

CREATURE CATCH UP NEWSLETTER

Quarterly Newsletter

Vol.3

August 2026



SAAKA
South African Animal
Keepers Association

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Editor Robynn Moller

WHO IS SHINÉ CORNELIUS?



If someone had asked me years ago where I would find my greatest purpose, I never would have imagined that it would be standing beside some of the world's most incredible animals. Looking back now, I realize that every step of my journey has been guided by one constant, my passion for understanding animals and helping them live the very best lives possible.

Animals have never simply been something I worked with; they have become my greatest teachers. Every species I have encountered has challenged me to think differently, communicate more effectively, and appreciate the incredible diversity of life. My career has given me opportunities that many people only dream of.

read more within

OFFERED BY
WILD WELFARE UK

ANIMAL HUSBANDRY WORKSHOP

7 - 10 SEP '26

VENUE: LORY PARK ZOO
07H30 - 17H00
LUNCH AT OWN COST
AT BUSY BEAKS CAFE

REGISTRATION:
R750 ATTENDANCE
SAAKA MEMBERS ONLY:
FOR FREE

CLOSING DATE - 31ST AUG
ACCOMMODATION
AVAILABLE AT: R200
FOR 4 NIGHTS

4 DAY KEEPER RELATED
enrichment / design
welfare assessments
welfare concepts
nutrition & health
record keeping
behaviour

FACILITATOR:
Sarah Bonser-Blake,
Wild Welfare Animal Welfare Field
Manager, 25 years of animal
management

FACILITATOR:
Simon Marsh,
Wild Welfare Director, 20 years
experience in welfare

LORY PARK
Animal and Owl Sanctuary

Book through: saaka.org.za
whats-app Robynn 0844968587

SAAKA
South African Animal
Keepers Association

www.saaka.org

LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Members,

As we move through another exciting quarter, I want to take a moment to reflect on the progress we have made together as an association.

It is hard to believe that I have now been serving as President for just over a year. Looking back, I am incredibly proud of how far SAAKA has come. Our membership continues to grow, with more animal care professionals joining our community and sharing our vision of advancing animal welfare, professional development, and collaboration across South Africa. One of our biggest achievements this quarter has been the successful completion of the Creature Credits system on the SAAKA website. This important milestone allows members to log their professional development, workshops, conferences, webinars, and training, creating a record of their learning journey while encouraging continued growth within our profession.

Education remains at the heart of what we do, and we are excited about the opportunities ahead. The upcoming Shape-Africa Enrichment Workshop will bring together animal care professionals to learn, collaborate, and share practical approaches to improving animal welfare through enrichment. In September, we are also proud to support the upcoming Wild Welfare Animal Husbandry Workshop, another fantastic opportunity for our members to expand their knowledge, develop practical skills, and continue raising the standard of animal care in our facilities. These initiatives reflect SAAKA's commitment to providing meaningful professional development opportunities for our members.



Our collaboration with the Animal Talk Podcast continues to go from strength to strength, with the 50th episode. This milestone is a testament to the passion and dedication behind the podcast and its mission to connect animal care professionals.

We also have some exciting new collaborations that will help expand the opportunities available to our members and further strengthen SAAKA's impact within the zoological community. You'll be able to read more about these partnerships throughout this newsletter.

None of this would be possible without the dedication of our volunteer committee, whose passion and commitment continue to drive SAAKA forward. I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to every one of our members. Your support, enthusiasm, and willingness to contribute are what make this association such a success.

Thank you for being part of this journey. I look forward to seeing many of you at our upcoming events and continuing to build a stronger, more connected community of animal care professionals.



Ryne Ferguson
President

NOTE FROM THE TEAM

WHAT'S UP YA ALL

**WE ARE PROUD TO
ANNOUNCE THAT SAAKA
ARE NOW ASSOCIATE
MEMBERS OF THE
INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS
OF ZOOKEEPERS (ICZ).**

In 2000, representatives from seven of the world's zookeeper associations met to discuss the need for better communication among zookeepers worldwide. The idea to create the ICZ was formulated and the first conference of the ICZ was held in the Netherlands in 2003.

