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Professional and Vocational Opportunities in Animal Care

by Alicia Voss

(English 1102)

The Assignment: Choose a profession that you want to pursue or find interesting, and research it.

All of my life, I have been intrigued by the world of animals. Whether I was caring for my own pets, horseback riding, or reading wildlife books with rapt attention, I was forever consumed by the desire to learn more. If you share my sentiments, perhaps you, as well, have begun to seriously consider a career in animal care. This is a broad field from which to choose one particular occupation. However, through in-depth research, I have begun to narrow the spectrum to three main areas of animal care which fascinate me most: those in the medical field, those in the wildlife protection field, and those in the domestic care field.

The most obvious choice of animal care careers in the medical field is that of a veterinarian. There are a wide variety of veterinarians, from those more “traditional” types who work in small animal clinics to those who work on farms, in laboratories, and in zoos and wildlife parks. Becoming a veterinarian is a long tedious process, beginning with in-depth college courses in biology and zoology, among other sciences. From there, one must be accepted into a school with a solid four-year veterinary program, a task which is more easily said than done, as fewer than twenty percent of all applicants are accepted (Ramer). Broad, general training in medicine and surgery is very important once an individual is admitted to veterinary school. Hands-on experience is also highly recommended; one would be wise to volunteer at a veterinary clinic, a zoo, or another related establishment while he/she is working his/her way through the rigorous program. Lastly, a veterinarian must be constantly on call and willing to attend to needy animals at any time. This is not a high-paying profession; according to *Salary Wizard*, world technology leader in compensation management, some veterinarians start out with a salary of \$30,000 a year or lower. However, if one is dedicated to the job and above all, to the care and nurture of the animal kingdom, money is the least of concerns. Additionally, it should be noted that through raises and promotions, some veterinarians do enjoy an extent of wealth (as much as \$100,000 annually in rare situations!) (“Veterinarians”).

If, however, you decide that becoming a veterinarian is too long and grueling a process for you, you might consider the duties of a veterinary technician. These are closely associated with those of a full-scale veterinarian, yet without the same heavy demands in both study and work. According to Charlotte Lobb in her book *Exploring Animal Care Careers*, a two-year animal health technician course is required to hold this position, and hands-on experience with animals is emphasized (9). Veterinary technicians assist veterinarians in surgery prep, vaccinations, and diagnoses of illnesses. They perform blood tests, insert catheters, give sedations, take X-rays and EKGs, and monitor symptoms in animals. They may also keep detailed records of treatments administered and engage in basic animal dentistry, such as using ultrasonic equipment to clean a dog’s teeth and monitoring dental health for more serious problems, which should then be relayed to a veterinarian or professional dentist (Lobb 11-12). Autopsies and blood transfusions are routine tasks, as well as more mundane chores such as tending to the infirm animals and cleaning their cages. As a veterinary technician, one is constantly learning on the job. Some become expert at interpreting animal X-rays, which in turn paves the way for their becoming licensed X-ray technicians. Veterinary technicians do not earn an impressive salary; their typical wages are

considerably lower than those of even the lowest-paid veterinarian, often less than \$30,000 per year (“Veterinary Technician”). On the other hand, the job provides a wonderful experience in the care of animals, and is ideal for anyone who wants the basic experience of performing a veterinarian’s duties without all the work and long hours. As a veterinary technician, one can easily work part-time to supplement an income nicely in an environment that he/she enjoys. It is not necessary to become a full-fledged veterinarian in order to partake in the feeling of fulfillment that stems from the ability to save lives and make a difference for animals in need.

Throughout the past two decades, there has been an enormous surge in the professions of both veterinarian and veterinary technician, resulting in a shortage of jobs for those interested in pursuing a career of this field. Competition is fierce, and training, if one is accepted to a respectable program, is rigorous. Only those most dedicated to their cause and their love of animals will make it to the top, particularly when it comes to attaining a full-fledged DVM (Doctor of Veterinary Medicine). No matter how the environment in which these professionals work--be it a zoo, a pharmacy, a traditional small animal clinic, or any other establishment--they are up against the same overwhelming odds, which prove a concern to those who aspire to these positions. Nevertheless, as Jan C. Ramer, a noteworthy primate veterinarian at the Indianapolis Zoo, tells us in her online article “Veterinary Medicine,” occupations in this arena are “...very fulfilling and worth the effort. You may not get your dream job immediately, but if you are tenacious and work hard you can get there” (3).

Because of the lack of opportunities available in the veterinary professions, however, it is wise to consider the wildlife protection angle additionally to animal care professions, such as animal behaviorists and caregivers at shelters, zoos, and wildlife centers. Not only do these workers feed and water the animals, monitor their health and behavior, and supply them with enrichment activities -- such as new toys or food -- but they also form a special bond with the animals, resulting in a very unique and rewarding type of friendship.

