

Orangutan SSP Spotlight



Name: Lori Perkins

SSP Job Title: Past Chair

Brief info about yourself: I was the Orangutan SSP Program Leader for 30 years! I've now moved on to chairing the Ape TAG, and I do not plan to be in that role for another 30 years! I am happy to have handed the reins to the very capable hands of Megan Elder – I know she will take the program to new heights and greater success.

Your job title (not SSP, but where you currently work at): Vice President, Canopy Strategic Partners

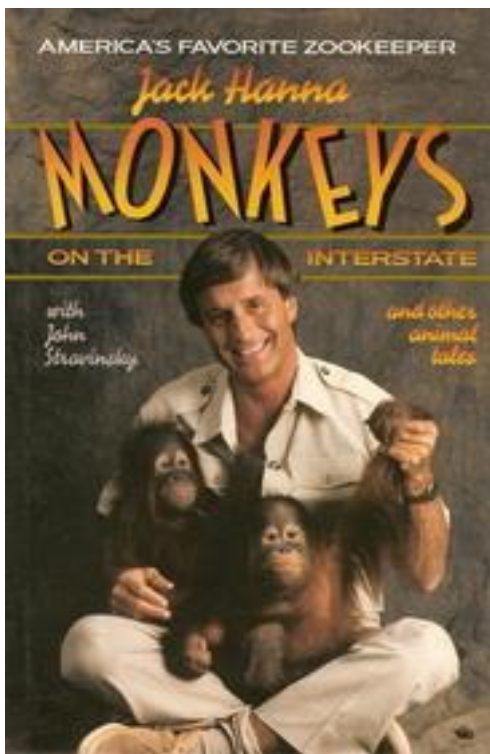
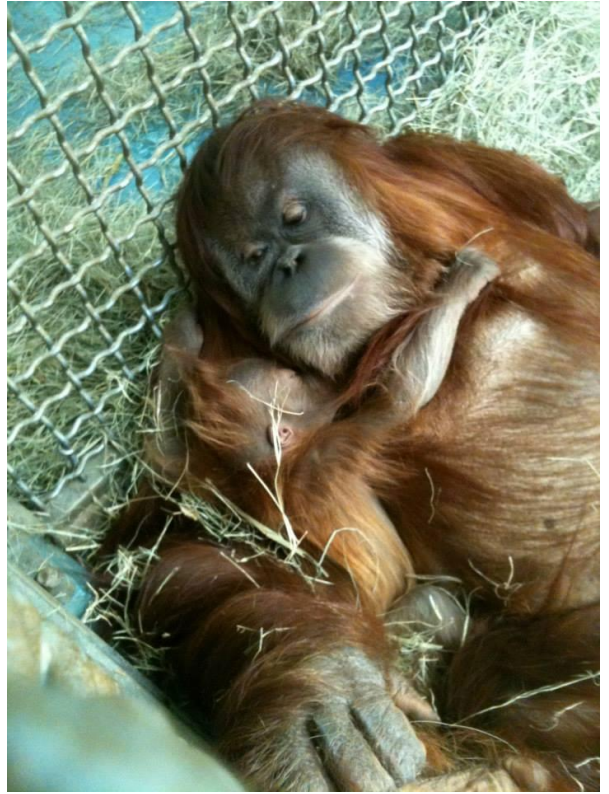


Your history with orangutans: I started studying orangutans for my master's thesis at Georgia Tech in the late 1980s. I've been hooked ever since!

What did you study in school, internships, volunteering, etc. that helped you get to where you are today? I started in the zoo profession as a graduate student studying ape behavior, and from there I developed a passion for the bigger picture of zoo operations. I've been fortunate to have had the opportunity to work in a very wide variety of zoo roles.

Why orangutans? I've always found them so compelling. They are self-contained, introspective, and patient, and I so admire those qualities. And they can also be giant goofballs, too, and their sense of humor is the final selling point! When I did my master's degree work, I was able to study more than two dozen orangutans in zoos across the southeast, and that solidified a lifelong fascination with them, and a concern for their future in the wild and their welfare in human care.