A steering committee was formed to direct the progress of the ICZ and create strategic directions for the budding association.

The ICZ will continue to develop a global network of zookeepers.

Already, many keepers have developed lifelong relationships, with colleagues throughout the world, as a result of the ICZ and there is greater opportunity to share knowledge and experience with colleagues on a global scale.



making connections for you

ICZ represents a resource of over 6,000 keepers worldwide. Zookeepers have a large range of specialized skills and knowledge that can be harnessed for conservation work not only involving conservation breeding of threatened species in zoos and wildlife parks but which can extend into work in the field.

These talents include good observation and identification skills, intimate knowledge of animal behavior, animal handling skills, recording of scientific information and good physical fitness for undertaking strenuous work in the field.

The ICZ Conservation Committee would like to create a database for animal keepers involved in any Conservation Project anywhere in the world. Conservation is very important for ICZ and we would like to share information from these projects as widely as possible. **GO TO OUR DATABASE (Website) FOR FURTHER INFORMATION.**

Our plan is to compile information on all of these projects and encourage the involvement of other zookeeper, or better still maybe some will start new ones of their own. Many conservation projects are run, managed or helped by animal keepers.

Info taken from ICZ Website

www.iczoo.org

www.saaka.org

UP COMING EVENTS

THINGS TO DO

go visit our Events page

Local & Lekker

24-28 Aug: MHERA Wildlife Week at AWE & Monte.
CONTACT: karin@mhera.org Cost R3200 five days



book now - great
opportunity

OFFERED BY
WILD WELFARE UK

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Animal and Owl Sanctuary

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whats-app Robynn 0844968587



12-16 Oct : IZE Conference at Two Oceans
Aquarium. CONTACT:
www.aquarium.co.za/ize-conference-2026



www.saaka.org

LOOP ABROAD AT LORY PARK ZOO

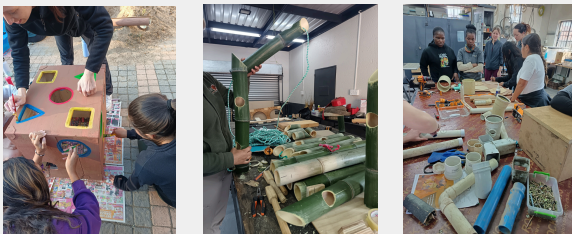
by Robynn Moller – Lory Park Zoo

Lory Park Zoo has for the past couple of years (2018 to date) hosted LOOP Abroad. A pre veterinary programme for students who are keen to learn more about becoming a vet.

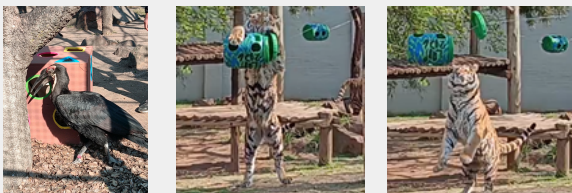


Lory Park hosts Int. students during the winter months (May - Aug) and during that time line they are exposed to varied zoo based experiences. From learning about basic husbandry to preventative medicine. They not only work on sections from big cats to birds and reptiles but also get exposed to enrichment.

Enrichment is one of the experiences and LOOP has partnered with SHAPE-Africa to aid in exposing the students to the subject of enrichment through a two week enrichment project.



The students not only learn about the theory, but also get actively involved by designing and implementing their own enrichment based of pre defined goals set out by management.

