

FROM THE ASHES:

IMPROVING THE SAFETY OF OUR ANIMAL FACILITIES

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In the early morning hours of 24 December 1995, fire destroyed the *World of Primates* exhibit at the Philadelphia Zoo, and 23 primates perished. When the building was originally constructed in 1985, smoke detection equipment was not required, primarily “because it housed only animals,” and all public viewing was from outside the building. At the time *World of Primates* was constructed, most Zoo buildings did not have smoke detection equipment, and at the time of the fire, detection equipment existed in less than 20% of all the Zoo’s buildings and in only one animal building.

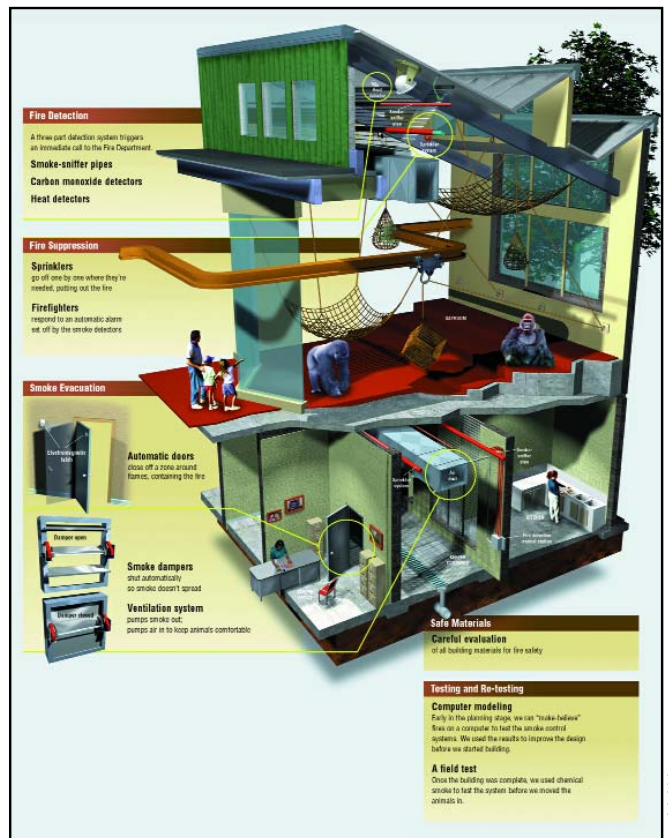
Immediately following the fire, there was a huge outpouring of support from the people of the region. The public support both emotionally and financially, as well as an investigation into the cause of the fire, caused the Zoo’s Board of Directors to focus on animal safety and set new standards to prevent such tragic events from ever unfolding again. The promise to rebuild and the strong desire to protect the rest of the animal collection also caused an industry-wide awareness of safety systems and procedures. The Zoo committed \$1 million to the immediate installation of smoke detection systems in animal buildings. It also created a new position, Director of Safety & Security, where only a Security Director existed before. The charge for the new position was to develop new safety programs. Zoo leadership then mandated the installation of smoke detection and fire protection devices in all main Zoo buildings and all animal buildings.

Less than five months after the fire, detection equipment was installed in eight buildings representing about 125,800 square feet or 46% of total building area. In another five months, the second phase of installation was completed, encompassing an additional 46,600 square feet. These first two phases were financed solely with Zoo funds and donations. Later, safety systems were installed with City funds through the Capital Programs Office. Just recently, the last of the fire detection equipment was installed. The remainder of fire protection equipment is currently in design and scheduled for installation during this calendar year. It took the dedication of the Board of Directors, countless staff hours and seven years to accomplish this milestone, but the Philadelphia Zoo is now, most likely, the best protected Zoo from fire in the world.

In the fall of 1996, nine short months after the fire, I gave a presentation at the Annual Conference of the then Aquarium & Zoo Maintenance Association hosted at the Saint Louis Zoo. I outlined the details of the incident and shared the experiences I had as a result of the fire—from helping to remove animal remains, to providing plans and information to fire investigators. It was a difficult presentation that elicited a strong emotional response. I closed with a challenge to my colleagues, stating that we have the responsibility to protect our captive animal collections.

Over the next year or two, many of my counterparts called me asking for advice on how to improve their facilities. Thinking about my challenge to the others, I could envision a time when zoos would have Aquarium & Zoo Facility Association (AZFA) accredited sites that met all the facility safety standards we could reasonably devise. I suggested to the organization that we consider the idea. There was considerable discussion about what a challenging undertaking it would be and the fact that AZA already had an accreditation process.

AZFA decided to approach AZA with our concerns and ideas in the hopes of building a solid relationship from which AZA’s current accreditation standards could be supplemented and supported. To that end, AZFA formed the Professional Relations Committee to get the message out about who we are, what we believe in and what we can do. Our relationship with AZA is blossoming, as evidenced by the appearance of this article in *Communiqué*. At this year’s AZFA conference in Pittsburgh, incoming AZFA President John Morgan formed an Accreditation Committee, on which I proudly serve. We don’t know exactly where we are going yet, but we do know that we want to achieve some important goals in cooperation with AZA. As our relationship with AZA continues to grow, it is my hope that the accreditation process for animal safety will grow also, enabling those of us entrusted with the care of our collections to protect them to the best of our ability. 🐼



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