

THE GUIDE TO ACCREDITATION OF ZOOLOGICAL PARKS AND AQUARIUMS

2025

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2025 Guide to Accreditation of Zoological Parks and Aquariums

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NOTE: For the purposes of this Guide, the terms “institution” and “facility” are interchangeably used to refer to both Accredited Institutions and Accredited Related Facilities. For further clarification please contact AZA accreditation staff.

Spectrum of AZA-Accredited Institutions

To achieve AZA accreditation, each institution must *meet* AZA standards. Many institutions that receive AZA accreditation *exceed* AZA standards. Others may simply *meet* AZA standards. Thus, there is a broad range in the level of achievement among institutions accredited by AZA.

Introduction

If you're reading this booklet you most likely fall into one of three categories:

- You are considering AZA accreditation for your institution;
- Your institution is already accredited by AZA and is preparing to undergo the full process again at the end of the five year accreditation cycle;
- You're simply interested in learning more about AZA's accreditation process.

Whichever category fits you best, this booklet contains all of the information you'll need for understanding the accreditation process, why it's so important, and what the benefits are for the institution, the animals, the staff, the oversight agencies, and the visiting public.

AZA has been accrediting zoos and aquariums since 1974. To achieve and maintain AZA accreditation, zoos and aquariums must be judged as meeting or exceeding AZA standards by the independent AZA Accreditation Commission. Our standards are based on current scientific knowledge and the best practices and philosophies of the zoo and aquarium profession. We continuously revise our standards to assure they remain current. We possess the highest level of professional expertise in zoo/aquarium animal care and welfare, veterinary medicine, safety, conservation, education, and general operations. We recognize that good animal care begins with good planning, solid financial stability, and strong support, and our process evaluates finances, governing authorities, and support organizations in addition to animal programs. Our standards are recognized by national governing agencies as the “gold ring” for which all institutions should strive. All of our experts sign pledges of confidentiality and impartiality. Our 16 member Accreditation Commission oversees every case to assure a thorough, fair, impartial, and consistent process. We also have an enforcement process and accreditation is removed if standards are not maintained.

Achieving AZA accreditation isn't easy. It requires a strong commitment, patience, hard work, investment in facilities, and a holistic approach. Maintaining AZA accreditation requires a willingness to continuously move forward, to always strive for improvement, to revitalize the old and embrace the new, and to support safe and best practices. AZA accreditation is a perpetual process.

The Preamble to the AZA standards thoroughly describes the goals and purposes of AZA-accreditation for any institution considering undergoing the process—whether applying for the first time or the tenth. It follows on the next page.

If you have questions about the AZA accreditation process please contact us.

Preamble to the AZA Accreditation Standards

PREAMBLE

AZA Accreditation – PURPOSE

AZA accredited zoos and aquariums are complex operations with important goals. The highest goals of AZA accreditation include exemplary animal care and wellbeing, and inspiring guest engagement through effective education and conservation. AZA accreditation standards and requirements represent decades of modernization utilizing science, experience, and an unrelenting resolve to create environments where animals thrive, a positive and lasting impact on guests, and to conserve our world's wild animals and wild places.

The AZA Accreditation Program provides all zoos and aquariums the opportunity to examine, meet, or exceed the highest standards in the profession. The accreditation process combines internal (stakeholder) and external (peer-review) comprehensive assessment, resulting in the most scrutinized, specialized and dynamic organizations in the world dedicated to animal care and wellbeing, public engagement, education, and conservation and science.

Institutions successfully accredited by AZA must continuously demonstrate excellence in all areas of operations and regularly adapt to new and evolving standards.

AZA Accreditation – PROCESS

To achieve AZA accreditation, an institution requires extraordinary vision and leadership, and a comprehensive team effort to attain excellence in all areas of operations and management. The accreditation process begins when institutional stakeholders study and commit to the gold-level standards available under the accreditation tab at AZA.org. AZA accreditation requires full adherence to all standards on a daily basis. The core areas of self and peer evaluation include:

- **Animal Care, Wellbeing, & Management** (Excellence in Animal Care and Wellbeing)
- **Veterinary Care** (Excellence in Animal Health Care)
- **Education & Interpretation** (Innovation in Science and Conservation Education)
- **Conservation & Scientific Advancement** (Measurable Impact in Science)
- **Strategic & Master Plan** (Values, Goals, Plans, and Outcomes)
- **Governance** (Oversight, Ethics, and Community Leadership)
- **Finance** (Business Management and Accountability)
- **Staff** (Professional Team Development and Management)
- **Guest Services** (Quality Guest Amenities and Attraction Services)
- **Safety & Security** (Public and Animal Safety, Staff Training, and Preparedness)
- **Physical Facilities** (Quality Construction, Maintenance, and Design of all Facilities)
- **Support Organizations** (Internal Support and Partnerships)

(continued next page)

Understanding, engaging, and committing to the advancement of standards, practices, related policies and philosophies in all areas assessed by AZA through accreditation constitutes “modern zoological practices and philosophies”. These accepted best practices and philosophies define excellence in our profession, and are what distinguish AZA-accredited institutions from other institutions that have animals for guests to see and appreciate. The word “practices” represents the tangible while “philosophies” refers to an overall perspective.

Because of the many variations among institutions, the majority of AZA standards are carefully designed to be *performance* standards (i.e., assessing the level of achievement considered acceptable to fulfill a performance characteristic, and choice in method for meeting the goal). This differs from *engineering* standards, where exact and precisely prescribed steps are required to fulfill an engineering characteristic, with little or no variation in method for meeting the goal. AZA institutions may achieve performance standards in a variety of ways, but *all* standards **must** be met.

AZA Accreditation – PRODUCT

AZA accredited institutions are differentiated as exemplary facilities through the vigorous and voluntary commitment to shared high standards, achieving measurable goals, and continually pursuing outcomes that benefit animals, guests and communities. These standards include assuring excellence in animal care and wellbeing, conservation, education, and research. Accredited institutions house, display, present, and interpret all animals in their care in a manner that is respectful to the animal and that inspires appreciation for wildlife and nature, while prioritizing animal and human health and safety. Animals are housed and cared for in a manner that meets their social, physical, behavioral, and nutritional needs, with considerations for lifelong care. Meaningful conservation messages are integral components of exhibits and interpretation.

Distinguishing characteristics of an AZA-accredited institution include:

- Extraordinary focus on animal care and wellbeing*
- Modern facilities and practices for comprehensive veterinary care
- Scientific advancement in animal care and conservation
- Focus and participation to support sustainable animal populations
- Exhibit aesthetics and habitat studies, planning, and design
- Innovative and inspirational educational programs and experiences
- Excellence in guest engagement and effective guest services
- Economic development and community partnerships
- Professional staff development and training
- Comprehensive preparedness in public and animal safety
- Sound business planning and financial management
- Dynamic and mission-driven strategic and master planning
- “Raising the bar” and regularly advancing operational standards

***AZA zoo and aquarium standards support the premise of five opportunities to thrive. These tenets propose that animals: (1) receive nutritionally complete diets that bring out the natural feeding response and behavior; (2) are afforded comfortable living experiences with choice and control to promote mentally and physically healthy behaviors; (3) experience good physical health; (4) are provided quality spaces to live in with appropriate social groupings that promote natural, species-appropriate and motivated behavior; and (5) develop natural coping skills and avoid chronic stress.**

IMPORTANT NOTE: All AZA accredited institutions and related facilities must follow all local, state, and federal laws and/or regulations. Some AZA standards may be more stringent than existing laws and/or regulations. In such cases, the AZA standard(s) must be met.

Accreditation Commission

Mission Statement

The mission statement of the AZA Accreditation Commission is to establish, uphold, and raise the highest zoological and aquarium professional standards through self-evaluation, on-site inspection, and peer review.

Goals

Establish Standards For AZA Zoos And Aquariums

AZA standards are the current nationally recognized professional standards for zoos and aquariums. Through continual review and policy setting, they will remain contemporary.

Enhance Animal Wellbeing in Zoos And Aquariums

Earning AZA accreditation requires institutions to continuously assess, promote, and enhance animal wellbeing for all animals in residence.

Credential AZA's Standards As The Profession's Standards

The Accreditation Commission establishes and maintains professional standards through continuing review and revision; through training for consistent inspection; and through guidance provided to the profession and those we serve. It is imperative that regulatory agencies, governing authorities, international allied groups, etc. have the trust and confidence in our efforts to establish and maintain high standards, and that they be assured that institutions awarded AZA accreditation comply.

Encourage Member Institutions To Develop Superior Facilities

The holding of AZA-accreditation obligates institutions to continuously strive for superior facilities reflecting modern design and aesthetics. On occasion, the Commission is called upon to use its professional clout to encourage improvements. Our objective, third party position has been an effective tool to lobby local authorities to support member facilities. We encourage development of superior modern facilities through enforcement of accreditation standards, publication of professional information highlighting current best practices and philosophies, documenting trends, and raising professional expectations.

Support Non-member Institutions To Achieve AZA-Accredited Status

AZA mentors interested organizations that are not AZA-accredited to aspire to improve their facilities, philosophies, and practices, in hope of achieving AZA-accreditation in future years, providing whatever professional assistance is available.

Description of the Program, Objectives, and Scope

The Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA) is a professional organization representing zoological parks and aquariums, the majority of which are located in the Americas. Among its objectives, the Association strives to raise professional standards and to influence continuing development of superior zoological parks and aquariums, placing animal wellbeing, professional development and training, safety, and high quality guest engagement as top priorities.

Throughout their history, zoological parks and aquariums in the Americas have been governed according to varying objectives. Nevertheless, AZA believes that institutions maintaining exotic wildlife must recognize and accept their common goals and seek to advance them by adhering to professional standards for maintaining quality and performance [See "Preamble" appearing on pages 6–8 of this booklet.]

