



## AZAD 2007 • Saint Louis Zoo

### A Look at Zoos

*By Michael Abbene, Docent, Saint Louis Zoo*

What role should a zoo play in the 21st century? Dr. Jeffrey Bonner, President of the Saint Louis Zoo, explores that question in his book with a mix of autobiography and philosophy tempered by a highly realistic assessment of the state of our world and what zoos can do about it. Using a series of anecdotes from zoos around the world, Dr. Bonner brings these issues to life.

It starts simply enough with the story of the Species Survival Plan for the Partula snail that has been all but wiped out by an introduced species and now exists in small colonies at a handful of zoos in the US and the United Kingdom. Subsequent stories deal with saving Jamaican ground iguanas, African lions, Amur tigers, Golden Lion tamarins and Black-footed ferrets. Some stories are scary and funny at the same time, particularly the ones about escaped cheetahs in Saint Louis and an escaped tiger in Indianapolis.

One story will make you cry. The tragic Christmas Eve 1995 fire at Philadelphia's World of Primates is told in a measured voice that carefully recounts the loss and how the staff, volunteers and the community came together. Dr. Bonner juxtaposes this with the story of the young boy who fell into the gorilla exhibit at the Brookfield Zoo in suburban Chicago and was protected by one of the gorillas until keepers could bring the boy out of the exhibit. It is a very powerful chapter.

And it's these stories that make the book a very easy read. It isn't preachy at all. Whether he's talking about something as small as Partula snails and American burying beetles or as large as African elephants, Bonner keeps it fascinating with his personal viewpoint and comments from the actual participants in the episodes he relates. Due to familiarity there is, perhaps, an over-reliance on stories from the Indianapolis Zoo (where he was President from 1993 to 2002) and Saint Louis (which he joined in April, 2002). But that's a small point. Every chapter is thought-provoking and applicable to many situations and questions docents face on a day-to-day basis.

So what is the role of zoos today? Bonner points out: "We are not going to save species in zoos. We can only save them by saving wild places." Are zoos still to be considered arks? "No, zoos are definitely not arks, but our planet is. Our planet is an ark, and the living things of the planet are our treasure." These are the messages we need to bring to our visitors.

The royalties from this book are being split between the Saint Louis Zoo WildCare Institute and AZA's Conservation Endowment Fund. If you are coming to St. Louis for AZAD 2007, Dr. Bonner will be available to autograph copies of his book on Zoo Day, September 27.

*Reference: Sailing With Noah: Stories From The World Of Zoos. By Jeffrey P. Bonner (President and CEO, Saint Louis Zoo), University of Missouri Press, 2006.*