

What Does an Ambassador Animal Coordinator Do?

Adam Winegarden, AmeriCorps Ambassador Animal Coordinator



The Racine Zoo AmeriCorps Program launched in August of 2019. Along with supporting nine new AmeriCorps educators to deliver programming in Racine County, the grant also funds my position as the Ambassador Animal Coordinator. With a quickly growing education department, it is important that all of the new and existing staff and interns are properly trained to handle all of our ambassador animals, and equally important that all of the animals are well-trained and comfortable participating in education programs. I work towards both of these goals and more every day at the Zoo.

My days typically start at 8:00am, an hour before most of the other education department arrives. Getting in early gives me time to talk to the Animal Care Department about the availability of animals for the day. There are many factors that go into determining if an animal should be going on out programs on a given day, including considering the animal's

behavior, scheduled vet exams or medical procedures, and how often they have been used on previous days. We have strict policies to avoid overusing the same animals for programs, and we make sure that animals get plenty of time to rest between uses.

Once other staff and interns begin to arrive, I communicate to them the animals available for their programs that day, and help get them on their way. If there are educators that do not have classes to teach, that's a great opportunity for me to work with them on learning to handle some new animals. The skills and safety precautions used to handle a chinchilla are vastly different from those of an alligator or python, so it's extremely important that everyone stays up to date on best practices.

I also spend several hours of my day training the ambassador animals. In AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, animal training is not used to demand a behavior from an animal, but to open a communication pathway with an animal, asking it to participate in the session. We call this choice-based participation. For our ambassador animals, this manifests itself in animals like our woodchuck, skunk, and kookaburra voluntarily going into a crate to be safely transported to programs, and demonstrating natural behaviors for food rewards during the program. It also means that animals have an opportunity to say "no" and not participate, which is a choice our animals always have and is respected.

At the end of the day, I input all of the notes from my training sessions into our daily reports for the keepers to read, make sure anyone with late night or early morning programs have all of the information about the animals they need, and head home! Being an Ambassador Animal Coordinator has its challenges, but it is rewarding to know that the animals meeting audiences throughout our area are happy, healthy, and safe.

CONSERVATION EDUCATION CORNER



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AmeriCorps Ambassador Animal Coordinator