Credentialing Program Offered

AZA offers a single accreditation program with two types of membership:

- Institutional members (zoological parks and/or aquariums)
- Related Facility members (facilities that operate in supportive or similar roles to zoos and aquariums, but are not open to the public on a regular basis)

NOTE: For the purposes of this Guide, the terms “institution” and “facility” are interchangeably used to refer to both Accredited Institutions and Accredited Related Facilities. For further clarification please contact AZA accreditation staff.

Related Facilities vs. Institutions

Related Facilities are expected to achieve and maintain or surpass the same standards as Institution members. The Related Facility membership category requires that each facility be *inspected* and *accredited* before AZA membership can begin, or continue. The inspection and review process falls under the authority of the Accreditation Commission. Accreditation is required every five years, regardless of the membership category.

The accreditation process for Related Facilities is very similar to the accreditation process for Institutions, with subtle differences. In addition to not being open to the public on a regular basis, Related Facilities typically have slight differences in mission and scope from zoological parks or aquariums. However, Related Facilities must have conservation as part of their mission, and the overall mission must be aligned with AZA's. Related Facilities are bound by AZA's Code of Ethics, policies, and standards, just like accredited Institutions. When evaluating a Related Facility applicant, the Accreditation Commission and the inspection team use the accreditation standards as a basis for judgment (see the 2025 edition of the *Accreditation Standards and Related Policies* booklet). Most Related Facilities are not evaluated for habitat aesthetics and design, but are evaluated on such issues as enclosure size and furniture; enrichment items and programs; whether physical, social, and psychological needs are being met; acquisition, transfer, euthanasia and reintroduction practices, etc. Related Facilities that occasionally host a small number of guests by appointment only need not have an education program. However, facilities that have a *regular* flow of public guests and/or school groups (whether by appointment or not) should strive to have an education program, and that program should strive to meet accreditation standards. Like Accredited Institutions, Accredited Related Facilities are expected to embrace modern zoological practices and philosophies as basic tenets. If uncertain as to what may or may not apply, contact AZA Accreditation staff for clarification.

The Accreditation Commission

The Accreditation Commission consists of a Chairperson and eleven Commissioners who serve three-year terms. The terms are staggered to ensure continuity of service. In addition to the Chair and Commissioners, several (usually three) Advisors are appointed to serve without vote. Advisors serve one three-year term and expand the overall body of expertise of the Commission. The AZA Chair-Elect makes appointments to the Accreditation Commission and selects the Chair and Vice-Chair. Only Professional Fellows are eligible for appointment to the Commission. Appointees must have actively served as accreditation inspectors on, at minimum, three inspections, and must hold leadership roles at their institutions, and be considered as experts in their fields. Appointees must hold positions that focus on operations, animal wellbeing, care and management, or veterinary medicine. The responsibilities of the Accreditation Commission include developing standards and assuring they reflect current science; developing policy; evaluating all institutions undergoing the accreditation process; determining if an institution meets AZA standards; overseeing inspections, and; enforcing compliance with accreditation standards.

The Commission and its programs are managed and guided by the AZA Vice President of Accreditation

Programs. The Vice President, Accreditation Programs shall conduct all administrative business of the Commission, supervise accreditation staff, provide guidance on policy, maintain accreditation records, advise and consult with the Commission, Visiting Committees, and applicant institutions, and provide training as required. The Vice President, Accreditation Programs may accompany the Visiting Committee on inspections, and shall also assist the Commission Chair with Commission meetings.

History of AZA Accreditation

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| 1966 | Passage of the Animal Welfare Act |
| 1968 | AZA begins initial discussion on guiding overall improvements within the profession |
| 1971 | Committee formed to establish best practices in animal care and operations |
| 1972 | Accreditation is identified as best method for driving improvement |
| 1973 | Standards written and process developed |
| 1974 | First institution is accredited by AZA (accreditation is a voluntary process) |
| 1985 | AZA makes accreditation mandatory for institutional membership |
| 1986 | AZA membership decreases by 75% |
| 1990 | New standards added to original group |
| 1999 | AZA moves its accreditation headquarters to Silver Spring, Md. |
| 2006 | First review and revision of <i>all</i> standards as one document occurs and is scheduled for automatic five-year recurrence |
| 2007 | The Preamble to standards is first introduced |
| 2010 | Standards are reorganized and numbered |
| 2011 | The AZA Board of Directors votes to mandate protected contact for management of elephants in AZA-accredited facilities (requires full compliance by 2014) |
| 2011 | The automatic five-year review and revision of <i>all</i> standards as one document occurs |
| 2012 | Standards for elephant management and care undergo significant revisions in line with AZA's policy on restricted contact |
| 2012 | The requirement for drills is removed from being part of an "explanation" and created as a stand-alone standard |
| 2014 | Elephant care providers at AZA-accredited facilities must no longer share the same unrestricted space with elephants, except for certain, limited exceptions outlined in the Policy on Maximizing the Safety of Elephant Care Professionals. Facilities not fully ready by January 1, 2015 must obtain a variance while they complete any training and/or construction. No variances will be issued beyond 2018. |
| 2016 | The automatic five-year review and revision of <i>all</i> standards as one document occurs |
| 2016 | The number of AZA-accredited institutions reaches new high water mark since going mandatory (232 accredited institutions) |
| 2017 | Standards for the care and welfare of cetaceans are developed and approved. |
| 2018 | Any AZA-accredited facilities with elephants that were issued variances to finish training and/or construction must now be finished and in full compliance. |
| 2020 | Standards for elephant management and care undergo another round of significant revisions |
| 2023 | AZA's animal welfare evaluation process achieves the WAZA 2023 Animal Welfare Goal |

AZA's decision in 1985 to make accreditation mandatory resulted in a 75% decrease in membership that year as most institutions were not yet able to meet all of AZA's accreditation standards. Despite the drop in membership, AZA's willingness to take that bold step led to a rise in animal husbandry and care among serious zoological parks and aquariums in the U.S. as they began striving to reach the standards *required* for AZA membership and accreditation. AZA believes just as strongly today that assuring high standards of animal welfare, management, and husbandry is paramount to the overall welfare of living creatures, *and good conscience permits no higher priority.*

Benefits of Accreditation

Accreditation, no matter what field, is most important as an assurance to the public that an organization, institution, or program meets or exceeds the standards established by its profession. Overall, benefits include:

- Development of public confidence by means of a thorough, impartial, measured, and documented audit that establishes whether an institution meets or exceeds the current professional standards and best practices established by AZA
- Publicly recognized badge signifying excellence in, and commitment to, animal care and wellbeing, veterinary care, ethics, physical facilities, staffing, conservation, education, safety and security, finance, and supportive bodies
- Improvements in identified areas and a concurrent increase in cooperation and support from governing bodies and other organizations
- An indicator to private organizations, foundations, and governmental agencies in connection with contributions, grants, contracts, funding, permitting, and other areas
- Exempts institutions from certain government requirements [primarily at the state level];
- Representation, through AZA leadership, at the global level for meetings, discussions, and conferences involving international trade agreements and best practices for species conservation and management (CITES, IUCN, etc.)
- Promotes professional recognition by the top zoological parks and aquariums in the world that current professional standards are being met
- Promotes excellence within the institution by setting in motion continuous self-evaluation in light of ever-rising zoological and aquarium standards and best practices
- Helps distinguish institutions from “roadside collections” and the like
- Provides staff an invaluable opportunity to learn from other institutions and professional experts
- Fosters staff and community pride
- Significantly improves the ability to attract and retain a high quality, professional staff
- Membership in AZA
 - Access to animals from other AZA-accredited facilities for loan and/or breeding
 - Participation in all Species Survival Plans
 - Information and knowledge exchange (access to top experts and colleagues within the zoological and aquarium professions)
 - Access to AZA's Accreditation Resource Center
 - Reciprocity with public membership of other AZA-accredited institutions

Policies, Rules, and General Procedures for Applying

Key Points and Principles of Accreditation

1. Institutions are accredited based on what exists *at the time of the inspection and review*—not on future plans. In addition, how an institution has performed during the previous five-year accreditation cycle is also considered.
2. Achieving AZA-accreditation indicates that an institution is currently meeting accepted professional standards as established by AZA. The accreditation program notes, but does not evaluate or measure, the institution's level of achievement *beyond* that of established standards. The spectrum of institutions accredited by AZA range from those that meet AZA standards to those that far exceed AZA standards, thus there is a broad range in the level of achievement among institutions accredited by AZA.
3. Accreditation is based upon the informed *collective* judgment of 15 highly experienced individuals within the professional fields of zoo/aquarium operations, animal management/husbandry, and veterinary medicine (the Accreditation Commission). The Accreditation Commission, and its agents, shall determine if an institution is meeting standards and incorporating modern zoological practices and philosophies, and shall further determine if an institution meets AZA's definition of a zoological park or aquarium—a requirement for submitting an application. (See *Basic Definitions*, page 13).
4. The accreditation program is conducted in strict confidence, and by experts under oath to maintain impartiality (see *Impartiality*, page 19).
5. The granting of accreditation is for five years, and expires at the end of that period. To avoid a lapse in accreditation, institutions must successfully complete the full process again prior to the end of the five-year period.
6. The accreditation process is the same for all institutions, regardless of whether an institution holds accreditation at the time of application or is applying for the first time.
7. *At any time* during the five-year accreditation cycle, an accredited institution may be reviewed or inspected, and accreditation may be rescinded or granted on a provisional basis if an institution fails to maintain standards. (See *Follow-up Inspections*, page 46, and *Interim or Special Inspections*, page 47).
8. Once AZA accreditation is achieved, an AZA-accredited institution must continuously advance its professional operation, upgrade its facilities, stay abreast of constantly rising standards in all areas, and incorporate modern zoological practices and philosophies as basic tenets, or risk losing its accreditation. Successfully receiving AZA accreditation does not guarantee a facility will qualify again in five years when it next applies.

Basic Definitions

To apply for accreditation, facilities must: (1) operate based on philosophies and practices considered by AZA as being *modern best zoological practices* of the profession, (2) meet or exceed all AZA accreditation standards and adhere to all AZA policies, and (3) meet all aspects of either the definition of a zoological park or aquarium **or** the definition of a related facility.

