

THE FIRST ARABIAN ZOO AND AQUARIUM ASSOCIATION (AZAA) CONFERENCE

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BACKGROUND

The idea of a Middle East Zoo and Aquarium Association has been spoken and discussed about by the zoo community for more than a decade. At various times individuals within the region have started the process but due to a various reasons, all failed to gain traction. This changed in 2012 when an initiative of Mr Ghanim Al Hajeri, Director General of Al Ain Zoo proposed the hosting of the first regional zoo and aquarium networking meeting from the 11-13 Dec 2012 The primary objectives of this meeting were:

- To bring together for the first time representatives from the major zoos and aquariums in the region to share their values and mission with each other.
- To establish a network in which everyone feels comfortable with communication and sharing of common ideas.
- To recognize that it is a distinct advantage to be part of a networking forum that gives strength to individual institutions as a member.
- To establish support and need of a regional zoo and aquarium association

This bold undertaking by Mr Ghanim was to be the catalyst in creating a regional working environment, under one roof with the sole purpose of establishing an agreement that a zoo and aquarium association in the Middle East would be a distinct advantage and have regional support. The 3 day meeting included presentations from regional zoos and aquariums and a facilitated workshop with discussion points that allowed for open dialogue amongst all delegates. The areas of focus were:

- Provide an opportunity for networking among zoo and aquarium professionals from the region for the first time.
- Begin a database of contact information for zoo and aquariums in the region.
- Learn about the region's zoos and aquariums.
- Describe what zoo and aquarium associations are and how they work.
- Demonstrate the benefits of a regional zoo and aquarium association or cooperative.
- Explain the process of gaining membership of a regional association or cooperative through the direct experiences of delegates
- Identify the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats related to establishing such an organisation in our region.
- If supported, plan the next steps needed to develop the initiative further.



Ghanim Al Hajeri, director of Al Ain Zoo, at the opening ceremony

Delegates arrived from Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Three international guest speakers from Switzerland, USA and Africa also arrived. These were:

- Dr. Gerald Dick – Executive Director of WAZA
- Dr. Sally Walker – Director / Founder Zoo Outreach Organisation and the South Asian Zoo Association for Regional Cooperation (SAZARC)
- Dr. Stephen Van Der Spuy – Executive Director African Association of Zoos & Aquariums

The historic meeting was official opened by Mr. Ghanim Al Hajeri, Director General, Al Ain Zoo who spoke about the importance of the meeting and how success could be achieved with cooperation from all delegates.

“We have an opportunity over the next few days to work together in reviewing what we have now and what we want in the future. To lay down the framework for a network of regional Zoos and Aquariums and in doing so promote and enhance all the reasons we meet here today for the long term responsible care and wellbeing of the animals we hold in trust”

At the final session a draft agreement was presented to all delegates. This agreement incorporated the positive comments and unanimous wish to be part of their own zoo and aquarium association. The agreement:

On this day 13th December 2012 at the 1st regional Zoo and Aquarium networking meeting hosted by Al Ain Zoo the delegates agree that:

A regional Arabian Zoo and Aquarium Association be established.

This organisation will communicate, collaborate and cooperate with its members the strengths and opportunities we all share.

We will share information about our animal collections for the benefit of these animals.

On return to our countries we will engage with our national institutions on a regular basis.

Al Ain Zoo is willing to provide office space and staff time to coordinate communication within the region and to establish a working group of members to move forward in the establishment of our Association.