beautiful weekend for exchanging ideas with about 75 fellow volunteers from Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio and Kentucky. The Toledo volunteers, who prefer to be called Zoo-Eds, along with zoo staff put together a fun and informative weekend.

Everyone bunked at the Toledo Hilton which is a few short miles from the beautiful Toledo Zoo.

Zoo-Eds greeted us at the hotel with our name badge and a sack of goodies to kick off the program. The Friday evening Ice Breaker was held, appropriately, in the zoo's chilling Arctic Encounter. A wonderful buffet sated our appetites as we enjoyed the wonderful displays and animals depicting life in the arctic.

Saturday we enjoyed the quiet beauty of the early morning zoo as we arrived at 8am for breakfast. Conference co-chairs Joanne Vicki, Zoo-Ed, and Bill Davis, Volunteer Coordinator, greeted us and introduced the two morning speakers. Dawn Gerhart, from Keep Toledo/Lucas County Beautiful, Inc., discussed the recycling program that has been underway for two years. She shared some of the many ways they are spreading the benefits of recycling to the community through Sunday paper activity sheets for the kids, appearing at special events, and presentations to school groups and clubs, to name a few. A unique item found in our goody bag was a green water bottle made from 100% recycled plastic, using a process developed by people in Northwest Ohio. Dawn said it is the first 100% recycled plastic to receive approval from the FDA for carrying items for human consumption. Toledo/Lucas County is well on it's way to showing it's residents how important and easy it is to help in conserving our natural resources through the simple task of recycling.

Next on the agenda was the very engaging Dr. Tim Reichard, Toledo Zoo's Senior Veterinarian and an obvious favorite of the Zoo-Eds. Dr. Tim, as they call him, focused on zoo volunteers as environmental activists. As we know, visiting with zoo guests allows us the opportunity to mention ways we can all contribute to conserving resources. He showed a very compelling 10-minute video on population that spoke louder than any narrative. The world map was laid out on the screen and a counter quickly ticked off the years starting at 1 A.D. As you watched the years and centuries go by, red dots appeared on the world map to represent population growth. It was pretty slow going for many, many centuries. A noticeable increase came in the 1800's. Around the 1960's warp speed kicked in and the map exploded with red. The world population was 3 billion in the early 1960s. In only 40 years that number has more than doubled to over 6.2 billion people. Dr. Reichard reminded us that the Earth has a maximum carrying capacity for the number of living creatures, including humans, which its resources

can support. People are responsible for finding the proper balance. He explained that what is good for wildlife is also good for people. Perhaps we can try and relay this concept to zoo guests and assure them that their individual efforts to conserve resources does indeed make a difference. (More information on the population and environment can be obtained from: National Wildlife Federation at www.nwf.org/population and Population Connection at www.populationconnection.org, formerly Zero Population).

After breaking for lunch, the rest of the afternoon was designated as 'Zoo Day' and our chance to explore the many wonderful exhibits of the Toledo Zoo. Several behind the scenes tours were arranged for the AZAD attendees that were very popular.

Our Saturday was not quite over as we headed to the zoo's Museum of Science building for a yummy dinner buffet. It was followed by a talk on the bush meat trade given by Jenni Laidman, a conservation writer with the "Toledo Blade" newspaper. She traveled to Gabon, Africa in 2000 to learn more about the bush meat crisis and efforts to return orphaned gorillas to the wild. Jenni explained that logging and oil companies are not always providing food supplies to the workers, so of course they turn to hunting gorillas and other mammals. The stories she told were heart wrenching but when someone asked what we could do to help, she had no suggestions.

As with any AZAD conference, our hosts offered a raffle displaying loads of wonderful items. The attendees enjoyed the offerings and many walked away with multiple treasures as they happily took chances on many gifts, all for the benefit of conservation.. My chances paid off nicely as I took home a cute chickadee birdhouse that looks just great in my backyard.

Sunday morning our Toledo Zoo hosts provided another enjoyable continental breakfast that afforded more opportunity to chat with other attendees. It was followed by the final two presentations. Deborah Cooper, a former volunteer and staff member at Toledo Zoo, talked of 'The Power of One'. She operates a wildlife rehabilitation center, Nature's Nursery, run primarily by volunteers. A great deal of her time is spent providing conservation education programs to the public. A question she likes to ask groups is, "What is your favorite animal?" You can imagine the range of answers, but she always finds it interesting that no one ever says 'Me'. She pointed out that many people do not think of themselves as part of the habitat equation, yet we require the same basic needs as animals. Her message dovetailed perfectly with that of Dr. Reichard's. What is good for wildlife is also good for people. One by one, if we each do our part to conserve and make a difference, our efforts combined will have a positive affect on the whole.

The conference wrapped up with a showing of the 'Rainforest Encounter Assembly Program'. This elaborate and fun 60 minute program is targeted

toward grades K-6. It combines high technology with vibrant costumes, live animals and audience participation to teach about the different layers of the rainforest and highlights an animal living in each layer. Two education staff take the show on the road every Wednesday. They spend the entire day at one school and it looks like they have great fun putting on the show and sharing some of the wonders of the rainforest.

As the noon hour approached, so marked the end of the AZAD 2002 Regional Conference. It was a weekend filled with interesting topics, beautiful grounds, wonderful animals, and the chance to exchange ideas with those from other zoos. The smaller attendance size made it much easier to interact with everyone. An enormous amount of time and effort went into the successful execution of this conference. Hats off to the Toledo Zoo staff and Zoo-Eds for hosting an enjoyable and memorable regional event.

Regional conferences are an underused event. For attendees, the cost, time commitment and travel time is less than attending an annual conference. There are so many members who never go to an annual conference, yet they might be more inclined to attend a regional. Past attendances have ranged from 75 to 250 and allows for a more intimate social gathering and exchange of ideas.

To obtain a copy of the newly enhanced regional conference guidelines, contact the [AZAD Conference Advisory Chair](#).