

How to Babysit an Orangutan **Docent Experiences as a Caregiver**

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The minute I laid eyes on 2-month old Luna Bela, the first great ape born at the Houston Zoo, I was in love. And little did I know at that time I would subsequently spend 16 months serving as a surrogate mother to her. Luna, a Bornean orangutan, was so named because she was born during a full moon; bela is Indonesian for “to care for.”

Of course, orangutans don’t usually need human babysitters. Luna’s mom, Kelly, was captive-born and a first-time mom who never had the opportunity to watch mother orangutans with their infants. In the wild, this is how they learn to be good moms, by observing other moms. Kelly caressed and cradled her baby, but she wouldn’t let it nurse. After 72 hours the staff pulled Luna, fed her, examined her, and returned her to her mother. Only after Kelly showed aggression to Luna did they reluctantly make the decision to permanently separate mother and infant.

Wild orangutan moms nurse their babies for five or six years. And the little ones under two years of age are very dependent upon having someone there for them. Zoo staff knew that when they decided Luna would have to be hand-raised, they were embarking on an extremely labor-intensive effort.

After several months of 24/7 care, everyone was exhausted. Barbara Lester, Curator of Primates and Small Mammals, convinced her management to approve a rare and unorthodox request: Appeal to the Zoo’s Docents to submit applications to become caregivers. The move was unheard of! Allow non-staff to interact with a wild animal? And an endangered one at that!

More than 30 applications were submitted. Barbara personally interviewed the candidates, and along with members of her staff, they selected 14 individuals for Caregiver training. I was fortunate to be one of those selected, and this is my story.

The Interview

The moment I heard Docents were going to be offered an opportunity to apply for Caregiver positions, I immediately wrote a letter to Barbara Lester advising her of my interest in the project and of my desire to broaden my knowledge of primates in general. During Docent training, I had specialized in Big Cats but I had hoped to eventually gain a deeper knowledge of all of the animals housed at the Houston Zoo.

After several weeks, I was contacted and an interview was scheduled. I was not quite sure what I expected from this interview, but it was unlike any interview I’ve ever been through. The questions were truly unique. How do you feel about euthanasia? What animal training have you had other than during the Docent training program? Why do you want to be part of this project? Other questions were designed to determine a volunteer’s sense of commitment, flexibility, and willingness to follow specific directions.

A short time later, Barbara called and told me I had been selected as a member of the Luna Project Team! I was thrilled beyond words - I was going to be Luna’s Sunday Morning Mom!

Training

Training was soon underway. Each Caregiver was issued a copy of the Luna Protocol Manual that contained general instructions for the Caregivers and specific instructions for each shift. Barbara

personally conducted the training and was assisted by Lynn Killam, a Supervisor in Primates. We were given ample opportunity to ask questions, clarify issues, and offer suggestions.

Cleanliness is an important part of a Caregiver's duties. We were asked to arrive wearing clean clothes, have clean hair with no hair spray, and wearing no colognes or jewelry. Our clothes should be button free – a small button chewed off could easily be swallowed and cause problems. Shoes with no laces were preferred because Luna made a beeline toward shoes with laces.

Other general guidelines included such things as bottle-warming instructions, and feeding the baby so that she was facing the other orangutans and not humans. It was important that she imprint on orangutans as much as possible. We were taught to look at what we were doing through the eyes of the baby.

After spending most of the day going over the text of the Luna Protocol Manual, it was finally time to go to the Orangutan Night House to meet Luna.

We first went into the Primate Kitchen and learned the proper procedures for scrubbing hands and any exposed arm or leg area. This is necessary to prevent transmission of any disease to the orangutans. Surgical masks were also worn for the same reason.

One enters the Orangutan Night House by moving through a tertiary door. There is a shallow pool that contains a bleach solution and it was explained that upon entering or exiting the Night House, we must step into this bleach bath solution. This procedure is designed to prevent germs on your shoes from inadvertently being transmitted to the apes, or from the apes to the public. You then enter a second door, which is the main door into the Night House. It is kept locked at all times.

Inside the Night House, there are six cages identified as Cage A, B, C, D, E or F. Each cage has double locks on the door. The layout of the cages is rather like a squared "C" with connecting, numbered hydraulic doors and/or tunnels between each of the cages for shifting the animals. There are two hydraulic doors leading into the exhibit area.

About one foot from the front cage mesh is a red line. We were instructed to NEVER cross this red line. Orangutans are quite clever and will often try to lure you close to the mesh; then they grab you and they are so strong you could easily be hurt. I frequently saw Doc or Kelly put a hand beneath the bottom of the mesh, wiggling their fingers and hoping you'll drop Cheerios or raisins in their hand. They only show you a small part of their hand, usually just fingers. But if you get too close, the rest of the hand will come out to try to grab you. To emphasize the seriousness of not crossing the red line, any Caregiver caught violating this rule was subject to immediate dismissal from the program.

As we were learning our way around the Night House, we received a typical "welcome" from the oranges: They took turns spitting water on us. At least we hoped it was only water. I soon learned spitting and kiss-squeaking were common ploys for seeking attention.

A few of us at a time were allowed to go into Cage A, Luna's cage. We didn't want to overwhelm her by having a lot of people in there at one time. We were shown the book that contained a daily log of Luna's activities, diet, medications and weight. While I was reading the Luna book, I felt a touch on my leg. I looked down and saw Luna looking up at me. She held her hand up to me and it appeared she wanted me to pick her up. I asked if it would be ok to pick her up and was told ok. Up she moved to my arms. It tickled me silly . . . until she made a move for my reading glasses. That was my first lesson in how manipulative orangutans can be!