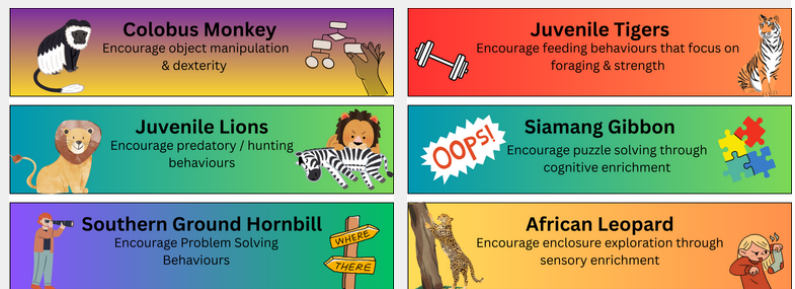


Staff at LPZ are involved from the onset and help the students build and implement.

A team effort all round with great ideas and solutions implemented throughout the programme.



The GOALS were:



During the 10 weeks, students and staff collaborated to invent amazing enrichment. From bamboo hanging swings to puzzle boxes and paper mache prey items.

SHAPE-Africa is proud to work with LOOP Abroad and Lory Park Zoo in their enrichment programme.



HOME IS WHERE THE HAMMER IS

GLOBAL & LOCAL

making a difference

CHRONICLES OF AN ENRICHMENT OFFICER

If you've ever worked, volunteered, or workshopped at the Johannesburg Zoo, you've probably noticed that the Enrichment Department has been a bit like a hermit crab—constantly searching for its next shell.

Over the last eight years, I've called more places "the enrichment workshop" than I care to count. There was the run-down research house, where every project seemed to involve dodging cobwebs. Then came the shipping container, which was either an oven or a freezer depending on the season. After that came the Pumpkin House, Creature Feature, the old polar bear pump room, and now, finally, a workspace that actually feels like it was designed for... well... enrichment.

It's been quite the adventure.

Looking back, each move taught us something. We learnt how to make enrichment with limited space, how to store rope next to papier-mâché without asking too many questions, and how to find almost any tool—eventually. Keepers became experts at the phrase, "I'm sure I put it somewhere safe."

The reality is that enrichment doesn't magically appear in animal enclosures. Every browse feeder, puzzle box, scent trail, hanging toy and training aid starts long before it reaches the animals. It begins with an idea, a sketch, a pile of materials, and usually someone saying, "I wonder if this will work..."

That process needs space.

A dedicated enrichment workshop isn't simply a storeroom full of recycled firehose and buckets. It's a place where ideas become reality. It's where materials are organised, tools are easy to find (most of the time), projects can be built safely, and damaged items can be repaired instead of thrown away. It means less time searching for cable ties and more time creating enrichment that makes a real difference.



Perhaps the biggest change has been collaboration. A proper workspace invites people in. Keepers stop by to brainstorm, borrow an idea, lend a hand, or proudly show off something they've built for their animals. Good enrichment has always been a team effort, and having a central hub makes sharing knowledge so much easier.

There are practical benefits too. Better storage means equipment lasts longer. Materials can be reused, reducing waste and stretching budgets. Enrichment items can be catalogued, rotated between sections and maintained properly, making it easier to keep programmes fresh and varied.

HOME IS WHERE THE HAMMER IS

GLOBAL & LOCAL

making a difference

CHRONICLES OF AN ENRICHMENT OFFICER CONT.

And, of course, the biggest winners are the animals. When we're not spending half the morning hunting for a drill bit or moving supplies from one temporary home to another, we have more time to focus on what really matters—creating opportunities for animals to explore, solve problems, make choices and express natural behaviours.



a world class African city



After eight years of moving house, unpacking boxes and figuring out where to plug in the glue gun, having a permanent enrichment workspace feels like a milestone worth celebrating.

It represents more than four walls and a workbench. It shows that environmental enrichment is recognised as an essential part of modern animal care and that investing in the people behind the scenes ultimately benefits every animal in our care.

A massive thank you to the Johannesburg Zoo management for believing in the value of enrichment and providing us with a dedicated workspace. This investment has transformed the way we work and will have lasting benefits for both the team and the animals.

So here's to finally putting down roots. Swing by HQ when you're in the area and let's make the magic happen. Although, if history has taught me anything, I'll keep the boxes... just in case.

