



AMANDA ZOLMAN ANIMAL NUTRITION ASSISTANT

1. When did you begin working at the Columbus Zoo?

I started at the Zoo while still in college as a seasonal team member in what was then the Education Show Staff department. Upon graduating, in 2004, I filled the part-time position in the Animal Nutrition Center. I thought this would be a great stepping stone into the world of zoo keeping. However, to my surprise, my mind was quickly changed once I started working in this department. I fell in love with it! Eventually, I received a full-time position on the team and have been here ever since.

2. What education and animal experiences helped you secure a job in Animal Care?

Everyone in our Animal Nutrition department has a four-year degree in the field of science (animal management, zoology, biology, etc.). All of us also gained experience by working as a seasonal team member in various animal areas here at the Zoo, volunteering at a wildlife center, or working in a veterinarian's office.

3. What skills are the most important in your job?

Communication – Things change daily, and good communication is important so everyone knows what is going on.

Organizational skills – It is important to make sure that everything we need is stocked so we can prepare diets properly. Attention to detail is a huge asset in this field, especially since we weigh just about everything that leaves our kitchen.

Customer service – We are a customer service department to the zookeepers. We help answer questions and find items that they may need to carry out daily tasks and special projects.

Creativity – Sometimes, we are faced with a challenge such as getting an animal to take medication, or creating a special meal (for a birthday or animal not eating). This is when we get to think outside of the box for a novel solution while taking into consideration the appropriate edible items for that particular species.

Other skills/experience – We also use a lot of science (biology, animal physiology, anatomy etc.) and math (ratios, percentages, and conversions etc.).

4. What is a typical day for your current position?

A typical day in Animal Nutrition is jam-packed! The mornings are definitely the busiest time for us when we arrive to work at 6 am. We typically have anywhere from two to four people working the floor on any given day. Soon after we walk in the door, we pull the diets we prepared the day before from the cooler and load them into our van. Once loaded, we deliver the diets to the animal areas (there are more than 20 different stops to make) before the Zoo opens each morning. This allows the keepers to get animals fed, shifted, medicated, and out in their habitats before guests arrive. (It usually takes 1.5 to 2 hours to deliver all diets.) Once the delivery person has returned to the kitchen, their next responsibility is to gather anything extra (bagged feed, dry goods, produce items, etc.) that animal areas have requested and will need delivered the following day.

While the delivery person is out delivering, another Nutrition Assistant is back in the kitchen prepping diets for the following day. We have a different produce book (like a cookbook) for every day of the week that tells us which department produce bin to make, what food items to put into that bin, how much, and which animal it is for. So, for example a produce book page may say:

Mac's Group (feeds 9 gorillas)

15.10 lb. kale
21.15 lb. endive
3.20 lb. celery
3.20 lb. broccoli
18.45 lb. cucumber
.80 lb. berries
2.05 lb. citrus

On the produce pages, we also keep track of all of the animals' likes and dislikes. People think that they are "just animals," and they will eat whatever, but that is not the case. Animals are a lot like people; not everyone likes broccoli! It typically takes about half of the day to prepare the produce portion of animal diets from start (by pulling the carts from the cooler) to finish (when we restock the carts with produce for the next day).

ZOO KEEPER INTERVIEWS

COLUMBUS
ZOO
AND AQUARIUM


The Wilds

Once produce is completed, we prepare carnivore diets following a similar guide as we use for produce. We offer a USDA-inspected meat that has vitamins and minerals already added into it to create a more complete, balanced meal. We also incorporate a variety of different fish and rodents to the diets, which creates an additional level of nutrients and enrichment. Each animal has their own food bin for us to weigh out a specific (meat) ration. Some of the animals have a fast day during which they will receive a bone instead of a full diet. Many of our animals would not eat seven days a week in their native range, so we give them a bone to give their digestive tract a bit of a rest. This same bone does double duty; for the carnivores chewing on them, it also acts as a toothbrush. We stock a variety of sizes of bones from large shanks to long, thin rib bones tailored to fit the different-sized mouths we feed.

Animal Nutrition maintains an inventory of more than 800 different products. We also purchase various types of produce, hays, bagged feeds, dry goods, and live feeder insects.

5. What advice would you give me to help me work in Animal Care?

I would start volunteering at your local zoo, wildlife center, veterinarian's offices, humane society, groomers, or even pet-sitting for neighbors and see what area interests you the most. Here at the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, we have a ZooAide program (for teens), an Adult Volunteer program, and for the advanced volunteer, the Docent program. These programs provide the opportunity to see what it would be like working in the zoo world. As you reach college level, I would suggest participating in available internships. The more experience, the better!

6. How does this career impact your personal and lifestyle choices?

By working in the zoo world, it has enhanced my awareness for how my personal lifestyle choices can affect the world around me. For example, working in Animal Nutrition has opened my eyes to how important it is to buy sustainable seafood. When I started working in Animal Nutrition, we did not have trouble buying certain species of fish for the animals. However, in the last couple of years, we have noticed that certain species that were once easy to source is now harder to find. So now, I use the Seafood Watch Guide, which helps direct me to which fish I should purchase for the animals, as well as for my family.

7. What is the hardest part of your job?

It is always hard losing an animal. I may only be indirectly caring for the animals by prepping their food, but you grow accustomed to making their daily diets and working with the keepers to provide a nutritious meal. So, the first time you look in the prep book and see the blank spot where their diet once was...it is very sad.

8. What is the best part of your job?

The best part of the job for me is that I do not just work with one group of animals. I get to learn specifics about all 10,000! Each day can be totally different. It is fast-paced, and things can change all the time. Also, my supervisor and co-workers are pretty amazing, too!

9. Does the work you do at the Zoo impact the animals around the world?

Yes, during my time here in Animal Nutrition, we have partnered with several different conservation groups to help supply them with formulas for baby animals. This helps to allow these organizations to nurse the babies back to health so they can be released back into the wild. When the Zoo brings in manatees in need of rehabilitation, we are in charge of ordering their lettuce and making any formulas for orphaned manatee babies while they complete their rehabilitation journey here before heading back to return to Florida waters. We also source food to help the maturation process and prepare hellbenders for release.

10. What is the most important thing you do for the well-being of the animals in your care?

Our job in Animal Nutrition is to provide a balanced, enriching, and nutritious diet for the animals. Our Zoo houses animals from all over the world, so we have plenty of opportunities to be creative and contribute to their overall quality of life. It can be quite a challenge to mimic the exact diet they would consume in their native habitat, so we do our very best to source products that are locally available while also searching the globe for what we need to help recreate the desired nutrients in the diets we provide.

ZOO KEEPER INTERVIEWS

