



Guidelines for Creating and Sharing Animal and Collection Records

AZA Institutional Data Management Scientific Advisory Group (IDMAG)

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The goal of maintaining a centralized, compiled record for each animal cared for in a zoo or aquarium is ideal, however, oftentimes, information belonging in an animal record is spread across many departments and may originate with any member of the animal care staff. Therefore, it is important for zoos and aquariums to have a formal method for collecting or linking various pieces of information into the official records and that the roles and responsibilities for each named record type are clearly defined in written protocols for the reporting, recording, distribution, storage, and retrieval processes; there should also be a stated process of review for the accuracy and completeness of these records. For example, a recording/reporting protocol would state who reports births or deaths, to whom they are reported, in what manner and in what time frame they are reported, who officially records the information, and who reviews the resulting record for accuracy and completeness. Then, the maintenance and archiving protocol would state where the record is to be filed, who may have access, and how long the record is to be maintained before being archived or disposed of.

Information contained in animal records is essential not only to the immediate care of the individual animal but also as pooled data to manage larger concerns (e.g., providing norms for species-related veterinary and population management decisions, evidence of compliance with laws and regulations, showing trends in populations on every level from institutional to global, etc.). No matter what its use, it is critical for the information contained in an animal record to be factual, clear, complete, and documented. Because zoos and aquariums vary greatly in size and organizational structure, it is impossible to set defined procedures that would be applicable to all; therefore the following guidelines for creating and sharing animal records have been developed to assist with the establishment of written policies that best fit their own internal structure and protocols.

Animal and Collection Records – Definitions and Examples

The AZA Institutional Data Management Scientific Advisory Group (IDMAG) defines an animal record as: *“data, regardless of physical form or medium, providing information about individual animals, groups of animals, or samples or parts thereof”*. An animal's record may include, but is not limited to, information about its provenance, history, daily care, activities, and condition; some may originate in non-animal care departments. Some examples of animal records are:

- transaction documents (including proof of legal ownership, purchase contracts, etc.)
- identification information
- reports of collection changes (including in-house moves)
- pedigrees/lineages
- veterinary information, including images, test results, etc.
- nutrition and body condition information
- information on sampling and parts/products distribution

In addition, the IDMAG defines collection records as: *“information, evidence, rationalizations about an animal collection as a whole that may supplement or explain information contained in an animal record”*. Collection records may include, but are not limited to, documentation of collection decisions and changes, evidence of structural change at the institution, evidence of building name changes, and documentation of institution level or unit level husbandry protocols and changes. Some examples of collection records are:

- collection plans
- permits

- annual inventories (which include reconciliation with the previous year)
- area journals/notebooks (including information to/from/between other animal care staff)
- keeper reports
- animal management protocols (e.g., species hand-rearing protocols, special care or treatments, etc.)
- enclosure maps/trees
- enclosure/exhibit information (monitoring, maintenance, modifications, etc.)
- research plans and published papers

Animal and Collection Records - Development

It is recommended that each zoo and aquarium develop written policies and procedures, applicable to all staff involved with animal care, that:

- define the types of records that are required.
For example, daily keeper reports might be required from the keeper staff and weekly summaries of activities might be required from the animal curator and senior veterinarian.
- define the information that is to be included in each type of record.
Following the example above, the institution would state the specific types of information to be recorded on the daily keeper report and the weekly summaries.
- define the primary location where each record can be found.
For example, if a zoo does not employ a nutritionist, the policy or procedures might state that animal diet information will be found in keeper daily reports, curator-developed daily diets, and/or veterinarian-prescribed treatment diets.
- assign responsibility for the generation of each record type and set time limits for the their creation.
For example, keepers might be held responsible for producing daily reports by the start of the next day and curators might be held responsible for producing weekly summaries by the Tuesday of the following week.
- define a process to review the accuracy of each record type and assign responsibility for that review process.
For example, the identity of who will review each type of record, the date of reviews, and the review/correction processes might be included in the policy.
- define a process to identify official records and assign responsibility for the recording of, or linking of, information into these records.
For example, the identity of who will be responsible for placing information into the official records and the processes of how to identify official records might be included in the policy.
- ensure entries in official records are never erased or deleted.
For example, if an entry is determined to be erroneous, rather than deleting it, the entry should be amended and an audit trail should be created that identifies what data was changed, who made the change, the date it was changed, and the reason for the change.
- ensure records relating to specific animals in the collection, including the records of non--animal care departments, are permanently archived as part of the animal's record.
For example, if your zoo or aquarium's records retention schedules differ from this recommendation every attempt should be made to exempt these records from schedules requiring their destruction.

Animal and Collection Records – Sharing of Information

Each zoo and aquarium should assess the ownership of their animal and collection records and determine the rights of employees and outside entities to the information contained in them. It is recommended that each zoo and aquarium develop written policies and procedures for the distribution and/or availability of the animal and collection records that:

- identify who has access to animal and collection records and under what conditions.

For example, animal care staff whose duties require a direct need for information about specific animals or collection of animals should be identified as individuals who are allowed access to any or specified records, regardless of who created them or when they were created.

- assign responsibility for the distribution, archiving and retrieval of each record type.
For example, the recordkeeper or registrar might be held responsible for maintaining all past and current transaction documents and the curator might be held responsible for maintaining the daily keeper reports from his/her section.
- define a notification system that specifies what information will be provided in the notification, who will be notified, the date they will be notified by, and the mechanism that will be used to ensure the notification is communicated appropriately.
For example, the shipment of an animal might require that written notice be made to the senior keeper in the animal's area, the curator, and the veterinarian at least 30 days prior to the move, and identifies the animal by group or individual identification/accession number, sex, and tag/transponder number, etc.
- define where each record type (stored or archived) is available and what format (paper or digital) it is in.
For example, all original animal transaction documents might be kept in the registrar's office in fire-proof file cabinets but copies of the Animal Data Transfer Forms are kept in the appropriate keeper area.
- define a system for obtaining necessary information such that the information is available regardless of department and regardless of staffing issues
For example, keeper daily reports might be maintained in an electronic database run on the institution's network, to which all animal care staff members have at least read-only access.

Implementation of These Recommendations

Well-written, consistent data-recording protocols and clear lines of communication will increase the quality of animal records and should be implemented by all institutions, regardless of technical resources. While the best option for availability of information is an electronic database system run on a computer network (intranet) to which all animal care staff members have unrestricted access, the above recommendations may also be adopted by zoos and aquariums without full electronic connections.