For the purposes of AZA's accreditation program, a zoological park or aquarium is defined as: a permanent institution which owns and maintains wildlife, under the direction of a professional staff, provides its animals with appropriate care and exhibits them in an aesthetic manner to the public on a regular basis. The institution, division, or section shall further be defined as having as a core mission the exhibition, conservation, and preservation of the earth's fauna in an educational and scientific manner.

For the purposes of AZA's accreditation program, the Related Facility membership category is defined as: organizations holding wildlife that are not commercial entities, and are not open to the public on a regularly scheduled, predictable basis. The facility shall be under the direction of a professional staff trained in animal husbandry, and shall be further defined as having conservation and preservation as part of its mission—a mission that shall have a beneficial, tangible, supportive impact on the zoological and aquarium professions. This includes

wildlife ranches, wildlife refuges or rehab centers, research facilities, survival centers, conservation support facilities, and/or similar organizations.

Other Definitions

ACCREDITATION: The establishment and maintenance of professional standards and the qualitative evaluation of organizations in the light of those standards. Through this process a profession is judged based on criteria selected by experts in that field, rather than by outside agencies and/or individuals that are not actively employed in that field.

ADJACENT: Next to, close to, adjoining.

AESTHETIC: Pertaining to the beautiful.

ANIMAL WELFARE: An animal's collective physical, mental, and emotional states over a period of time, measured on a continuum from good to poor. Animal welfare refers to the science of animal welfare and is measurable using both input- and output-based measures. The science of animal welfare supports and informs our understanding of animal wellbeing (see "animal wellbeing" definition below).

ANIMAL WELLBEING: A state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy; achieved by AZA facilities giving animals lifelong opportunities to thrive. This is supported through: leadership, culture, and operations; science and innovation; expertise and passion; collaboration and sharing; engagement and communication; and our approach to the conservation of species and natural spaces. Wellbeing is a concept used to communicate the desire to provide an overall positive balance of comfort, health, and happiness to the animals in our care. Wellbeing, for the purposes of this document, is conceptual. This contrasts with animal welfare (see "animal welfare" definition above) which is a science and measurable. The science of animal welfare supports and informs our understanding of animal wellbeing.

AQUARIUM: Usually at least one public building which contains aquatic animals. However, the animals are usually split into numerous exhibits. [For full definition see *Basic Definition*, page 13.]

BREATH-HOLD DIVING: A diving mode in which the diver uses no self-contained or surface-supplied air supply.

CAMPUS PLAN: A written long-range plan that provides an organization with direction to develop or improve land, facilities, a building complex, etc.

CEO/DIRECTOR: The person with the authority and responsibility for the operation of the institution. Other titles may include president, chief executive officer, superintendent, supervisor, manager, etc.

CONSERVATION: Conservation is understood to be active stewardship of the natural environment, including wildlife, plants, energy and other natural resources.

CURRENTLY ACCREDITED APPLICANTS: Currently accredited applicants are those facilities that are AZA-accredited *at the time the application is submitted and processed*.

CURRENTLY UNDER REVISION: Policies within this document are continuously being revised as science moves forward and we continue to learn new and better methods. If a policy is currently being reviewed for updating (noted as Currently Under Revision) the current policy appearing in this booklet still applies, but the notation serves as a notification that the document is being reviewed and may be updated in future editions.

DANGEROUS VENOMOUS ANIMAL: A venomous animal capable of causing human harm requiring special treatment beyond standard first aid.

DEFENSIVE INTERVAL PERIOD: A financial metric indicating the number of days an entity can operate without needing to access long-term assets or additional outside financial resources.

DIVER: An employee (paid or unpaid) working in water using an apparatus (including snorkels) which supplies breathing gas at ambient pressure.

ENGINEERING STANDARDS: Standards that require exact and precisely measured steps to fulfill an engineering characteristic, with little or no variation in method for meeting the goal.

ENRICHMENT: A process to ensure that the behavioral and physical needs of an animal are being met by providing opportunities for species-appropriate behaviors and choices.

EXPLANATION: A component of the standard that provides additional details regarding the requirements of that specific standard.

GOVERNING AUTHORITY: The agency with authority to govern the operations of the institution (such as the city, county/provincial, or federal government body, private corporation, foundation, society, board of directors, or other similar entities).

INSTITUTIONAL COLLECTION PLAN (ICP): An ICP is a document designed to thoughtfully assess the reasons for having each taxon in the collection. The ICP must be updated on a regular basis (minimally every 5 years). The ICP should include a statement of justification for all species and individuals in the institution's planned collection.

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: Institutions located outside the United States may apply for accreditation under the same rules as those located within the United States. In some rare cases, processing of applications for international institutions may not be possible within the standard six-month time frame, and may require a year or more before the Commission hearing can be scheduled. In addition, the amount of the Visiting Committee deposit may be higher due to increased travel costs associated with inspecting institutions located outside of the United States (see *Fees*, page 18). If possible, AZA will assign an individual who is fluent in the applicant's native language to the inspection team for all international institutions, but the questionnaire and all *primary* materials submitted must be in English (see *Translation of Documents*, page 22). If AZA is unable to assign individuals who speak the native language, the institution is responsible for providing an interpreter. Brochures and other pre-printed materials must be accompanied by a translation. If you have any questions about this please contact AZA.

MASTER PLAN: See "campus plan" above.

MENTOR (PEER CONSULTANT): An individual deemed qualified and assigned by the Accreditation Commission to assist an AZA-accredited institution in addressing identified concerns or preparing for the AZA accreditation process. Non-accredited facilities, see Pathway Toward Membership below.

MODERN ZOOLOGICAL PRACTICES AND PHILOSOPHIES: Understanding, engaging, and committing to the advancement of standards, practices, related policies and philosophies in all areas assessed by AZA through accreditation constitutes "modern zoological practices and philosophies". These accepted best practices and philosophies define excellence in our profession, and are what distinguish AZA-accredited institutions from other institutions that have animals for guests to see and appreciate. The word "practices" represents the tangible while "philosophies" refers to an overall perspective.

NEW APPLICANTS: "New" applicants are those institutions applying for accreditation for the first time, or any institution that is *not currently AZA-accredited*, regardless of whether it has been AZA-accredited in the past. (See *Accreditation Preparation Tips*, page 19).

OCEANARIUM: Usually aquatic animals housed in several public buildings contained in a park setting. The exhibit scale is very large with other attractions/services scattered among the exhibits.

PATHWAY TOWARD MEMBERSHIP (PTM): PTM is a program for non-member facilities that are interested in preparing for and eventually undergoing the AZA accreditation process, and who wish to have a Coach assist them. As part of the program a Coach will be assigned by AZA to help the facility identify areas that need to be addressed, will review and help update policies and procedures, internal documents, record keeping, and all

areas involved in the accreditation and AZA membership process. The Coach can advise as to the facility's readiness, and can also provide guidance on assembling the application, if desired. Additional benefits are included with the program. Check with AZA's Membership Department for more information.

PERFORMANCE STANDARDS: Standards that measure the level of achievement considered acceptable to fulfill a performance characteristic, and choice in method for meeting the goal.

PERMANENT (cultural institution): An institution founded by an authority which intends it to continue indefinitely.

POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS ANIMALS: Potentially dangerous animals are those species that could likely cause serious injury or death to a human through attack, disease transmission, etc. While some species are obviously dangerous, the Commission acknowledges there is not complete agreement of potentially dangerous species among all zoo/aquarium professionals or regulatory agencies. Member institutions are expected to provide their own analysis and justification of the species they consider potentially dangerous in their collections and to demonstrate that appropriate procedures are in place to prevent harm to staff, guests, volunteers, etc. Institutions are encouraged to err on the side of caution in determining what species should be considered potentially dangerous.

PROFESSIONAL STAFF: A paid full-time employee who commands an appropriate body of special knowledge and has the professional training, experience and ability to reach zoological park or aquarium management decisions consonant with the experience of peers, and who has access to and knowledge of the literature of the field.

REGULAR BASIS: Regular hours, so that access is reasonably convenient to the public.

RELATED FACILITY: Organizations holding wildlife that are not commercial entities, and are not open to the public on a regularly scheduled, predictable basis. The facility shall be under the direction of a professional staff trained in animal husbandry, and shall be further defined as having conservation and preservation as part of its mission—a mission that shall have a beneficial, tangible, supportive impact on the zoological and aquarium professions. This includes wildlife refuges or rehab centers, non-invasive research facilities, survival centers, breeding farms, and/or similar organizations.” The Accreditation Commission, and its agents, shall determine whether a facility meets the definition of a related facility.

STRATEGIC PLAN: A written plan defining an organization's focused direction and core mission areas, including main goals and resources necessary to achieve these goals and strategic success.

SUPPORT ORGANIZATION: A subordinate or independent organization and non-governing entity, usually a public charity, one of whose primary purpose is to support through a formal agreement an accredited zoo or aquarium by performing mutually agreed upon functions such as fund raising, endowment, membership, education, guest services and public relations.

VENOMOUS ANIMAL: An animal which envenomates by biting, scratching, stinging, or direct contact, but not by ingestion.

WILDLIFE: Non-domesticated animal life.

WILDLIFE PARK: Animals maintained in a public park setting, usually in very large exhibits that include animals which are free-ranging within the exhibit.

ZOOLOGICAL PARK: A collection of animals which are housed in many public exhibits, both indoors and outdoors [for full definition see *Basic Definitions*, page 13.]

Summary of the Application Process

It takes approximately six months from the time an application is submitted until the Commission holds a hearing and makes its decision. If an application is tabled, or if provisional accreditation is granted, an additional

inspection is required, and it may take up to twelve months or more before the Commission makes a final decision.

