Conservationist who transformed public education at the world-famous Bronx Zoo shares the wonder of wildlife in fascinating new book

Annette Libeskind Berkovits releasing ‘Confessions of an Accidental Zoo Curator’

NEW YORK – A champion and expert on conservation education, Annette Libeskind Berkovits is taking readers behind the scenes of one of America’s most renowned zoos in her new book, “Confessions of an Accidental Zoo Curator” (April 22, 2017).

Filled with fun anecdotes about a variety of animals from pumas to king cobras, “Confessions of an Accidental Zoo Curator” is the perfect book for animal lovers everywhere that have ever wondered about what goes on behind the scenes at a zoo. Berkovits pulls back the curtain on fascinating, little-known facts about the Bronx Zoo, including a secret classroom with gorillas, employees who live at the zoo, unpublicized animal escapes and controversial exhibits.

When Berkovits started working at the Bronx Zoo in New York in 1972, she trod a nearly virgin territory. Public education had not yet found its way into the zoo’s philosophy or strategies, and very few women worked in zoos. True, the Bronx Zoo was the first in the world to launch an education department, but its activities were limited to a bevy of young women clad in miniskirts who roamed the park providing tidbits of information that may have been entertaining but hardly educational. Nevertheless, Berkovits was the right woman for the job. She took the zoo’s public education initiatives to the next level not only at her zoo but nationwide and worldwide.

A pioneer for women in the field of conservation and the creator of award-winning conservation education programs recognized for excellence by the National Science Foundation, Berkovits shares a unique and insightful perspective on everything from the zoo’s inner workings to the dilemma of preserving nature for the next generation. From giraffes to supersize snakes and fugitive pigs, “Confessions of an Accidental Zoo Curator” takes readers on a fascinating journey told with the charming wit of a woman who worked her way up to serve as senior vice president at the Wildlife Conservation Society, which today conserves the world's largest wild places in 15 priority regions, home to more than 50 percent of the world's biodiversity.

Annette Libeskind Berkovits was born in Kyrgyzstan and grew up in postwar Poland and the fledgling state of Israel before coming to America at age 16. In her three-decade career with the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York, she spearheaded the institution’s nationwide and worldwide science education programs. Her achievements include the first-ever agreement to bring environmental education to China’s schools. The National Science Foundation has recognized her outstanding leadership in the field. Now retired, she is pursuing her life-long love of writing. She is the author of “In the Unlikeliest of Places” and “Confessions of an Accidental Zoo Curator.”
“Confessions of an Accidental Zoo Curator”
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Advance Praise

“Berkovits tells a remarkable story, fascinating and unique. With a deft blend of personal insight and eloquent story-telling, she takes us from a remote village in Kyrgyzstan to the Bronx Zoo, from accidental zoology to innovative environmental education and describes her adventures as she evolved from neophyte to international leader in her field.”
—William Conway, Senior Conservationist with the Wildlife Conservation Society; former President of the Society and Director of the Bronx Zoo

“‘Confessions of an Accidental Zoo Curator’ is a story that goes far beyond its title. While I am not a fan of reading people’s life stories, the trajectory of the life of Annette Berkovits as she develops through a difficult childhood devoid of any real animal connections, to become one of the world’s foremost leaders in zoo-based wildlife conservation education is both fascinating and inspiring. This is a story that shows how love and passion for the natural world can grow and blossom out of experience and a desire to inspire others. Annette’s career and her accomplishments were no accident, but instead arose out of a willingness to take on opportunities and experience life to its fullest.”
—Alan Rabinowitz PhD, zoologist, author and CEO of Panthera, a conservation organization working to protect the world's wild cats and their ecosystems

“Reading this book, I’m pleased to discover anew the passion, curiosity and humorous sensibility that have always characterized Annette’s work and her life. ‘Confessions of the Accidental Zoo Curator’ is simply a delight.”
—Lee Ehmke, Houston Zoo Director and CEO; President, World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (2013-2015)

“…As one of the most creative and innovative educators in the zoo community, Annette faced the challenge of educating, rather than entertaining young zoo visitors to return to their homes with a greater appreciation for the importance and value of wildlife and wild places. To be successful in getting her messages to the students required that the work be interesting, stimulating, and fun too. Go behind the scenes in a major zoo and see it through her eyes.”
—James Doherty, retired general curator at the Bronx Zoo; Carter Chair in Mammalogy; species coordinator for the AZA Sumatran Rhinoceros Species Survival Plan

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An Interview with
Annette Libeskind Berkovits

For people who are not familiar with your line of work, what does a zoo curator do?
An animal zoo curator designs strategies to best care in captivity for a particular species of animal based on its biology and ecology. Some curators extend knowledge about that species to conservation strategies in the wild.