By Candice Ward
Enrichment Officer
Johannesburg Zoo

SHINÉ CORNELIUS

SAAMBR / SeaWorld Durban

getting to know one of our members

I have worked with dolphins, African penguins, macaws, cockatoos, and Cape fur seals, each species leaving a lasting impression on me. Every one of them has taught me something unique about behaviour, intelligence, trust, and the importance of building relationships.

Working with dolphins introduced me to the incredible power of communication. They reminded me that effective training isn't about control—it's about cooperation. They taught me patience, precision, consistency, and the value of positive reinforcement. Every successful behaviour began with trust, and every training session reinforced the importance of listening just as much as teaching.

African penguins showed me that even the smallest victories matter. Caring for them required attention to detail, observation, and understanding individual personalities. Watching them thrive through dedicated husbandry reinforced how meaningful everyday care can be in improving animal welfare. Macaws and cockatoos brought colour, personality, and endless challenges into my life. Their intelligence continually amazed me. They reminded me that enrichment is never just about providing toys—it's about providing opportunities for animals to make choices, solve problems, and engage with their environment. Their curiosity pushed me to become more creative and to constantly ask, "How can we make today more interesting?"

Today, much of my passion lies with Cape fur seals. Working alongside these remarkable marine mammals has deepened my appreciation for behavioural science and welfare-focused management. Every day presents something different. No two animals respond exactly the same, and that diversity keeps me learning.

One of the projects I am particularly proud of has been helping develop underwater foraging enrichment opportunities. Through welfare assessments, our team identified a gap in encouraging natural feeding behaviours at depth. Rather than accepting traditional feeding methods, we explored ways to better reflect the animals' natural ecology.

The results were incredibly rewarding. We observed increased feeding at depth, more varied swimming patterns, healthy competition between animals, and even positive changes in social interactions. Watching behavioural science translate into improved welfare has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my career. Moments like these remind me why evidence-based animal care is so important.

Throughout my journey, positive reinforcement has become much more than a training technique—it has become a philosophy. Whether working with animals or people, I have learned that reinforcing success builds confidence, trust, and stronger relationships. The best learning happens when individuals feel safe, motivated, and empowered to succeed.

Of course, working with animals has also taught me humility. Not every training session goes according to plan. Not every enrichment device works the first time. Sometimes progress is slow, and sometimes animals remind us that they always have a choice. Those moments have taught me resilience, flexibility, and the importance of adapting rather than forcing an outcome.

SHINÉ CORNELIUS

SAAMBR / SeaWorld Durban

getting to know one of our members

Perhaps one of the greatest lessons animals have taught me is the importance of observation. Animals communicate constantly, but rarely with words. Learning to recognise subtle behavioural changes has become one of the most valuable skills I possess. Good animal care begins with listening, watching, and understanding before taking action.

Another lesson I have learnt is that collaboration makes us stronger. Behind every successful welfare programme is a dedicated team of keepers, veterinarians, trainers, researchers, husbandry staff and volunteers working together toward a common goal. Some of my greatest achievements have been team achievements, and I value the opportunity to learn from the knowledge and experiences of others.

Outside of daily husbandry and training, I am passionate about continuing to learn. Animal care is constantly evolving as new research expands our understanding of behaviour, cognition, and welfare. I believe we should never stop asking questions or seeking better ways to care for the animals entrusted to us. ct : South Africa ...

This passion for learning is one of the reasons **I am excited to be part of SAAKA. For me, SAAKA represents far more than membership in a professional association. It is a community of people who share the same commitment to advancing animal welfare, improving professional standards, and supporting one another.**

I hope to gain new knowledge from experienced animal care professionals working with a wide variety of species and facilities. I look forward to learning different training techniques, enrichment ideas, welfare assessment methods, and husbandry practices that I can bring back to my own workplace. Equally importantly, I hope to contribute my own experiences.