The application process begins with the submission, at an established deadline, of a completed questionnaire/application. The completed questionnaire/application must be accompanied by a variety of supporting materials and is submitted in quintuplicate. *A sixth copy of the completed questionnaire/application should be maintained indefinitely on site for the institution's future reference and for the use of the Visiting Committee during the inspection.* An on-site inspection will occur approximately one to four months after submission of the application. At the conclusion of the inspection, the institution will be presented with a list of items that must be addressed to be considered in compliance with standards (the list of concerns). The inspection is followed by a hearing before the Accreditation Commission, scheduled at its next meeting. At that time, the institution's case will be discussed and a determination made whether to grant accreditation, grant provisional accreditation, table the application (new applicants only), or deny accreditation. *The Commission's decision will be based on what exists at the time of the inspection and final review—not on future plans. Also considered is the institution's record of performance during the previous five-year accreditation cycle.*

A detailed explanation of this process appears in the pages that follow.

Basic Information, Expectations, and Rules

Accreditation Resource Center

The Accreditation Resource Center (available on the AZA website at www.aza.org/accred-resource-center) is intended to serve as a tool in helping currently accredited AZA institutions (as well as new applicant facilities) to develop protocols, programs, and policies at their own institutions that, at minimum, are in line with accreditation expectations. The Resource Center contains numerous examples of institutional documents and policies that are required for AZA accreditation as well as guidelines and information that may be useful in developing and/or revising institutional programs and policies.

Accredited Institution Expiration Dates

Accredited institutions are expected to keep track of their own expiration dates (available on the AZA web site at <https://www.aza.org/inst-status> [aza.org → accreditation institution status → currently accredited zoos and aquariums], or by contacting AZA). Institutions will be reminded six months in advance of the deadline for submission of materials (twelve months in advance of accreditation expiration), but should not rely on this reminder as a method of tracking an expiration date.

Application Deadlines

March 1 and September 1. The Commission meets twice yearly [in March and September] to consider pending cases. Institutions wishing to have their cases heard in March must submit application packages *by September 1*. Institutions wishing to have their cases heard in September must submit application packages *by March 1*. Institutions closed during the winter may only submit application materials by March 1 for review during the September meeting. If the deadline falls on a weekend or holiday, the next regular business day immediately following shall be considered as the deadline. Please note that late applications will not be accepted. If you have questions about a deadline, please contact AZA. NOTE (currently accredited institutions): *Missing an application deadline will not be considered an acceptable reason for extension of accreditation, and may result in a lapse of current accreditation and AZA membership.*

Confidentiality

Information submitted to the Accreditation Commission by institutions as part of their accreditation application is held in *strict confidence*, and is made available to the following individuals only: •Accreditation Commissioners, •Commission Advisors, •Inspectors (Visiting Committee), •Vice President, Accreditation Programs (and accreditation staff), •AZA Executive Vice President. The following also have access, but typically do not view the

materials: •AZA President & CEO, •AZA Board of Directors. Each of these individuals is required to annually sign an *Oath of Impartiality & Confidentiality* to assure the overall integrity of the accreditation process. This procedural guarantee of confidentiality allows accrediting organizations access to restricted materials, and creates a safe platform for communication between the Commission and the inspection team with: the institution, the staff, and the public.

Conversely, the Commission will not disclose the names of any person(s) requesting confidentiality when providing information, verbally or in writing, about the institution. This includes staff, colleagues, and/or members of the public.

Distribution of the Final Report

The Final Report of the Visiting Committee to the Accreditation Commission shall be provided by the Accreditation Commission to the institution's CEO/Director, and to the institution's governing authority, only. Further distribution of that report is left to the sole discretion of the institution and/or its governing authority. The institution's CEO/Director will receive a copy of the complete report prior to the institution's hearing.

Early Submittals

Application packages may not be submitted any earlier than one month in advance of the deadline for which they are intended.

Enforcement of Standards

Institutions holding accreditation from AZA must maintain all AZA standards, and support AZA practices and philosophies during the period that accreditation is held. If AZA has evidence that this is not taking place, it will work with the institution to see that standards are met, or will take whatever action is appropriate to ensure the integrity of its process, including removal of AZA accreditation when deemed necessary.

Fees

A filing fee and a Visiting Committee deposit are both due at the beginning of the process, and *must be included with the application*. Filing fees are non-refundable once the official review process has started. If an institution withdraws its application before the official internal review has started, the fee may be refunded. The non-refundable filing fee is based on annual revenue (see below). For new applicants the filing fee also varies depending on whether or not the applicant is enrolled in the *Pathway Toward Membership* program (see below). If Visiting Committee expenses exceed the deposit, the facility will be invoiced for the balance; if less, a refund will be issued. Checks must be in U.S. dollars. Electronic wire transfers are also acceptable. Contact AZA for electronic transfer instructions.

Currently AZA-Accredited AND New applicants enrolled in the Pathway Toward Membership program and deemed ready to apply (not currently AZA-accredited):

Visiting Committee Deposit = \$2,000 (\$3,000 for International applicants)

| <u>Annual Revenue</u> | <u>Application Filing Fee</u> |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| < \$6 million | \$3,500 |
| \$6 – 19 million | \$4,500 |
| \$20 million + | \$7,000 |

New applicants NOT enrolled in the Pathway Toward Membership program and not currently AZA-accredited who wish to bypass the PTM program and apply for accreditation directly:

Visiting Committee Deposit = \$2,000 (\$3,000 for International applicants)

| <u>Annual Revenue</u> | <u>Application Filing Fee</u> |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|
| < \$6 million | \$10,000 |
| \$6 – 19 million | \$15,000 |
| \$20 million + | \$20,000 |

**Filing fees are non-refundable once the official review process has started. If a facility withdraws its application before the official review has started, the fee may be refunded. Checks should be in U.S. dollars and made payable to AZA. A single check is sufficient. Electronic wire transfers are also acceptable. Contact AZA for electronic transfer instructions. If Visiting Committee expenses exceed the deposit, the facility will be invoiced for the balance; if less, a refund will be issued.*

Impartiality

Accreditation or any thorough and accurate evaluation of an operation, no matter which field, must involve experts actually and currently employed within that field in order to assure that the extensive and explicit level of knowledge required for a rigorous examination is in place. At the same time, these professional experts must be strictly impartial in their judgments so as to assure and protect the integrity of the process. AZA takes great care to make certain that its accreditation process is based on the latest science, and its professional experts are selected based on required criteria and without bias, and act fairly and impartially. The process also requires all inspectors and members of the Accreditation Commission to sign oaths of impartiality annually. The fact that a group of 16 professional experts determine the outcome as a whole also helps to assure an impartial judgment in each case.

Accreditation Preparation Tips

It is advisable for first-time applicants (those institutions that have never gone through the accreditation process before) to be familiar with fundamental AZA philosophies and policies before applying directly for accreditation. It is recommended that the facility consider enrolling in the Pathway Toward Membership program where this information will be thoroughly provided. In some cases an assessment of suitability by AZA may be required prior to submitting an application for PTM (see *Assessment of Suitability* below).

Aspiring Accreditation Applicants Network. All not currently accredited institutions considering applying for AZA accreditation are encouraged to join the *Aspiring Accreditation Applicants* community on the AZA Network. The goal of this online networking group is to provide a platform for those working toward accreditation to ask questions, receive feedback, and share their experiences with each other throughout the process of preparing and applying for accreditation.

Assessment of Suitability. A basic requirement for submitting an application for AZA accreditation is that the applicant institution must meet the *basic* definition of a zoological park or aquarium **or** the definition of a related facility *appearing on page 16*. If an applicant or AZA is unsure that the facility meets one of these definitions, it is necessary that AZA conduct an on-site assessment in advance, before enrollment in PTM or submittal of an accreditation application may occur. Accreditation applications submitted by organizations that do not meet one of these definitions will not be accepted.

Requesting A Mentor (For Currently AZA-accredited Institutions and Related Facilities Only). While not a requirement, institutions currently accredited by AZA may request an official mentor approved by the Accreditation Commission before undergoing the accreditation process at the end of the five-year accreditation period. Even those institutions that believe AZA standards are being met should consider requesting a Commission-approved mentor for an independent opinion before undergoing the process again. Commission-approved mentors should be requested at least one year prior to submitting the application. The more time an institution has to work with a mentor, the greater the benefit. Mentors or “mock inspections” cannot be provided at the time of or after application submittal. Mentors may review agreements, contracts, procedures, and physical facilities in light of current AZA accreditation standards, and can identify areas and/or practices or policies that may need to be addressed before the official inspection takes place, and can even advise an institution in preparing its application. There is no fee for currently AZA-accredited institutions.

Requesting A Coach/Pathway Toward Membership (For Institutions NOT Currently Accredited by AZA). Under the direction of AZA’s Membership department, Pathway Toward Membership (PTM) is a program for non-AZA members that includes a Coach assigned to provide guidance to institutions seeking eventual accreditation

from AZA. Although PTM is not a membership category, it is a services agreement between AZA and non-AZA members preparing to submit an application for accreditation. In addition to providing an overall Coach, the program offers insight, advice and orientation to the policies and philosophies of AZA. It provides resources and support to participants during their journey toward readiness to undergo the AZA accreditation process. The Pathway Toward Membership program also helps build advocates and provides a mechanism for engagement in the Association. It is designed for zoological parks and aquariums and related facilities that are not yet accredited by AZA but are working towards AZA accreditation. Enrollment in the program includes accreditation coaching, a limited number of AZA membership benefits, discounts at AZA events, personal assistance at conferences, and other helpful tools for integrating into the AZA network and adopting AZA practices and philosophies. Enrollment in the PTM program is not a requirement, but enrollment is required to receive a Coach. There is an annual fee for enrollment in this program, and it is expected that institutions enroll and participate for a minimum of 1 to 5 years (or until the Coach indicates that the candidate is ready) before applying for accreditation. The annual fee is tiered, based on each facility's annual revenue. Institutions that do not wish to enroll in the Pathway program and prefer to go straight to applying for accreditation may do so, but will be required to pay a significantly higher filing fee than institutions that are already AZA-accredited or are enrolled in the Pathway program. Contact AZA's Membership department for more information about this program. [NOTE: Enrollment in the Pathway Toward Membership program does not guarantee that a facility will be granted accreditation. Accreditation can only be achieved by a judgment from the AZA Accreditation Commission that the applicant facility meets or exceeds all AZA standards and operates in accordance with AZA practices and philosophies.]