Among the various tasks that an animal caregiver might perform are those of a zookeeper. Some zookeepers are managers of entire habitats (i.e., primates, reptiles, marine animals, animals native to Africa or Asia, etc.), in which capacities they direct and supervise other zookeepers in order to carry out a specific program dedicated to proper animal care. The supervised zookeepers will likely tend exclusively to one or two enclosures, ensuring that every animal is attended to. Animals, like humans, require much love and attention. Each creature’s personality is evident and distinctive to those who work with it; thus it is extremely crucial that not one animal is neglected. Every zookeeper is keenly aware of the fact that life in a zoo is not always easy for animals, regardless of the size of their enclosures. Some zookeepers even go on to become curators, dedicating themselves almost exclusively to the construction, modification, and maintenance of enriching, realistic animal enclosures, as pointed out by Carole Moore in her 2006 *Career World* article “From Fur to Tail Feathers” (4). According to Anne Austin in another 2001 *Career World* publication entitled “Hot Jobs for Animal Lovers,” realistic habitats, care regimens, and enrichment programs result in a strong sense of security for animals, which naturally feel more at home when their surroundings at the zoo mimic those to which they are native (2-3). A two-year degree in animal science from a prestigious school, as well as specialized training and experience, are required to become a zookeeper. Depending on their positions, zookeepers generally earn an annual income between \$20,000 and \$40,000 (“Zookeeper”).

The career of a zookeeper is colorful and varied. One is never certain of just what might happen next in this exciting and often very enjoyable profession. However, Senior Zookeeper Ann Kissel, head of Brookfield Zoo’s African Habitat, is quick to assert in her interview with Brookfield Zoo’s web site, that the life of a zookeeper is certainly not all fun and games. No matter what the weather, there are enclosures to be cleaned and animals to be cared for. There are times when animals become ill and must be treated by a veterinarian and/or isolated from the rest of their type.

Zookeepers occasionally must learn how to participate in the treatment of these sick animals by administering special diets and medications, as well as monitoring the course of an illness and recognizing when a veterinarian should be summoned (“Day in the Life”). Occasionally, Kissel and others in her line of work have been pulled out of their regular duties in order to supervise animal births. Captive births of endangered species are of a tentative and controversial nature, but when the process goes smoothly and both mother and child are healthy, they can be inspiring experiences. As Kissel tells us, “Seeing any animal being born is rewarding but especially an endangered animal” (“Day in the Life”).

Of course, there are other animal care positions available at zoos for those who are not interested in pursuing the responsibilities of a zookeeper. One that I personally find highly interesting is the career of a dolphin trainer. I am very grateful to have been able to interview Debi Hulka, who spent a summer break from classes as an intern dolphin trainer at Brookfield Zoo’s Seven Seas department. Hulka majored in psychology at the University of Iowa, a degree, which, she says, was of great help to her as she worked and interacted with marine wildlife. Prompted by a lifelong love for animals and dolphin shows, and intrigued by marine biology, Hulka applied and was accepted to the zoo’s summer internship program, for which she received college credits and much hands-on experience with the animals she loved. Through the course of her summer, she learned that the life of a dolphin trainer was much more than met the eye.

Forty-hour weeks and mundane chores, such as scrubbing enclosures and working in the fish kitchen, are as much a part of a dolphin trainer’s life as the animal conditioning itself. Hulka spent much time observing the senior dolphin trainers and charting the dolphins’ behaviors. She worked with a mentor and attended morning training sessions, where she was supervised as she assisted the trainers. When a baby dolphin was born at the zoo, Hulka participated in its around-the-clock observation, necessary because survival rates for dolphins born in captivity are somewhat low.

Hulka says that there is nothing that quite compares to being able to work personally with these beautiful animals, forging special relationships with each one and interacting on a very rewarding level. She additionally enjoyed relating to the public by conversing with zoo visitors, answering questions, and maintaining crowd control. But, on the other hand, she says, working long hours, weekends, and inconvenient schedules can be difficult and trying. One must be fully devoted to his/her field in order to reap the benefits of the long run. It requires much patience, commitment, and experience with animals, Hulka concludes, but if it is worth the effort to you, you wouldn’t want it any other way.

Finally, in exploring the possibilities of animal care professions, it is advised that you look into careers that concern themselves with the care and control of domestic animals. In what is perhaps a less dramatic, however equally important capacity, animal shelter employees and pet store owners face many of the same issues as zoo employees do.

