

EAZA News 62; Interview with Bengt Holst

1. Please provide us with your full name.

Bengt Holst

2. Please describe your career path. Have you done any work outside of the zoo world?

I took my masters degree at the University of Copenhagen in 1983 writing a thesis on the roosting behaviour of Corvids. It has not very much to do with zoo work, but my supervisor was a member of a special council under the Ministry of Culture overseeing zoos. So, he asked me if I would be ready to take a position as scientific assistant at the Copenhagen Zoo when I finished my thesis. As an ethologist in spe I saw a huge potential in the zoo world and didn't have to think for a very long time before saying yes. And after having taken my degree on a Friday (3 June 1983) I started in the Zoo the following Monday.

During the years I had a big support in the former director, Bent Jørgensen. He gave me free hands to develop the scientific part in a suitable direction and introduced me to the international zoo world whenever possible. As one of the first "exotic" tasks he sent me to Frankfurt Zoo for four weeks to learn something about bird keeping in practice. So, I worked in the bird house as a keeper for four weeks and actually did learn a lot during that period. At the end of this period I received a "Fensterputzschein" from Dr. Faust, the former director of Frankfurt Zoo. Because window cleaning was what I had done most during those four weeks!

In 1987 I became head of animal department at Copenhagen Zoo and started slowly to develop the international framework. My focus at that time was mostly on environmental enrichment, and I tried as much as I could to spread the message about the importance of this part of zoo management to the outside world. An exciting job which linked my job in the zoo with the university world.

When the former director retired I became Vice Director at Copenhagen Zoo with the subtitle; Director of Science and Conservation. The new title described clearly in what direction my job had turned. My focus was more and more turned towards the international scene, and that has continued ever since.

In the late eighties I became acquainted with CBSG and was thrilled with its concept. I attended the annual meetings, got more and more involved and soon started to develop "my own" workshops. Ulie Seal was my great idol, and I think he was the one that turned my eyes towards the *in situ* conservation world. His enormous enthusiasm and positive attitude towards new ideas fascinated me, and probably provided me with many of the human-related and technical tools I use today when working with conservation.

In 2002 this fascination made me propose a European branch of CBSG, and CBSG Europe became a reality in 2003.

As of now I think I use more than fifty percent of my time on international tasks, be it for EAZA, CBSG or for other international relations. I see the Zoo as a piece in a big international network. The network can not do without us, and we can not do without the network.

3. Besides your EAZA/CBSG work, what other work do you do at Copenhagen Zoo?

What does an average day at Copenhagen Zoo look like for you?

Being head of the scientific staff and vice director of the Zoo I of course have ordinary management tasks and strategic tasks besides my international tasks. But there is no such thing as a typical day for me. Sometimes I am totally focused on the international issues, and sometimes on the Zoo issues. And sometimes on both. I travel up to three months a year and am lucky to have full support from the Zoo in doing this. For us the international cooperation is essential, and having this priority also means an accept of a pretty heavy travel scheme – not always a nice priority for the family! But I am lucky to have an understanding family that understands my fascination for the work I do, be it in the Zoo or on the international scene. My "typical" zoo work consists of strategic planning for the zoo, follow up on existing plans, technical discussions within the framework of collection planning/animal management and consultancy work for other zoos, organisations and authorities. And then of course further development of the research and conservation fields of the Zoo. With projects and employees in several parts of the world this area can actually be quite challenges sometimes!

4. What is the most memorable or fascinating event in your career so far?

It's really difficult to say. I have experienced so many memorable moments, both in the Zoo and abroad. But one thing that fascinates me enormously and makes me feel unusually privileged is the huge network of dedicated and phantastic people I have around the world. Researchers, zoo people, conservationists, rangers, administrators, politicians and "just" friends, an inspiring crowd and a source of support in all situations. It's thanks to them and what they stand for that we have been able to develop the conservation profile we have at Copenhagen Zoo. And it's thanks to them that even the most frustrating conflict in our daily work outside the Zoo can be solved with a smile and with a feeling of being on top of the problem, despite the frustrations. One really learns a lot from these networks, both with regard to our key areas of interest such as animal management, research and conservation, and with regard to cultural differences and the many good things we can get from the fact that we are actually different in thinking, but not necessarily different in what we want to achieve.

5. What do you enjoy most about your job? And what do you like the least?

I like to organise and coordinate things. I like to communicate with people from all over the world, and I like to see things develop and even succeed. And in my job I have plenty of opportunities to experience all those things. And then there is the diversity of tasks. I can work with everything from beetles to elephants, with such diverse things as ethics and hardcore research and conservation, with human resources *in* and *ex situ* and with less complex things such as writing articles and giving lectures. I work at the operational level and at the strategic level. So, what more can one wish?

