



# Atascadero News

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## *A day in the life of a Charles Paddock Zookeeper*

BY: Julia Bluff -- February 22, 2008

Atascadero's Charles Paddock Zoo, located at 9305 Pismo Ave. directly adjacent to the Atascadero Lake Park, is home to more than 100 animals, both wild and domestic.

It is the primary responsibility of the zookeepers, most of whose work goes on outside of the public eye, to provide those animals with the specialized care required of them.

While the zoo doesn't open its doors to the public until 10 a.m. in the winter, the zookeepers are there every day at 7:30 a.m. to cater to the needs of the animals.

Kate Capela, who has been a zookeeper at the Charles Paddock Zoo for more than two years, spends the first minutes of the morning preparing food for the animals in her care. Every single one has specific dietary needs and requirements that must be addressed.

A typical day for Capela includes feeding the animals, maintaining and cleaning their exhibits, working on large projects to benefit the zoo and putting together enrichment activities for the animals.

One of the dirtier jobs at the zoo is the maintenance of the aviary, which is currently home to several different species of flight birds, a set of Bosnian turtles and a boisterous brood of Flamingos, who are guests at the aviary while their own exhibit is being revamped by the staff. The birds have little sense of good housekeeping, and the zookeepers come in daily to clean the aviary by hand, scrubbing the droppings off the ground, draining the ponds and swapping the day-old feed with fresh chow — all of which tend to get the zookeeper very dirty.

"I tend to wear my work," Capela said with a laugh.

While Capela is servicing the aviary, another Atascadero zookeeper, Mandy Dumong, is busy caring for the female Indochinese Tiger, Sala. Dumong is especially attracted to the big cats, and has specialized in their care and treatment over the years.

Each exhibit in the zoo is carefully calibrated to suit each animal it houses, and the tiger exhibit is no exception. Sala's enclosed area includes a pond, several climbing surfaces, different substrates for her to lie on, and several interactive activities that she can engage in.

“The main purpose of each exhibit is to provide them with a naturalistic environment,” Dumong said.

As Dumong greets Sala in the morning to feed her, the tiger makes a noise, similar to the throaty purr of a house cat, referred to as chuffing. The noise is a friendly greeting and a sign of her pleasure.

“Tigers tend to have really different personalities,” Capela said.

Sala tends to be very friendly and cooperative with the zookeepers, and as Capela said, “is a bit of a princess.”

But no matter how friendly Sala is, the zookeepers are always keenly aware that she is not a domesticated house cat. She is a powerful, wild animal, and must always be treated as such. In order for the zookeepers to service her exhibit, Sala is shifted from her outdoor quarters to an indoor den. There are two locked doors between the tiger and her keepers at any given time. With the tiger safely inside her den, Dumong proceeds into the exhibit, placing the specially formulated cat chow in various areas of the exhibit to keep Sala active as she hunts for her meal.

Sala spends the majority of the daylight hours dozing in a corner of the exhibit. One of the common misperceptions about tigers, Dumong said, is that their inactivity throughout the day is a sign that the animal is unhappy. As big cats are primarily nocturnal animals, the reality is exactly the opposite, she said.

“That is a happy cat,” she said. “That is what they are supposed to do; they are supposed to sleep the majority of the day — just exactly like your house cat, they don’t do anything until they want something from you.”

While Dumong specializes in the big cats, Capela said that her interest tends more towards the reptiles that are housed at the zoo, especially the turtles and the tortoises. The Charles Paddock Zoo is home to several species of turtles and tortoises from all over the world, and is looking to increase its turtle numbers in an effort to combat a relatively new wildlife concern — the Asian Turtle Crisis.

“We have a number of species that really relate to the Asian Turtle Crisis right now,” she said. “What is happening is that researchers are going over to look for certain species and they find that they don’t see them in the wild, they see them in the food markets.”

Putting these species on the commercial food market has driven their numbers down almost to the point of extinction.

“It is a major, major crisis,” Capela said.

The Atascadero zoo is making a positive contribution to the crisis by protecting, housing and putting the reptile species affected by the crisis in situations conducive to breeding.

Amphibians are also facing a similar global crisis as an aggressive fungus called chytrid is rapidly depleting their numbers.

“They are really equating it to dinosaurs going extinct,” Capela said. “It is a huge, huge problem; it is bigger than people realize.”

While the fungus has thus far proved resilient to researchers’ efforts to control it in the wild, it can be easily eradicated in a controlled setting. There is currently a massive effort under way to get the affected amphibians out of the wild and into a zoo setting, a tactic that the Association of Zoos and Aquariums very rarely promotes. In addition, in order to increase public awareness and discussion on the global crisis, the AZA has also named 2008 as the Year of the Frog. Capela said to expect this theme to be echoed at the Atascadero zoo in the coming months.

Zookeepers are committed to monitoring and safeguarding the health of any animal in their care, whether they are amphibians, reptiles or mammals.

“As a zookeeper, you are really the voice for the animals, so you have to know each individual animal,” Capela said.

They are experts at recognizing the often-subtle signs that their animals may be ailing in any way. Capela explained that wild animals, unlike domesticated animals, instinctively hide any injury or sickness for fear that they might appear more vulnerable to natural predators. Signs to look for include changes in overall behavior, appetite, water intake, a sudden decrease in activity, skin quality and coat condition, she said.

Any sick animals are provided with expert care by the zookeepers and other staff including the Charles Paddock Zoo’s veterinarian.

One animal that continues to get expert care at the zoo is Big Boy, an Aldabra Tortoise. The more than 300-pound reptile came to the zoo with shell damage, which was likely caused by the sun beating down on his back and is common in the wild, Capela said. The zoo’s medical staff has had to get creative with its treatment on Big Boy and routinely patches his shell with a plaster or epoxy spread.

The massive tortoise is Capela’s favorite animal to work with at the zoo, thanks in large part to his distinctive inquisitive and friendly personality, which is atypical of large reptiles, she said.

“He is very in tune to his keepers; he loves to have you in there,” she said. “He is kind of one of those animals that every single day you are there, he is excited to see you.”

As she makes her way around the outdoor exhibit, Big Boy will often follow her around, competing for his share of her attention.

“I definitely enjoy him,” Capela said. “I talk to him, even though he has no external ears. He can’t hear me, so everybody thinks that I am insane, but he can hear the vibrations.”

The 63-year-old tortoise is in no way geriatric, as he can easily live to twice his current age. In addition, the tortoise is also quicker and stronger than he is usually taken to be. Big Boy is one of the few animals that have successfully gotten out of their enclosures. He decided to do some exploring, Capela said, and simply walked through the chain-link fence that separated his exhibit from the rest of zoo.

“It was as though some horrifying creature had come through and peeled all the chain link back,” she said with a laugh.

It took four adults to lift the massive animal from the walkway into a flatbed vehicle and back into his exhibit. The chain-link has since been replaced with a more sturdy fencing.

Capela and the other zookeepers spend the hours after feeding and cleaning exhibits working on enrichment-based activities for the zoo animals.

The idea behind the enrichment activities is to promote and stimulate natural behavior of the animals, Capela said. It keeps the animals engaged and active.

As they go about their daily work, it is easy to see that the Charles Paddock zookeepers are not only committed to the animals that they service, but that they also love their work.

“It is a lot of hard work, but it is very rewarding,” Capela said. “It is one of those jobs that you go home at the end of the day and think that I made a difference.”

The Charles Paddock Zoo is open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. For more information call 461-5080.