An education curator at a zoo was a completely novel concept in the 70s. It was meant to designate a professional who understood animals but also knew how to present the information about that animal species in the most engaging and scientifically accurate way and to measure impact on the audience. In my case, for a time I also had responsibility for all the Bronx Zoo’s animals in the children’s zoo and its handleable teaching collection of animals.

How did you get involved with conservation education at the Bronx Zoo?
Pursuant to my graduate studies, I conducted a research study that suggested audiences are far more likely to respond positively to animals and care about their future if they were effectively engaged, rather than provided with facts devoid of context. This understanding led to the development of programs that focused on conserving animals in their habitats rather than providing mere facts about animals. The main strategy for success was hands-on inquiry learning, rather than teacher dominated lessons.

How did conservation education transform during your career?
It went from using animals for simple entertainment to in-depth study of ecology and from a focus on children to a focus on teachers.

Why are public education programs at zoos so important?
There isn’t much room in the curricula of schools to teach about ecology and how wild habitats are a necessity for animal survival. Zoos have the potential of doing a stellar job in this area because they have the living animals to engage interest. Without an educated public, there will be no constituency for wildlife conservation.
What would you recommend for teachers interested in having their students get more involved in conservation education?
I’d suggest the teachers themselves first become knowledgeable about the field by taking courses at their local zoos and colleges. Many provide credits toward salary increases. Students can be involved in the numerous internship programs offered by zoos.

What did you love most about working at the Bronx Zoo?
The sounds and colors of all the beautiful animals—a cacophony of life! Also, the frequent births and observing the way different people—staff and visitors—related to wildlife.

What do you think the role of zoos will be in the future of conservation?
For some species extinct in the wild, zoos will be the last repositories of these animals. Many zoos will serve as gene banks. Some zoos have strategies to encourage their audiences to provide badly needed funds for conservation of species in the wild.

You know we have to ask, what is your favorite zoo animal?
Pumas and wolves. I find pumas to be exquisite cats and once I had a love affair with Carlos, the puma. And wolves for their intelligence and complex social organization.

Can someone who is terrified of cats be cut out for a career in a zoo?
Well, maybe not a match made in heaven, but if one has curiosity, interest in science and willingness to learn and innovate, then the answer is yes.

Would conservation-minded zoo professionals ever eat giraffe, antelope or crocodile meat?
Yes, they did so when it was sanctioned in Africa, and the meat came from ranched animals, but since this encouraged the killing of wild animals and contributed to their decline, the practice was outlawed.

Do animals always conform to the “rules” of biology?
Most of the time, but not always. Any animal observer or scientist must be open to acknowledging new phenomena, record them and study them long enough to know if the non-conformist behavior was a fluke, or perhaps a response to a particular environmental circumstance.

Why are Chinese forests devoid of animal sounds?
Human population growth has caused extensive overhunting, so nearly all animals have been hunted out in most wildlife areas.

Where is the queen’s rat a delicacy served by an archbishop to foreign guests?
Belize, Central America. The gibuut, or paca (a rodent), is considered a most prized game meat.
Why do some animals have demeaning names like “lesser” while others enjoy aggrandizement?
Animals are most often named by their discoverers who may attach their own first impression of the animal to the name. The best and most accurate way to refer to any animal is its scientific name devised by Carl Linnaeus, a Swedish zoologist. He invented a system to name living things using two Latin names: a genus name and species name. This avoids the confusion of using common names that often differ from location to location.

Riding with which animal can get you thrown out of a New York City taxi?
In my case, it was a large boa constrictor, but given that NYC cab drivers come from many cultures, it could almost be any exotic animal.

How does a zoo educator get tangled up in a revolution?
I happened to arrive in Caracas in 1989 to set up the First Pan American Congress for Conservation of Wildlife Through Education on the very day a major protest against an increase in gasoline prices erupted. Three thousand Venezuelans lost their lives in the weeklong revolution.

Why do Chinese educators love Babaloo, the snake mascot?
Pablo Python, the mascot leading children on an animal themed adventure in one of the Bronx Zoo’s early childhood curricula was a big hit in China’s schools. The Chinese could not pronounce its name and called him Babaloo instead.

Can animals ever behave rudely or hurl profanities?
Definitely, speaking mynahs and primates engaging in behaviors humans find embarrassing are only two examples.

How did a young woman born at the foothills of the Himalayas break the glass ceiling in a male-dominated profession in the Big Apple?
By inventing a new tool for conservation – wildlife/conservation education and assembling a super creative team to design programs that attracted millions of dollars in funding.