Sharing the successes and challenges of implementing welfare assessments and underwater enrichment for Cape fur seals may inspire conversations that benefit animals beyond my own collection. I believe that when animal professionals openly share ideas, everyone grows—and, most importantly, the animals benefit.

Networking with passionate professionals is another opportunity I value. Every conversation has the potential to introduce a new perspective or solution that can improve the way we care for animals. Some of the best ideas often come from simply discussing challenges with people who understand the unique responsibilities of working in animal care.

Looking ahead, my goal is to continue growing as an animal care professional while helping promote evidence-based welfare practices. I want to contribute to a future where animal training is centred on trust, enrichment is purposeful, and welfare assessments become an essential part of everyday husbandry rather than an occasional exercise.

When I reflect on my journey so far, I don't simply think about the animals I have worked with. I think about everything they have taught me. They have taught me patience, resilience, empathy, observation, adaptability, and the importance of lifelong learning.

WHO'S WHO



SHINÉ CORNELIUS

SAAMBR / SeaWorld Durban

getting to know one of our members

Most importantly, they have taught me that caring for animals is not just a career—it is a responsibility and a privilege.

Every day I am reminded why I chose this path, and every new animal, every new challenge, and every new opportunity strengthens my passion even further. As I continue this journey with SAKA, I hope to keep learning, keep sharing, and keep striving to improve the lives of the animals entrusted to our care.

After all, they have given me so much, and the least I can do is spend my career giving my very best back to them.

article written by Shiné Cornelius

SAAMBR / SeaWorld Durban



ARTICLE SUBMISSION'S

SAKA is growing and with new members comes connections.

If you want to write an article, please contact info@saaka.org.za to submit to the newsletter.

All these articles within this SAKA Newsletter will also be on the SAKA Website.

Articles can be on:

Husbandry
Your experience as a keeper
Welfare
Enrichment
Education
Husbandry manuals
Animal Training
Anything to do with what we as keepers do for our animals and the industry we care for.



www.saaka.org

OUR CREATURES

FEATURE CREATURE



Animals are amazing

Meet Odile & Albie

At Hoedspruit Reptile Centre, we have two Nile crocodiles that are approximately 20 years old. Albie, has a genetic abnormality called amelanism, partial lack of melanin pigments. This is what gives Albie his yellow appearance, and is different from true albinism in that he does not have the characteristic "red eyes".

Albie arrived at HRC as a yearling, in a cardboard box which had been dumped at the Centre reception, after appearing briefly in a movie- or so the story goes. None of our team that are currently working at the centre were around back then and so we are unable to verify this. Albie is super smart, and very cunning. Our other beloved Nile croc is Odile. She is the more shy of the two. She has a lovely personality and is super sweet, most of the time.

She can also be super stubborn, and will not leave her pond for cleaning unless it is convenient for her. She came to HRC from a crocodile farm in 2021, and we are proud to say she won't become a handbag, a belt, or a burger any longer.

We have recently started the process of training our crocodiles at HRC. The purpose of this is to provide environmental, physical and mental stimulation as well as to condition the crocodiles to be more "keeper friendly".

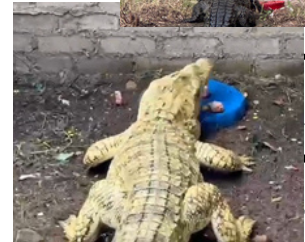
Captive crocodiles can easily learn feeding behaviour and become very food motivated. They can recognise keeper uniforms and voices, as well as objects like brooms, food buckets, and feeding tongs. A bad situation to be in, is to be charged by a highly food driven crocodile that may accidentally mistake a keeper for it's meal.

One of the co-objectives of training the crocodiles is to manage this high food motivated behaviour. The focus of our efforts will be to encourage our scaly friends to calmly approach keepers when individually called, to stop in front of them and to patiently wait for their meal reward. No rushing, no excited behaviours.

In addition to training we have made another important safety modification- the creation of a lockable night room.