What I like the least? Hmm, maybe when bureaucracy takes over and creates obstacles for the real work. Or when people are not honest and don't do what they preach. I also hate when small issues are turned into huge problems, and people start focusing on the problems instead of the possible solutions.

6. You seem to have a very positive attitude towards everything. Did you ever get really angry or have you ever lost your patience? If so, when/what was the reason?

I was lucky to be brought up in a home where half a glass was always "half full" instead of "half empty". So, I look more at the opportunities than at the obstacles. And I can not see why we shouldn't. We live in a phantastic world with a lot of opportunities. But it is of course up to us to grasp those opportunities. It is through the opportunities we can develop things whereas the obstacles will only slow down everything we want to do.

I don't think I have ever lost my temper, at least not in the open. But of course I get frustrated now and then, especially when people say one thing and act differently, and also when I see zoos or aquaria working directly against what they have themselves been approving at other times. I have no problems with discrepancies and discussions. On the contrary. We need these differences in order to develop further. But I want transparency and honesty in the actions we take.

7a. What are the main challenges for you as chair of the EEP Committee?

I think the main challenge is to keep up the EEP spirit, the attitude that made the first zoos go for cooperation instead of "ego trips", and to find the right balance between having necessary "rules of conduct" for our performing and still to avoid unnecessary bureaucracy. It's a difficult balance since we need to have a common framework when cooperating in collection planning. But we also need to be sensitive to different cultures in Europe and difficult ways of running zoos. My personal view is that cooperation can not work without a minimum number of rules and procedures, just as we need rules and procedures to run a zoo or an aquarium. And I also think we must accept bending the rules now and then to make things work and to be fair to those who don't necessarily fit into the scheme. But if the approved rules and procedures are challenged in general in order to gain more benefit for oneself I will fight back, not in order to win per se, but in order to sustain efficiency.

If the "EEP spirit" is integrated in all we do we can be sure to be on the right track. Furthermore it will lead us in the right direction as long as we touch ground now and then to make sure we don't become too hypothetical in our thinking and our ways of acting. So, that's certainly another challenge.

And having said that I feel confident that we are able to meet those challenges.

b. and as vice chair of the Conservation Committee?

I have a very good cooperation with the chairman of the committee, Pierre Gay, and we have divided the work in the committee among us. He does a great part of the external work whereas I take care of the internal work such as organising meetings, communicating with the membership and developing our EAZA profile further. So, one of our main challenges seen from my view is certainly to get the conservation campaigns going and to urge all EAZA institutions to do active conservation work in stead of just talking about it and using it in various PR events. I also see a huge challenge in creating links between what we do in the zoos and aquaria and what is done *in situ*, wherever it is.

c. and as chair of the EAZA Tapir and Hippo TAG?

My main challenge is to link *in situ* conservation activities with our *ex situ* activities and to assure a scientific basis for our *ex situ* work. I have a very close relationship with the IUCN/SSC Tapir Specialist Group and think this is one of the most important links I have established during the years. The chairman of the Tapir Specialist Group, Patricia Medici from Brazil, is one of the most efficient and inspiring conservationists I have ever met. Her work can be used as a model for all other specialist groups and even for conservation work in general, and I have learnt a lot from her. By linking her to our Tapir and Hippo TAG we have managed to professionalise our work significantly, and to strengthen the links between our work in the zoos and the work they are doing in the wild. Of benefit to both parties!

8. What do you hope will be accomplished through the extensive efforts of both Committees in the near future?

I'll work towards a world where international breeding programmes are seen as true *ex situ* conservation activities that can make a difference for many species. I'll also work towards a world where zoos and aquaria are considered honest and efficient conservation organisations by the authorities and where zoos and aquaria themselves do their utmost to live up to that brand – not only in theory, but also in action. How far along these routes we will get is different to tell. But I can at least assure you that I will do my best to get as far as ever possible, both on the European scene and on the global scene.

9. What other important changes do you see happening in the zoo world in the next ten years?

I hope to see a united zoo and aquarium world that takes its responsibility seriously and that is ready to invest in a common future with a common vision. But to be honest I am afraid we will also to a certain extent experience a fragmentation of the zoo world into two groups: a group that really invests in the visions of the zoos and aquaria and is ready to take responsibility and to invest in that future and another group that may use the vision as a brand, but which will not be willing to invest what is needed to accomplish that vision. I am not talking about big or small zoos, about rich or poor zoos. Even small and poor zoos can – and will be – part of the first group, and big and rich zoos can easily be part of the second group. It is entirely a question of attitude. But I am also optimistic enough to trust that in the end most of the European zoos will go for the first group, perhaps not within the next ten years, but at least within the next twenty years. We certainly have the potential, and it would be such a loss if we do not use that potential.