Sunday Morning Mom

A typical morning called for arrival at 6:45 a.m. After scrubbing arms and hands, Luna's bottle was warmed and her food and dishes were gathered to take into the Night House. The Luna book was reviewed for any new protocols and records were checked for her activities since your last visit.

At 7:00 a.m., the Caregiver enters the Night House. Luna slept inside Cage A in a Varikennel (VK), and the Caregiver would unlatch the VK and give Luna her formula. The blankets in the VK would be thoroughly inspected and removed for washing if necessary. The two of us would then make the rounds saying "Good morning" to the rest of the orangutans. Then it was playtime until the keepers brought everyone their morning juice.

Around 8:30 a.m., Luna would be free to explore the sights, sounds and smells in the exhibit area. Watching her get more and more curious about the climbing structure was one of the highlights of seeing Luna grow up. Although she often tested my anxieties by climbing to the very top, she never once hesitated, stumbled or fell.

Upon returning to the Night House, it was time to eat. There were specific feeding times and all intake was documented in the Luna book – how much she was offered, how much she ate, what she appeared to like and not like, and which orangutans might have been in front of her while eating. All urination and defecation was documented as well as her activity level, unique behaviors, reactions to adult orangutans, and any problems encountered. We were requested not to be anthropomorphic in our descriptions, but when Luna was learning to walk on two legs it was difficult not to describe her gait as a "drunken ballerina"!

During the day, Luna was encouraged to play in all of the cages to get her used to the smells of the adults as well as familiarize her with the Night House. Enrichment items were used to this end. If the Caregivers were guilty of any sin, it was over-indulging their baby. If you can imagine any human child having 14 grandmothers, you've a pretty good idea of how Luna was spoiled.

At 12:30, the afternoon Caregiver arrived and the process of changing Moms began. Some days it was quite easy, but on other days Luna would be clingy and would not want to leave her morning Caregiver. The afternoon shift ended at 6:00 p.m. when everyone settled down for the night.

Introductions

Once the Primate staff made the decision to introduce Luna and Cheyenne, Barbara Lester took another risk with her volunteers. Barbara realized that the Caregivers had come to know the adult orangutans extremely well, and that this project could be expedited by having the Caregivers conduct the intros. This meant crossing that red line! Caregivers were given an option – certainly no volunteer would be forced to participate in a potentially dangerous situation – but every single Caregiver readily agreed to do the intros, and we were trained to create situations wherein Cheyenne and Luna could interact through the cage mesh.

Cheyenne avidly watched Luna from the moment she was born. She was extremely gentle with her, shared food with her, and gave every indication she would be the perfect surrogate for Luna. After months of close observation of the interaction between the two, the hydraulic door between their cages was opened a few inches – enough for Luna to squeeze through but not Cheyenne. It took Luna about 40 minutes before she oozed through the opening, and they've been together ever since.

Keeping in Touch

Giving care to an orangutan baby is much like being a foster parent. You know from the beginning they won't be with you at some point in the future. Fortunately for the Caregivers, the Primate staff has been wonderful about letting us visit Luna. Some of the Caregivers help the keepers clean cages while others amass enrichment items for the orangutans and bring them out regularly.

Does Luna still remember me? You bet she does. One Easter Sunday, six months after the Luna Project ended, I wore rabbit ears over at the orangutan habitat. Cheyenne and Luna had been given Easter baskets, plastic eggs containing primate biscuits, Easter grass and other enrichment items. Although there was a big crowd, Luna spied my ears and stopped to stare at them. Her eyes then dropped to my face, and she exploded in an orangutan grin, teeth showing, arms open wide. She made a beeline to me and climbed up until her face was next to mine, placing her hand on the glass near my face. Truly I was a very proud Mom!

Elok

The Houston Zoo agreed to accept a one-year old Sumatran orangutan in November of 2001, and Barbara Lester resurrected her Caregiver team. Elok, Indonesian for "handsome," arrived in early November and after spending time in quarantine, the Elok Project began. Elok was a very different baby from Luna – much more independent and less clingy. Elok was happy to play alone.

It was hard for Luna to see all of her Moms back in the Night House but paying attention to Elok. We had to find ways to give Luna some attention, yet not shirk our duties to Elok. Our goal was to introduce Elok to both Cheyenne and Luna. Once again, Cheyenne lusted after the new baby, but Luna proved to be a challenge. Like any 4 year old, she was jealous of the younger sibling. Eventually, Elok learned he could fight his Big Sister if he remained arboreal, and soon Luna stopped badgering him. The three of them are on exhibit daily, and it is a joy to watch them together.

Summary

I am so blessed to have been a participant in these two projects. In the beginning, I did not see Luna as a scientific project, but more as an opportunity to learn more about orangutans. Some months into the project, however, it became clear my role was more than just a temporary mom. My role was to help Luna learn to exist in the world of orangutans – her future. So when Elok came to us, it was easier to develop a clinical mindset. He arrived in November, and was introduced to Cheyenne & Luna on February 14th.

I have learned so much about orangutans. In fact, one could say I am completely besotted with orangutans! I can entertain anyone with stories of Kelly and her red pantyhose or removing the fluorescent light, Rudi (my love!) giving me 16 coins he had pouched, Doc playing with boxes, Cheyenne reading her magazines, or Luna playing with her pokey hose or covering herself with Beta chips. These are magnificent, intelligent creatures. I am so glad to know each of them personally, but in the beginning, I was so afraid I'd never be able to tell them apart!

Should any of you ever get an opportunity to participate in a similar project, I wholeheartedly encourage you to aggressively pursue the chance. I have been twice blessed . . . and have my fingers crossed for one more!