Whilst in most instances it's perfectly okay to conduct enclosure maintenance with a crocodile still in its habitat, one very real critical risk exists. If you accidentally fall into the pond, chances are you won't get out before the crocs get in.

To eliminate this, our crocs are trained to move into their night rooms on command and to station onto a target (a colourful concrete block). The night room doors are then closed and locked, allowing keepers to freely move around the enclosure and go about their business.



It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking crocs are prehistoric mindless predators, especially because most of us find it hard to understand their behaviour cues.

They simply don't have the emotive facial expressions we are so used to reading that one sees in mammals and birds. Crocodiles are highly intelligent, adaptable and patient and for crocodiles in captivity to be truly happy, they need regular enrichment.

Challenge yourselves and your animals and do share your experiences.

HUSBANDRY TIT BIT

The Nile crocodile possesses several remarkable adaptations. A transparent third eyelid protects the eye underwater, while a muscular palatal valve, the gular flap, closes the throat when the mouth is open beneath the surface. Crocodiles can remain submerged for extended periods by slowing their heart rate and redirecting blood flow. Sensitive pressure receptors around the jaws called Integumentary Sensory Organs, detect tiny movements and other valuable information in the water, enabling accurate hunting even in poor visibility.

by Chris Cooke

www.saaka.org

SAAKA CREATURE CATCH UP NEWSLETTER

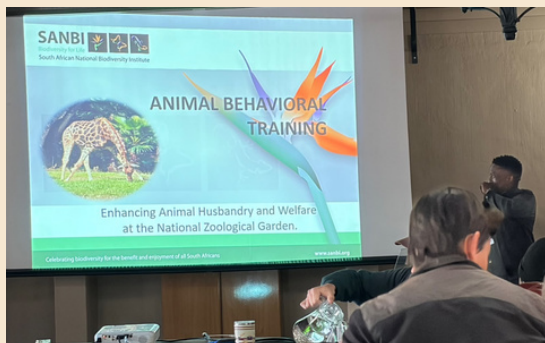


CREATURE CREDITS

Beyond the Enclosure

The SAAKA Personal Development Badge !

"SAAKA's Creature Credit system is a way for you, the hardworking keeper, to keep a log of your activities and achievements over the course of your career.



How it works is simple: every time that you engage in a zoo or conservation related activity, you log in and record what you did. As you accumulate points, bonus benefits will be unlocked. Most importantly the core idea behind this program – encouraging keeper engagement with their field – culminates in becoming recognized for your efforts. Keepers within SAAKA and support a culture of collaboration, professionalism, and lifelong engagement with wildlife conservation."

KHOMOTSO MADISHA

Congratulations for reaching a mile stone.

Your dedication to your professional development shows in your Creature Credits.

Thank you for recording and learning how to use Creature Credits to your advantage.

Here are but a few that you have done:

- Workshops, courses done –
- Online events attended –
- Articles written –
- Facilitated Keeper exchanges –
- Presenting on your giraffe training –
- Participating in SAAKA events –
- Writing about enrichment –

Khomotso Madisha

Your Badge is
"Splashy Crab"
Keep up the cleaning!
You are almost at the Second Badge



95
points



IF YOU ARE A MEMBER of SAAKA

**you can log into the SAAKA website
and join teh Creature Credit
Adventure with Khomotso**



JHB ZOO WILD WELFARE WORKSHOP

Available experiences

things you can do for you

Attending the recent Advanced Animal Behavioural Management Workshop hosted at the Johannesburg Zoo was a very good experience for my career as an animal keeper and as a SAKA member.

The workshop was facilitated by Johannesburg Zoo and Wild Welfare, the 5 day work gathered zoological professionals from across South Africa to help us improve the well-being and welfare of animals in our care.

The workshop combined animal behavioral science and hands on practical work. For me, the experience provided critical tools that will directly improve my day-to-day husbandry routines.