Best experience with orangutans: I think the best still has to be the day in 2013 when I was stationed in front of orangutan Blaze's indoor enclosure at Zoo Atlanta, positioning her son Pongo up close to the mesh to try to encourage the two to bond (which they ultimately did, beautifully and permanently, following Pongo's caesarian birth). Blaze was always wary of me, and I was therefore a little wary of her, too. I was sitting cross-legged very close to the mesh (probably too close, in hindsight), and since I had a 2-month-old in my lap and my legs crossed under me, I couldn't move quickly. After a minute or two, Blaze *rushed* at the mesh and jammed her forehead against the mesh and thrust her fingers out towards us. She scared me half to death, but since I couldn't move, I just sat there and looked at her. She was staring back at me, and kind of shoved her head at the mesh again, so I reached up and rubbed her forehead through the mesh. I couldn't believe she was letting me do that, but she kept her head there and then she focused on Pongo and squeaked at him and petted him through the mesh. From then on, whenever it was my shift with Pongo, Blaze and I would have our couple of minutes of buddy-time first, and then we'd get down to business with Pongo. It was such a special and moving moment, to have Blaze decide I was Good People.



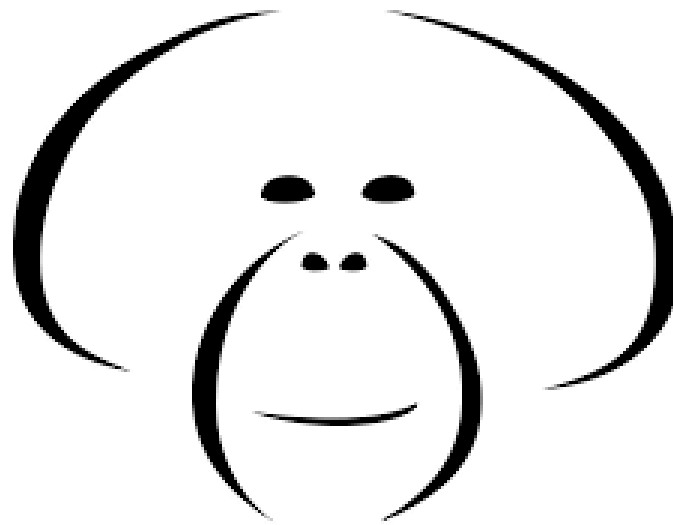
Worst experience with orangutans: That would undoubtedly be the time the female Amber, who now lives at the Louisville Zoo, yanked my shirt up over my head in front of a crowded bookstore audience. It's a long story, but way back in the 1980s when this sort of thing was not uncommon, I was invited to join a group at a book-signing at which two infant orangutans were present. My job was to hold Amber on a little stage and at the time I felt very self-important, and a little show-offy, being up on stage with this adorable little orangutan. My ego was quickly brought back down to earth when sweet little Amber grabbed the end of my blouse and yanked it up over my head, exposing me to the entire crowd. If you've ever tried to get a piece of fabric out of an orangutan's grip, you can imagine how long I was stuck there on display to the chuckling audience. I've met Amber once since then, as an adult at Louisville, and I swear she had a smirk on her face when she saw me ... This also counts as the worst

experience because of what we all now recognize to be the terrible message this sort of presentation gives, and the tremendous risk to animal welfare it poses. I'm glad that our profession has evolved away from condoning this sort of activity over the course of my time in the zoo world.

Biggest career accomplishment involving orangutans: I hope that I have left behind a strong, stable SSP population, and that I have been able to leverage that population to have made a real, lasting, and significant contribution to the survival of the species.



The most unique form of orangutan memorabilia you own: Oh, boy. I have a *lot* of stuff! Probably the most unique is this bizarre and kind of creepy tableaux that a Zoo Atlanta veterinarian found in his basement and gave to me. I live in the fear that it is going to come to life one day and I'll hear it softly typing, "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy" over and over again ... !



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