Some animal shelter employees are in charge of animal control responsibilities, in which they are on duty to rescue flocks, herds, or even single animals from natural disasters like brush fires and floods. In other cases, pets or livestock are rescued from abusive or neglectful owners. Many of the rescued animals are treated or examined by veterinarians and then, if they do not have a home to go back to, cared for and fed by the animal shelter. Here, workers attend to and exercise the animals, as well as monitor them for signs of illness and provide them with loving homes through animal adoptions. Animal shelter employees (control officers and kennel attendants) are generally selected by an application and interview process, followed by a month or so of training (Lobb 104). This is an ideal manner in which to gain experience in animal care while working one’s way through school or higher training. It is additionally a means of supplementary income and an enjoyable part-time job for those who love animals. A full-time animal shelter employee earns between \$16,000 and \$25,000 annually (“Animal Shelter”).

Pet store owners deal with a largely different set of circumstances in the workplace. They

must hire and oversee their employees, negotiate with breeders and pet supply companies, and see to it that all of their animals are properly cared for. Food and water must be freshened daily, cages cleaned regularly, and customers duly assisted. Some pet stores are also grooming establishments, to which dogs are brought for haircuts and shampoos. Running an effective pet store is hard work.

Aside from performing daily chores, a pet store owner must constantly be looking for symptoms of illness in his/her animals and attending to animals in need. He/she must be well researched on his/her breeds and varieties of pets so that he/she can answer questions and instruct prospective pet owners in the care and nurture of their new companions. Pet store owners should attend seminars which keep them up-to-date on scientific advances in animal care, such as new diets and improved paraphernalia like stronger leashes, more effective odor eliminators, and better-designed cages and kennels (Lobb 96). A college degree in business and/or animal science is recommended for those who aspire to this occupation. Of course, hands-on experience in the care and keeping of animals is also highly beneficial. Yearly wages vary depending on the success of the business.

While conducting my research, I was pleased to encounter the *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science (JAAWS)*, whose stated mission is to “[produce] educational programs and materials on the relationship between human and non-human animals” (*JAAWS*). The chief subscribers to this publication, which is sponsored jointly by the Society and Animals Forum and The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, are veterinary and shelter workers, humane society personnel, public service workers, research scientists, and various other professionals concerned with animal welfare. This quarterly journal, published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, is divided into four main divisions: Laboratory Animals, Companion Animals, Farm Animals, and Wildlife/Zoo Animals. Each division is run by its own individual editor(s), graduates of prestigious international universities. *JAAWS* provides readers with updates in animal science and animal care, breakthroughs in animal research and medicine, news of developments in animal care professions, and new technological research procedures, among other issues of particular importance.

Its articles, bearing such names as “Cage Size Preference in Rats” and “Implementation of a Feral Cat Management Program on a University Campus” are well-researched, focused, and thorough, maintaining a professional and scientific writing style which is underscored by the use of tables and charts for clarity. According to the *JAAWS* official website, the publication boasts “...articles and reports discussing methods of experimentation, husbandry, and care that enhance the welfare of animals in laboratories, farms, homes, and the wild” (*JAAWS*). Students at universities and graduate schools are able to submit their work for publication in *JAAWS*, which “...encourages submission of brief report research reports and comments on any aspect of applied animal welfare science.”

In every respect, *JAAWS* is a journal that emphasizes respect for animals and concern for their well being, an ideal which is reflected in the following excerpt from the Volume 7, 2004 *JAAWS* article “Ethics and Animal Welfare in South East Asian Zoos: A Case Study of Thailand,” by Govindasamy Agoramorthy and Bernard Harrison:

Data on animal welfare were collected using questionnaires and data forms. A total of four representatives, two from the executive board, one from the committee, and one from each local zoo participated in a collection of data. The reason for including local representatives was to learn how they would evaluate their own zoos. The evaluators checked each exhibit carefully to record problems of animal welfare and also reviewed records on zoo management, nutrition, veterinary care, hygiene, animal acquisition, transportation, management, disposal of surplus animals, breeding programs, education, research, safety, public health, and funding. (190)

JAAWS is a well-rounded, informative publication covering various aspects of careers in animal care and research. I was impressed by its conclusiveness and relevance to the professions I have chosen to discuss, and this leads me to believe that it would be a wise choice of reading material for anyone else who also aspires to this career field.

In conclusion, there is a vast pool from which to select an animal care profession. Through research and hands-on experience, you will naturally begin to narrow your choices to that career best suited to your personality, as I have. In the meantime, however, bear in mind that it is essential to interact with animals on a regular basis, be it through part-time work, volunteerism, or at home with your pets. I have found that this sort of involvement can play an invaluable role in the selection of an exciting occupation in the diverse and intriguing world of animal care careers.

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