Key Learnings and Workshop Highlights: I have learned the importance of animal choice, control, and emotional wellbeing and monitoring of animal behaviors.



The core modules focused on:

- * Operant Conditioning: Mastering the precise timing needed to shape voluntary husbandry behaviors.
- * Positive Reinforcement Training (PRT): Practicing force-free target training across various species to make veterinary checkups entirely stress free.
- * Enrichment Planning: Shifting away from random enrichment items toward goal-oriented plans that trigger specific, natural wild instincts.

How this training will enhance my routines:

Returning to my daily setups, the impact of this training will show up immediately in how I manage my assigned habitats. First, I am completely upgrading how I approach training logs. By utilizing the objective behavioral tracking methods taught by the Wild Welfare team, I can keep training progression consistent across all keeper shifts, eliminating guesswork.

The hands on target training for tigers gave me a better understanding of patience, bridging during training and importance of timing of reinforcement during training which will help me improve. I have been collaborating with passionate peers at the Johannesburg Zoo which gave me sense and need for keeper exchange and for collaboration with keepers from other facilities.

Thank you Johannesburg Zoo for the love and keeping us safe.

Khomotso Madisha
Animal Keeper at SANBI/National Zoological Garden
and SAKA committee member.



ANIMAL WELFARE & TRAINING CONSULTING



GUIDING ETHICAL ANIMAL CARE

Promoting Positive Welfare. Advancing Professional Standards. Supporting Better Outcomes for Animals.

Animal Welfare & Training Consulting is a professional registered consultancy dedicated to advancing animal welfare, behavioural management and ethical animal care practices across a variety of managed environments. The consultancy works with zoological facilities, aquariums, wildlife rehabilitation centres, conservation organisations, educational institutions and animal care professionals to develop practical, sustainable welfare solutions.

Founded by experienced animal-care professionals, the consultancy brings together practical industry experience and evidence-based approaches to help organisations improve the wellbeing of animals while supporting the development of the people responsible for their care. Its philosophy is built around compassion, professionalism, integrity and evidence-based practice, with recommendations tailored to the individual needs of animals, facilities and teams.

Supporting Animals Through Better Training

A key area of Animal Welfare & Training Consulting's work is behavioural management and training. Ethical, welfare-focused training can strengthen communication between animals and their caregivers while supporting important husbandry, veterinary-care and enrichment goals. The consultancy also provides enrichment and habitat recommendations designed to encourage natural behaviours, increase engagement and promote positive welfare outcomes.

However, good animal welfare extends beyond the animals themselves. People are an essential part of the equation. Through staff mentorship, coaching and professional development, the consultancy supports animal-care professionals in developing their knowledge, confidence and practical skills.

A Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Animal Welfare & Training Consulting believes exceptional animal care goes beyond simply meeting basic physical needs. Positive welfare means creating opportunities for animals to thrive physically, mentally and behaviourally. Its approach combines scientific understanding, practical experience and compassionate care to develop solutions that are both effective and sustainable.



Experience That Makes a Difference

The consultancy is led by Ryne Ferguson, an animal care, welfare and conservation professional with more than two decades of experience across zoological facilities, wildlife centres, conservation organisations and animal management environments in South Africa and internationally. His career has included experience with Johannesburg Zoo, Montecasino Bird Gardens, the KwaZulu-Natal Crane Foundation, Crocworld Conservation Centre and Australia Zoo, among others.

Ryne is also recognised for his work in avian behaviour and training and serves as President of the South African Animal Keepers Association (SAAKA) and founder and host of the Animal Talk Podcast.

Through welfare assessments, behavioural training, enrichment, education, mentorship and strategic guidance, Animal Welfare & Training Consulting aims to contribute to the continued advancement of animal welfare and professional animal-care standards across South Africa and beyond.

For more information:

 info@animalwelfaretraining.co.za

 +27 72 671 9158

We are on Social Media



 **LinkedIn**



Ryne is a proud member of The Animal Behavior Management Alliance (ABMA)



www.saaka.org