Some helpful things to remember when applying for accreditation [many of these things may be provided automatically to new facilities that choose to enroll in the *Pathway Toward Membership* program]:

- Encourage at least one staff member to become an individual member of AZA in order to gain access to important member benefits such as the Accreditation Resource Center (See *Accreditation Resource Center*, page 17).
- Join the *Aspiring Accreditation Applicants* community on the AZA Network (for not currently accredited institutions).
- Thoroughly read the **current** edition of the “*Accreditation Standards and Related Policies*” booklet.
- Thoroughly read the **current** edition of the “*Guide To Accreditation of Zoological Parks and Aquariums*” (this booklet). Most questions about the process are answered within.
- Make sure that the annual edition of the materials you use to apply *matches* the year in which you submit your accreditation application.
- When ready to apply, follow the instructions for assembling the application as contained in this booklet (page 21).
- When completing the application be sure to answer every question and attach required items.
- If you have any questions about assembling the application or other related topics please contact AZA Accreditation staff.
- Utilize the Commissioner (or Commission Advisor) assigned to your institution as Primary Reviewer as a resource before, during, and after the inspection.
- Participate in AZA through individual membership, attendance at conferences, training and/or professional development courses, and reading publications so as to thoroughly familiarize your institution with fundamental AZA philosophies, policies, and best practices. Added focus should be given to those pertaining to animal management, exhibits (size, habitat, furniture, and aesthetics), and safety.
- While future plans are important and are considered in the overall picture, the final decision to grant accreditation *will be based on what exists at the time of the inspection and final review—not on future plans.* Also considered is the institution's performance during the previous five-year accreditation cycle.
- Make sure to address all items on the List of Concerns received at the end of the inspection. Address as many as possible *prior to the hearing*, and be prepared to show timelines, contracts, etc. for those items that are not complete.

- If accreditation is denied or granted on a provisional basis (or if a new application is tabled), it should not be viewed as failure. In preparing for the process many improvements have been achieved, and your institution should continue on that path, though the goal has not yet been reached. Use the process as a map for moving forward. Keep working on the List of Concerns with your Coach (if enrolled in Pathway Toward Membership). If you did not enroll in Pathway Toward Membership the first time around, consider whether having a Pathway Coach might be helpful. AZA wants your institution to succeed and will help as much as possible, but continuing the positive forward momentum towards meeting all standards is hugely important, and is driven by you.
- Remember, all institutions that receive accreditation are expected to maintain accreditation standards *every day throughout the five-year period* of accreditation. While AZA accreditation inspections take place every five years, colleagues who visit (formally or informally), and members of the public do notify us if problems are perceived. If deemed appropriate, the Commission may conduct an interim inspection. Accreditation can be rescinded at any time if the Commission concludes that accreditation standards are not being consistently met and maintained (See *Complaints*, page 45, *Follow-up Inspections*, page 46, and *Interim or Special Inspections*, page 47).
- Remember that communication amongst your staff is critical. Work as a team to prepare the application materials, conduct internal mock inspections, prepare for the inspection, participate in the inspection, and address any concerns noted by the inspection team. Involve staff at all levels, and be appreciative of all of the work each individual contributes to the process.
- Do not be afraid to make significant changes to policies and procedures. Just because something has always worked does not mean it is the best or most efficient way to do it. Change can be intimidating but positive results are very rewarding.
- Use the entire accreditation process as a tool for positive growth. Although the process can be difficult, challenge your staff to come up with innovative ways to improve your institution. Have fun with it!

Assembling the Application Package

Please contact AZA Accreditation staff if unclear about any of these instructions.

Improperly Assembled Applications

Please read these instructions and follow them carefully. Improperly assembled or incomplete applications will be returned to the applicant and may result in an inability to continue on the processing schedule needed to avoid a lapse in accreditation and AZA membership.

Preparing The Application On Flash Drive

All applications must be submitted in electronic format on a USB flash drive in accordance with instructions contained in this section of the booklet.

Five sets of the completed application must be submitted to AZA by the required deadline. It is recommended that an additional copy of the completed flash drive be maintained by the institution for reference in coming years.

Assembly

When finished, each institution should submit one package containing five copies of the flash drive. Each flash drive should be placed in a separate envelope labeled with the institution's name. The package should also include five sealed envelopes containing salary information in hardcopy, if desired *[Note: this option is available if an institution does not wish to place salary information on the electronic flash drive. "For profit" operations also have the option to make complete salary information available to the Visiting Committee for review during the inspection.]* One printed hardcopy of the application questionnaire signature page (with original signatures) must also be included in the package.

The application questionnaire must be contained in electronic form on the flash drives, and must be linked to attachments in accordance with instructions below. [NOTE: if you are unable to link the questionnaire to

attachments after following the instructions below, please contact accreditation staff.]

Answering Questions On The Application Questionnaire

When completing the application questionnaire, applicants are required to include carefully considered statements of purpose to provide the Commission with a clear understanding of each institution's objectives. For example, the mere statement that an institution was established to exhibit animals to the general public will not be sufficient. It is also helpful to the Commission to know the reason(s) a new applicant institution is seeking accreditation.

Translation of Documents

The application and all required attachments *must* be submitted in English. Animal records and extremely lengthy documents do not need to be translated to English for the purpose of the application questionnaire, but they must be included in the application nonetheless where requested. An interpreter must be provided on-site for the AZA inspection team to answer questions and to translate portions of documents (including animal records) for the team as requested during the inspection.

Naming Files

All required attachments *must* be included. Materials must be provided electronically, and linked to the application questionnaire. Files should be named according to the question to which they pertain, for example, the electronic file of an institution's *Institutional Collection Plan* should be named "AC-3 ICP". Other examples include "VC-10.a. Restraint Protocol", "C-2 Conservation Plan", and "EI-10 Interpretive Program".

Acceptable Formats for Attachments

Acceptable formats for submittals on flash drive are *Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, Adobe Acrobat (PDF), Power Point, and JPEG*. If you desire to use a format not listed here, please check with AZA accreditation staff first to be certain it is acceptable. The application questionnaire itself should be submitted in the form of a Microsoft Word document only.

Instructions For Creating Hyperlinks Within Your Application Questionnaire Using Windows Explorer

[NOTE: if you are unable to link the questionnaire to attachments after following these instructions, please contact accreditation staff.] The flash drive must contain the application questionnaire and all attachments. Institutions must link each attachment to the "See flash drive" box appearing on the application questionnaire itself. Instructions for doing so follow.

[NOTE: It is recommended that the questionnaire be filled out in its entirety before adding the hyperlinks. The check boxes within the questionnaire can only be filled out when the document is protected/locked, whereas hyperlinks can only be added when the document is unprotected/unlocked (see step 3 below for instructions to do so). Therefore, it is easiest to fill in all check boxes and then go back and create all hyperlinks.]

1. Create a folder on your computer that contains the completed application questionnaire and all attachments (named according to the question to which they pertain; see "Naming Files" above).
2. Open the completed application questionnaire.
3. Unprotect/unlock the document using the word: **Tornado** (case sensitive)
 - a. Microsoft Word 2003: Click on the **Tools** tab at the top of the page. Scroll down to "Unprotect Document." Enter password. Click **OK**. Document is now unlocked and hyperlinks can be added.
 - b. Microsoft Word 2007 or later: Click on the **Review** tab at the top of the page. Click on **Restrict Editing**. Click **Stop Protection**, located at the bottom of the shaded box. Enter password. Click **OK**. Document is now unlocked and hyperlinks can be added.
4. When you come to the first question in which you need to create a hyperlink (for example **GI-5**), highlight

the words **See flash drive** at the appropriate question, then right click and choose **Hyperlink**.

5. Choose the attachment that corresponds to the question.
 - a. Microsoft Word 2003: Choose **File** on the right hand side of the dialogue box. A second box should open that shows the files available on your computer. Double click on the file that you would like to link.
 - b. Microsoft Word 2007 or later: Use the **Look In** box to find the file that you would like to link. Once found, highlight the file and click **OK**.
6. Once linked the item should be underlined and in a different color. Click on the link to be sure it works. You may need to hold down the Control button on your keyboard as you click the link.
7. You can also link an entire folder that contains several individual documents needed to answer a single question. For example, **F-9** under the **Finance** section asks for information regarding capital improvement projects that have taken place over the past 5 years. Perhaps you have one folder titled **Improvement Projects** and within that folder you have separate documents for each year. In this situation, rather than selecting a single file to link, highlight the entire folder and click **OK**.
8. Once all hyperlinks have been inserted you should again protect/lock the document. Use the same instructions as you did to unprotect/unlock the document, except now click "Yes, Start Enforcing Protection." You will be asked to create a password. Please use the same case sensitive password (**Tornado**).
9. Once you have reviewed the entire application questionnaire, linked all the necessary documentation, and checked that the links open, be sure to save the document. You can then close the document.
10. Now it is time to copy and paste the entire application folder (including questionnaire *and* all attachments) to a flash drive. We recommend trying out the uploaded flash drive on a different computer from the one you tested it on to be sure that all of the links still open, before proceeding with making the remaining four copies.
11. **See "Assembly" (page 21) for final compilation of application package.**

Shipping

Upon completion, five copies of the fully assembled application should be sent to AZA, addressed as follows: Accreditation Programs, AZA, 8403 Colesville Road, Suite 710, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910. **It is important that a signature not be required upon delivery.**

Accreditation Processing at a Glance

[listed in order of occurrence; times of occurrence are approximate]

Prior to Application Submittal:

- **Visiting Committee Selection Process Begins.** An institution may not select the members of its Visiting Committee. The institution's CEO/Director receives notification of the proposed Visiting Committee for review and approval. The CEO/Director is expected to review the list and may eliminate the names of any individuals for which they perceive a potential conflict. If any names are eliminated by the CEO/Director, additional names will be substituted for approval. Once approved, AZA will then contact team members for availability.
- **Primary Reviewer Is Assigned.** The Primary Reviewer is a member of the Accreditation Commission, or a Commission Advisor, who is assigned to the case and receives a complete set of the institution's application materials. This individual serves as chief examiner on behalf of the Commission and also works in conjunction with the Visiting Committee. As a member of the Accreditation Commission the Primary Reviewer is present at the institution's hearing. In the case of *new* applicants the Primary Reviewer automatically serves as Chair of the Visiting Committee, and may occasionally do so for *currently accredited* institutions as well.
- **The Visiting Committee Is Assembled.** Assembling the inspection team may take several weeks to complete, depending upon how quickly we receive approval of the proposed Visiting Committee from the

institution's CEO/Director, and how quickly the selected individuals respond when contacted. If all team members from the initial list proposed cannot be confirmed, additional names will be provided for approval. In some cases the Visiting Committee may not be finalized until after the application is submitted. For institutions that have been inspected in the past, an inspector from a previous team will be selected, *if available*. For *new* applicants, the Primary Reviewer automatically serves on the Visiting Committee. As soon as a complete team is confirmed, the institution's CEO/Director will be notified by email. [NOTE: for more information on how inspectors are selected see *Criteria For Selection of the Visiting Committee*, page 31.]