10. You travel a lot - how do you combine your busy 'zoo life' with your private/family life?

Well, it is by far not easy. And I am not sure you will get the same answer to this question if you ask my family. But as I said earlier I do feel have an understanding family, and also a very supportive zoo. And that means a lot. But to make it work I of course need to plan far ahead. As of now I have already booked several arrangements for 2009 and 2010, and the sooner I know of an activity the better. Probably the most difficult thing is when my kids start complaining saying "not again" and look honestly sad when I tell them that I will be gone for a week or two – again. But even they are pretty understanding and know that this is part of the job. So, I guess the short answer to your questions is that travelling has simply become a lifestyle – and must be to a certain extent if you want to be active on the international scene.

11. Copenhagen Zoo is the host of next year's EAZA Annual Conference. Why should EAZA members come to Copenhagen in large numbers? What can they expect (if already applicable)?

They should come because we will have a great conference in one of the world's oldest capitols and with a brilliant programme. And they should come in order to join all the others that will also come, partly to meet the others, and partly to enjoy the extensive exchange of experience that goes on during such a conference. And last, but not least they should come in order to demonstrate their support EAZA. After all it is not the venue, but the content of the conference that counts.

12. Is there any particular species that stands out for you? If so, which one and why?

I think that all species, big or small, have their own exciting story to tell. It is just up to us to find the story and to spread the message. And that's where the zoos and aquaria can do a unique job. So, to be honest, I have no "most popular species", but a general fascination for them all.

But if I should highlight a few I don't think it's a surprise to most of you that I am very fascinated by the muskox. It's a phantastic creature, adapted to a life under extreme conditions and living in one of the most beautiful places on Earth. The rough nature in arctic areas have always fascinated me, and to see a group of muskoxen standing on a windy hill in the sparse bare land areas of Greenland is a unique experience.

And going to another part of the world there are the four species of Lion Tamarins. They a marvellous creatures, and after having followed several groups of all of the four species from early morning when they depart from their sleeping holes till early evening where they enter their new sleeping holes, I have become a true Lion Tamarin fan.

And then of course the Malay Tapir, that despite it's size is so little known. How come that we know so little about its way of life? After all it's one of the main forces in forest renewal within its range, and then it's the only one of the four existing Tapir species left in the old world. Strange indeed, and fascinating!! That is also the driving force behind our research project on the Malay Tapir in Malaysia, a project that will nw be extended to cover nt only Krau Wildlife Reserve outside Kuala Lumpur, but also Taman Negara National Park.

13. Describe one of your favourite exhibits in another zoo.

14. Are you a vegetarian ? If yes, why? If not, why not ?

No, I am not. Actually I very much like a big steak, and wouldn't exchange it for a bowl of salad. And why? I'd rather turn the question around. Why should I be a vegetarian? I am a humanbeing, and as such I eat a bit of (nearly) everything. And to me there is absolutely no ethical problems with eating meat, juast as I see no problems in hunting, as long as it is done properly and sustainably.

15. What do you like doing in your spare time (e.g. hobbies)?

I love going for a walk in the forest or just sitting on the top of a mountain or at the sea enjoying the long distances and getting my thoughts right. I can sit for hours without doing anything but watching what happens around me, thinking and enjoying. I also like writing, but unfortunately only seldom have time for that. I have a dream of one day writing a book about us – the humanbeings – as biological creatures and seen in the framework of the nature that surrounds us. Why do we act as we do and where does our biological background take over from our cultural surface.

16 a. Last book read: A Book about Alexander the Great, first book of a trilogy written by the Italian writer: Valerio Massimo.

16 b. Last movie seen: "Dancing with Wolves" with Kevin Costner. I think I have seen it 4-5 times.

16 c. Favourite colour: Blue

16 d. Favourite celebrity: Male: Mel Gibson, Female: Meg Ryan. But above them my (deceased) father who without knowing it created the basis for my present fascination for nature by showing his own fascination without actually having any biological background.

16 e. Last trip made abroad: Malaysia to get a memorandum of understanding with the Malaysian Wildlife Department (DWNP) at place regarding our tapir project in Taman Negara.