- **The Inspection Is Scheduled.** Upon confirmation of the team, the inspection will be scheduled by the Chair of the inspection team in consultation with the institution's CEO/Director and the members of the inspection team. In some cases this may not occur until several weeks after the application is received. Once dates are selected, the institution should provide the team Chair with information for accommodations at a nearby hotel. Team members may then contact the hotel to make reservations, or the institution may choose to make these arrangements for the team. That decision is left to the preference of the institution, and the CEO/Director should inform the team Chair as to the institution's preference at the time the dates are finalized.

Upon Application Submittal:

- **Application Package is Checked for Completeness.** Accreditation staff will review the application materials for completeness and proper formatting. If improper formatting is used or if any information is determined missing you will be contacted right away.
- **The Inspection Agenda is Confirmed.** Once dates are selected, the inspection agenda will be finalized by the Chair of the inspection team in consultation with the institution's CEO/Director and the members of the inspection team. The Chair will provide a list of individuals (staff, members of the governing authority, members of the support organization, and/or volunteers) to be interviewed by the inspection team, and meetings will be scheduled. Transportation to and from the zoo and any offsite facilities will also be discussed.
- **Application and Materials are Reviewed.** Following initial review of the application package for completeness, accreditation staff will distribute application materials from the institution to individual inspection team members and to the Primary Reviewer. These individuals will begin a thorough study of the application in preparation for the inspection and as part of the overall evaluation of the institution.

At the Time of Inspection:

- **The Inspection Occurs.** Typically, most inspections take place two to four months following application submittal.
- **The List of Concerns is Generated.** At the conclusion of the inspection the inspection team generates the List of Concerns and delivers it to the institution's CEO/Director during the exit interview.
- **The Institution Begins Addressing the List.** The institution should begin addressing the List of Concerns as soon as it is delivered.

Following the Inspection:

- **The Inspection Report Is Submitted.** As soon as the inspection team finishes its inspection, it begins writing its full report to the Accreditation Commission. That report is submitted to accreditation staff for initial review, and then distributed to the Accreditation Commission.
- **The Institution's Written Response to the List of Concerns Is Submitted.** The institution must submit a report informing the Accreditation Commission of progress made addressing the List of Concerns, including documentation. That report is submitted to accreditation staff and is then distributed to the Accreditation Commission.
- **The Accreditation Commission Conducts Initial Review and Evaluation.** The Commission evaluates all information received from the inspection teams, the institutions, and accreditation staff.
- **The Institution Receives A Copy Of the Inspection Report.** The institution will receive an electronic copy of the full inspection report one to two weeks prior to the hearing.
- **The Institution's Hearing Takes Place.** The institution appears at its scheduled hearing before the

Accreditation Commission to discuss further progress made addressing the List of Concerns and to provide the Commission an opportunity to ask any questions it may have. Following the hearing the Commission makes its decision and the institution is informed.

- **The Institution Receives An Official Letter Reiterating Outcome.** AZA will provide a letter, as quickly as possible after the hearing, reiterating the outcome, and outlining additional action required, if any.
- **Accredited Institutions Receive Plaque.** A plaque denoting the institution's accreditation is delivered, and presentations are made or scheduled if requested by the institution.

The Inspection

Overview

During the inspection, the Visiting Committee is acting on behalf of the Accreditation Commission and the Board of Directors. Inspectors will usually tour the grounds and facilities as a group, and individually return to areas of particular interest or expertise thereafter. During this time they interview staff members, view records, and make note of positive and negative impressions. During the site visit, the team will also meet with members of the governing authority and key personnel. The full cooperation of the institution's staff will greatly assist the process. Inspections are generally conducted in two to five days.

NOTE, currently or previously accredited applicants: it is important to understand that any concerns identified in past AZA inspections that remain present will be considered particularly serious and indicative of potential issues such as lack of progress, slippage, failure to maintain standards, and/or lack of commitment and/or funding to address concerns. The outcome of the case may be affected.

NOTE, all applicants: should the inspection team have a concern regarding the wellbeing of any animal at the institution, it will be considered a *priority* issue.

Advance Notice

Ask the inspection team chair to communicate any concerns noted during the inspection that could potentially be addressed while the team is still on grounds. Address those concerns if possible, and present documentation at the exit interview.

Gifts

Members of the Visiting Committee may not accept any gifts or privileges offered by the institution.

Inspectors' Expenses

The applicant institution bears the expenses of the Visiting Committee. Every effort will be made to hold expenses to a reasonable minimum. AZA reimburses the inspectors directly and, as soon as all inspectors have submitted expense reports, the applicant institution will either be invoiced by AZA for the total amount due, or refunded the unused balance from the Visiting Committee Deposit. Reimbursable expenses are food, lodging, transportation, parking, postage, and any reasonable expense directly associated with the inspection. In general, flights are covered at Economy rates. Flights over six hours in duration (single legs, not total trip duration) are covered at Premium Economy (or equivalent) rates. Business Class and First Class tickets are not refundable unless under special circumstances and with prior approval from AZA staff. If an inspector elects to purchase a Business Class or First Class ticket for flights under six hours in duration, they are responsible for the difference in cost between the purchased ticket and the Economy or Premium Economy (depending on flight duration) rate ticket. For extremely long trips that do not allow inspectors sufficient time for rest prior to the start of the inspection (e.g., lengthy intercontinental trips), one additional night's hotel stay at the front-end of the inspection may also be reimbursed. If an inspector-in-training (shadow) accompanies the Visiting Committee on the inspection, all expenses incurred by the trainee are the sole responsibility of the trainee or their employer. The applicant institution shall share no burden of the shadow's expenses. [see also *Inspectors In Training (Shadows)*, page 33.]

Inspector Accommodations

If the applicant institution wishes to make lodging reservations on behalf of the Visiting Committee, accommodations must be at a local hotel or motel that, at minimum, has dining facilities and a lobby, is in a safe area, and is comfortable and clean. If an inspection team arrives and deems this is not the case, the applicant institution must move the team to better facilities.

Interviews

An opportunity for the Visiting Committee to interview staff *in confidence, without supervisors or management present*, must be provided. The Visiting Committee will select the individuals to be interviewed. The Committee will also interview members of the institution's governing authority at some point during the visit.

Media Coverage

It is inappropriate to schedule media coverage during the inspection. If local media wishes to interview inspectors, the institution should arrange an appropriate time *outside of the scheduled inspection process* for a member of the team to serve as spokesperson. Inspectors may speak only of the accreditation process *in general*, and *not* about the specific case.

Private Work Area

A dedicated workspace must be made available to the Committee while it is on site. The Visiting Committee members need ample time and space to discuss, in private, various aspects of the institution's operation, review their reports, and to compile the final List of Concerns prior to the exit interview with the CEO/Director.

Records

All records of the institution must be readily available and staff members must be on hand to answer any questions posed by the inspectors.

Social Events

While it is helpful for the applicant to arrange for a luncheon or dinner so that the Visiting Committee can meet staff members and members of the governing authority, the Visiting Committee should not be expected to participate in social functions beyond those required for the orderly discharge of its duties and responsibilities.

Visiting Committee's Written Report to the Commission

In the weeks following the inspection, the Visiting Committee (inspection team), under the direction of the Chair, shall prepare a full written report for the Commission. That report, as well as the List of Concerns presented to the institution during the exit interview, shall be submitted to the Commission for review and formal action at the institution's scheduled hearing. The report provides insight regarding the Visiting Committee's impression of the facility, its operations, and the care provided its animals. Applicant institutions shall receive a copy of the full Visiting Committee Report one to two weeks prior to the scheduled hearing before the Commission (see also *The Hearing*, page 28).

Conclusion of Inspection

Exit Interview

The inspection shall conclude in an exit interview with the institution's Director or CEO. [NOTE: It is *strongly recommended* that the institution's Director or CEO be present for the exit interview. However, should unavoidable circumstances dictate, the CEO/Director may designate a representative to meet with the Visiting Committee.] The CEO/Director may have staff present at the exit interview. During the exit interview, the Visiting Committee will discuss the general impressions (positive and negative) formed by the team during the inspection.

The institution's accomplishments will be discussed along with the list of *major* and *lesser* concerns that must be addressed for the institution to be considered in compliance with standards.

List of Concerns

During the exit interview, the Committee shall provide the CEO/Director with a written list of any items found to be of concern (this list shall also be provided to the Commission as part of the written report). The list will include both *major* concerns and *lesser* concerns, and those carrying forward from previous inspections (if any). *[NOTE: It is important to understand that should there be items carrying forward from previous inspections, these will be of particular concern to the Accreditation Commission.]* Also, concerns directly related to animal wellbeing (if any) *require priority response*. An institution should strive to address as many items on the list of concerns as possible prior to the hearing before the Commission. However, consideration will be given to the amount of time an institution has between the exit interview and the hearing, and the amount of time believed reasonable to complete each concern. Items that cannot be completed prior to the hearing should be covered by an action plan with estimated completion dates.

Add-ons To The List of Concerns Post Inspection: The Visiting Committee (inspection team) is an arm of the Accreditation Commission. There are occasions, however, in which *concerns are identified by the Accreditation Commission in the complete report of the Visiting Committee that were not included on the List of Concerns. When this happens, the institution will be notified by Accreditation staff and provided with an addendum to the original List of Concerns. The institution will be expected to address these concerns in a reasonable time frame, but will not need to redo its written response to the original list if it has already been submitted. The Accreditation Commission may ask questions regarding all concerns during the hearing.*

Appealing A Concern

If an institution disagrees with any of the items cited by inspectors on the List of Concerns, the CEO/Director should discuss this with the Visiting Committee (inspection team) during the inspection and/or exit interview. If the matter is resolved at that time to the satisfaction of the Committee the concern may be modified or removed altogether.

If the matter cannot be resolved at that time, or if the CEO/Director decides later to question an item on the List of Concerns, the CEO/Director should address the issue in the written Response to the List of Concerns (see "Written Response to the List of Concerns" below) as follows: under the item in question, the CEO/Director should explain in detail why the item is being questioned and how the institution is meeting the standard at issue, being sure to include documentation. The Accreditation Commission will thoroughly review the institution's Response to the List of Concerns prior to the institution's hearing, and will make a decision as to whether the item may be removed from the List of Concerns or must remain a concern to be addressed by the institution. The Commission will make its final determination at the time of the hearing.

Written Response To the List of Concerns

Upon receipt, the institution should begin immediately addressing the List of Concerns. In addition, the institution must supply the Accreditation Commission with a written response to the List of Concerns prior to the hearing. The response must be submitted by the deadline set by AZA Accreditation staff (typically 5–7 weeks before the hearing). The purpose of the written response to the list of concerns is to provide information to the Commission in advance so that, at the hearing, the institution's CEO/Director *need only report on additional progress made since the response was submitted*. The response should list each concern, followed by a description of how that concern is being addressed. **The response must include documentation (photos, copies of contracts, agreements, policies, etc.).** The response should be submitted by e-mail in electronic format, *including all attachments and photographs*. Photos may be embedded in the written response document where appropriate or submitted separately on flash drive or via an electronic file sharing service if too numerous to submit by e-mail. *NOTE: Failure to have taken corrective measures, or to present solid plans for doing so, will affect the outcome of the case.*

Updates to the Written Response To the List of Concerns

It is not necessary to send updates to the written response once it has been submitted to AZA. As the members of the Accreditation Commission prepare for upcoming hearings, they will likely not have time to read updates. Instead, when the institution's hearing begins, the Commission Chair will ask the CEO/Director to provide *verbal* updates on additional progress made since the written response was submitted. If he/she wishes to bring photographs documenting the additional progress, these should be limited to essential only (bring two copies: one for each side of the table). Please do not bring notebooks or large numbers of reports, photographs, and other documents to the hearing. Written updates and documentation *should be emailed to AZA staff* and will be placed into the institution's file once the hearings are completed.

Inspection Evaluation Form

Each applicant is provided an opportunity to evaluate the overall process and the Visiting Committee's effectiveness at the conclusion of the process. The Accreditation department will e-mail the institution's CEO/Director a short evaluation form requesting input regarding the overall process and the performance of the Visiting Committee. Returning the form is optional, but helps the Commission to better evaluate the effectiveness of the overall process. Information contained in the form shall be shared with the Commission and may be shared with the Visiting Committee to assist them in enhancing their performance in future inspections.

How to Prepare for the Accreditation Hearing

Preparing For The Hearing

Approximately *eight weeks* prior to the Commission's meeting, the institution's CEO/Director will be notified regarding the exact date, time, and location of the institution's hearing. The complete Visiting Committee Report, including the written narrative, will be provided to the CEO/Director via email one to two weeks prior to the hearing. The material in the report is *final*, but if there are any questions or concerns about the content, that information should be provided in writing and emailed to AZA accreditation staff *after* the hearing. The CEO/Director should be prepared to verbally update the Commission on any additional progress made *since the written response to the List of Concerns was submitted*. The collective information from both the written and verbal reports will be considered, along with application materials, the inspection report, and other current information, in determining the outcome. *Failure to have taken corrective measures, or to present solid plans for doing so, will affect the outcome of the case.*

Who May Attend

The CEO/Director is encouraged to bring to the hearing any staff, governing authority representatives, governmental officials, or individuals considered pertinent to the anticipated discussion, or as observers.

CEO/Director's Attendance At The Hearing

It is important that the institution's CEO/Director attend the hearing to answer questions, authorize action, and to make any statements desired. If the institution's CEO/Director cannot attend, a written notification must be provided to AZA as soon as possible. The notification must include an explanation, and provide the name of who will attend in place of the CEO/Director. The written notification must also give full authority to the CEO/Director's selected representative to act on behalf of the institution.

The Hearing

Although rare, under certain conditions the Commission may choose to conduct a hearing via Zoom. If that is the case, accreditation staff will notify the institution well in advance of the hearing date. However, under *normal* circumstances, hearings will be held in person. A waiting room (the "pre-hearing room") will be provided near the hearing room. Immediately prior to the hearing, the Commission will conduct its final review of the case. When the Commission is ready to begin the hearing, a Commission member will come to the pre-hearing room to notify

the institution's representatives. The hearing portion of the review typically lasts 15-30 minutes. Hearings are closed sessions, and are attended by all Commissioners, Commission Advisors, AZA Accreditation staff, AZA's General Counsel, and the AZA Executive Vice President. Hearings may also be attended, on occasion, by members of the AZA Board of Directors, the AZA President & CEO, AZA staff, and members of the Visiting Committee.

After the hearing, the applicant's representatives will retire to a second waiting room (the "post-hearing room"), and the Commission will resume in private session to deliberate and make a decision. Once a decision is reached, the institution's representatives will be joined in the post-hearing room by the Commission Chair, the institution's Primary Reviewer, AZA's Executive Vice President, and the Vice President of Accreditation Programs to discuss the Commission's decision. An official letter noting the decision and major points of discussion will be sent to the institution in the weeks following the hearing. In general, the letter does not serve as a checklist of all items of concern that still require attention but rather provides the overarching reasons for the decision.

Final Decision of the Commission

The Commission's decision will be based on what exists at the time of the inspection and the review at the hearing—not on future plans. In reaching its decision, the Accreditation Commission also considers the following:

- Six months of reviewing and evaluating the documents, records, policies, and practices of the institution
- The previous inspection report (if one exists)
- The 2–5 day on-site inspection
- The current inspection report
- The recommendation of the inspection team
- The investigation of comments from colleagues and outside sources (if any)
- The *number* and *nature* of concerns
- The institution's response in addressing the identified concerns
- The institution's hearing
- The state of the institution, its facilities, its management, and its overall operations *at present*
- The state of the institution, its facilities, its management, and its overall *operations over the previous five-year accreditation cycle*

The Commission may take one of the following actions:

- Grant Accreditation:** The Commission will grant accreditation when it is reasonably satisfied that the applicant institution meets the requirements of an accredited institution. The Commission may, however, request progress reports on any items it wishes the institution to address, require an interim or special inspection, and revisit the decision as often as necessary to assure itself that the institution continues to meet all conditions and requirements of accreditation during the five-year accreditation period.
- Grant Provisional Accreditation [Currently-Accredited Facilities Only]:** The Commission may grant provisional accreditation if it determines that certain conditions must be met or additional information submitted before the institution can be considered as fully meeting accreditation standards. The institution's accreditation (if currently accredited) will be extended one year to allow time to finish addressing identified issues. The Commission must have confidence that the institution is capable of addressing the issues within one year, and a follow-up inspection is required at the end of that year. *The institution remains accredited during the provisional period. A new application is not required. At the conclusion of one year and after the follow-up inspection, the Commission must accredit or deny (provisional accreditation is not an option). Processing shall terminate for applicants not responding in the time allotted, and it shall become necessary to submit a new application and materials should accreditation be desired again in the future.*

If an institution is granted provisional accreditation, the year of extended accreditation shall be deducted from the institution's subsequent five-year accreditation cycle. Therefore, should the institution receive

accreditation at the end of the extended year, it will be granted four more years of accreditation rather than five. Institutions may be required to undergo a follow-up inspection at the halfway point of the four years of accreditation remaining in the accreditation cycle. If so, an application and related fees are not required, but the cost of the mid-cycle inspection shall be borne by the institution.

- C. **Table Application [New Applicants Only]:** The Commission may table a new applicant's application if it determines that certain conditions must be met or additional information submitted before the institution can be considered as meeting accreditation standards. Tabling indicates that the Accreditation Commission believes the concerns *can* be addressed in a year or less. Tabling allows the institution additional time to continue to alleviate the concerns noted by the Commission without having to resubmit a full application package. Tabling is typically for one year, although the institution can take as long as they need before requesting a reinspection and another hearing. It should be noted that, if longer than two years, it will be necessary for the institution to complete and submit a current edition of the accreditation application along with updated materials, but additional filing fees will not be required. At the zoo's next hearing, the Commission may vote to accredit, deny, or again table the application. If accreditation is granted, the Commission may require that another inspection take place at the mid-point of the five-year cycle (a mid-cycle inspection, if required, would not involve an application or processing fees).
- D. **Deny Accreditation:** The Commission will deny accreditation when an institution does not meet accreditation standards at the time and, in its opinion, requires in excess of one year to successfully do so. The Chair shall write the institution's CEO/Director, providing a copy to the principal officer of the institution's governing authority and noting the reason(s) for denial. The earliest time that institutions denied accreditation may reapply is one year *after the date of denial* (assuming all identified concerns have been sufficiently addressed). Submission of a new application and materials shall be necessary. Denial of accreditation shall result in loss of AZA membership for institutions that are AZA-accredited at the time.

Receiving Accreditation

To receive AZA accreditation, institutions must be judged as meeting or exceeding AZA standards, and embracing AZA policies and practices. Once accreditation is achieved, the institution's CEO/Director will receive, at the hearing, a paper certificate acknowledging the institution's accreditation (for use in applying for permits, grants, exemptions, etc.). An electronic version of the certificate will be emailed to the CEO/Director shortly after the hearing. In addition, within approximately four weeks, the institution will receive an official letter from the Commission acknowledging the accreditation, and outlining any requirements specific to the case. The institution will also receive an engraved wall plaque within two months of receiving accreditation. *New* institutions will additionally receive from the AZA Membership Department a pro-rated invoice for AZA annual dues and a welcome package containing useful membership information, "Accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums" window decals, and access to the AZA logo for use on letterhead and in publications, in addition to other membership items.

Appeals Process

If accreditation is denied, a request for appeal may be made in writing to the AZA Executive Committee within thirty (30) days of the date of the written outcome letter notifying denial. The AZA Executive Committee must decide in forty-five (45) days whether to grant an appeal hearing. If the AZA Executive Committee grants an appeal hearing, it will be conducted by the AZA Board of Directors at its next regularly scheduled meeting. The determination of the Board is final. Institutions whose appeals are denied may reapply one year after the date of the Commission's original denial (assuming all identified concerns have been sufficiently addressed). Submission of a new application and materials will be necessary. Appeals should be mailed to: AZA Executive Committee, Appeals Process, AZA, 8403 Colesville Road, Suite 710, Silver Spring, Maryland 20910.

When It's Time to Process Again

The granting of accreditation is for five years, and expires at the end of that period. Accredited institutions must successfully complete the entire process again before the end of that period to avoid a lapse in accreditation and

AZA membership (see *Long Term Expectations* immediately following). **Accredited institutions are expected to keep track of their own expiration dates** (available on the AZA web site at <http://www.aza.org/current-accreditation-list/>, or by contacting AZA.) Institutions will be reminded six months in advance of the deadline for submission of materials (twelve months in advance of accreditation expiration), but should not rely on this reminder as a method of tracking an expiration date. *It is important that the yearly edition of the accreditation materials being used by an institution match the year in which the application is to be submitted.*

Long Term Expectations

Accreditation is mandatory for an institution to maintain membership in AZA. Similarly, membership and participation in AZA must be maintained as a condition of accreditation. All institutions must process at least once every five years and are subject to any new or higher standards, policies, guidelines, or resolutions adopted by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums. Even though an institution may have been accredited previously, there is no guarantee that accreditation will be granted during subsequent inspections. Standards are subject to continuous review and enhancement. Once accredited, an institution is expected to continuously advance its professional operation and constantly maintain, or surpass, all professional standards. [See also “Preamble” appearing on pages 6–8.]

Criteria for Selection of the Visiting Committee

Prior to the submittal of the application materials, each institution will be notified of their proposed Visiting Committee team members, listing qualified persons with expertise in *three* primary categories: •operations, •curatorial/husbandry (animal management), and •veterinary medicine. The institution's CEO/Director is expected to review the list and may eliminate the names of any individuals for which there is a perceived conflict. If any names are eliminated by the CEO/Director, additional names will be substituted for approval. Once approved, AZA will then contact team members for availability. An institution may not select the members of its Visiting Committee. [NOTE: in the case of new applicants this process will take place after the application materials have been received, unless advance notice is provided to AZA regarding the intent to submit an application.] For new applicants the Primary Reviewer automatically serves on the Visiting Committee. Once the team is selected and confirmed, the team Chair will consult with the applicant institution's CEO/Director and with team members to determine the dates of the inspection (see also *Visiting Committee Selection Process Begins* [page 23] and *The Inspection Is Scheduled* [page 24]).

[NOTE: exceptions to criteria listed below may be made occasionally on an individual basis by the Accreditation Commission Chair, Vice Chair, or by the Vice President, Accreditation Programs, unless otherwise indicated.]

Required Criteria for Service as an Accreditation Inspector

- Must have support of current employer and supervisor
- Must hold Individual membership in AZA (Professional Fellow or Professional Affiliate)
- Must be employed at (or retired from) an AZA-accredited institution or related facility
- Must have a minimum of 7 years' experience in a mid to high level position in the profession
- Must be actively involved in the profession and in AZA
- Prior involvement in accreditation process of own institution
- Must thoroughly review Inspector's Handbook annually
- Must have served as a “Shadow” on an accreditation team
- Must stay current regarding AZA Accreditation training
- Must be able to maintain impartiality
- Must be able to maintain confidentiality

- Must have good written and oral communication skills
- Current position held must fall under one of the three primary roles noted above as follows: [*Operations*: (Director, Deputy or Assistant Director, or similar), *Animal Management*: (Curator, Director of Animal Operations, or similar), *Veterinary Medicine*: (Veterinarian)]

Criteria for Service as Team Chair

- Basic criteria for service as an accreditation inspector (see above)
- Participation as member of an inspection team at a minimum of two different institutions
- Strong leadership, organizational, and interpersonal skills
- Willingness to read and follow written instructions
- Ability to write and organize reports
- Willingness to organize visit, and facilitate discussion with team members and with staff of the host institution
- Ability to meet required deadlines and follow instructions for compiling the final report to the Commission

Criteria for Retired Fellows' Service as an Accreditation Inspector

[No exceptions may be made]:

- Basic criteria for service as an accreditation inspector [*except for employment status*] (see above)
- Be retired, or in transition, from an AZA-accredited institution or related facility
- Must be approved by the Accreditation Commission prior to service
- Must attend AZA annual conferences regularly
- Must remain current with AZA policies and practices
- Must stay abreast of current practices within the profession

Criteria for Determination of Team Size

- Size of the institution
- Nature of species in residence
- Complexity of operations

Inspection team size ranges from three (most common) to five (or more as necessary).

Criteria for Determination of Team Composition

- One team member should be from the institution's previous inspection team, *if available*
- Team members' experience and expertise should parallel the general scope of the institution to be inspected (i.e., an aquarium should have a team with strong aquatic experience)
- Teams should include at least one member from an institution similar in size and budget to the institution to be inspected
- **Two Person Teams** are not normally assigned; special exceptions may be made in cases of *extremely* small institutions or based on the special nature of an institution's animals (for example, insects only, etc.)
- **Three Person Teams (most common)** should include one member with extensive experience in operations, one with extensive experience in animal welfare, husbandry, and management, and one with extensive experience in veterinary medicine
- **Four+ Person Teams** should include one member with extensive experience in operations, one with extensive experience in animal welfare, husbandry, and management, one with extensive experience in veterinary medicine, and one or more with expertise particularly relevant to the institution being inspected (such as aquatics, cetaceans, elephants, birds, etc.)

Inspectors In Training (Shadows)

An inspector-in-training, as part of the training process, is required to accompany (“shadow”) an inspection team on an actual inspection. This “boots on the ground” training opportunity provides insight into the inspection process prior to being assigned as an official team member by allowing individuals to “shadow” inspection teams. Shadows are invited to accompany the team throughout the entire inspection, including the exit interview. Shadows are encouraged to participate in all discussions that take place among the team or with staff at the facility. They may also be included in discussions related to the final Visiting Committee Report, but they must not participate in the final decision of the team or the actual writing of the report. They should not be listed on the report as an official member of the team. Before an inspector-in-training is assigned to shadow an inspection team, permission must be obtained from the applicant institution. All expenses incurred by the trainee are the sole responsibility of the trainee or his/her employer. The applicant institution shall share no burden of the shadow’s expenses. Institutions are not obligated to allow a shadow to join their inspection team, but they are encouraged to do so.

Team Tools

Resources available to the team include:

- **The Visiting Committee Inspector’s Handbook** which fully explains the parameters for an institution to be considered accredited and also provides information regarding an inspector’s participation in the process.
- **The Accreditation Standards and Related Policies** containing standards and policies related to the accreditation process.
- **The Accreditation Resource Center** which contains numerous examples of institutional documents and policies required for AZA accreditation as well as guidelines and information that may be useful in evaluating institutional programs and policies. The Resource Center is available under the *Accreditation* tab at AZA’s website.
- **The Primary Reviewer** (a member of the Commission or a Commission Advisor) who serves as the Visiting Committee’s direct line to the Commission.
- **AZA Accreditation Staff** who can answer policy questions and concerns, provide support, and consult with the team regarding issues that may surface during the inspection.
- **Accreditation Training Sessions** are sometimes offered at AZA’s annual conference. Inspectors should attempt to attend this session at least once every 3 years, and specific-topic sessions as offered. The general session covers best management practices, safety requirements, related specialty concerns or specialty areas of knowledge, practical inspection techniques, evaluations of past inspections, and the opportunity to ask members of the Accreditation Commission questions, and to discuss experiences with other inspectors. All virtual training offerings should also be completed.

Commonly Found Concerns & Primary Considerations

Examples of Commonly Found Concerns

Following are concerns commonly found during inspections:

Major concerns:

- Unresolved governance issues
- Unsigned/unconsummated agreements
- Low staffing levels
- Incomplete or lack of written safety procedures/manuals/protocols
- Inadequate policies, or failure to follow them
- Insufficient safety barriers

- No duplication of records or failure to store duplicate set in separate location
- Insufficient animal housing

Lesser concerns:

- Failure to conduct drills in accordance with standards
- Peeling Paint
- Rusty doors and fencing
- "Permanent" extension cords
- Cluttered yards and storage areas
- Rotted (wet and dry) wood and fencing
- Cracks in concrete guest walkways
- Insufficient evaluation of education programs
- Dark work areas
- Perimeter fence issues
- Missing or improperly mounted fire extinguishers
- Inaccessible SDS sheets
- GFI circuits in wet areas

Of significant concern, if present:

- Issues affecting animal wellbeing
- Recurring issues from previous inspections
- Evidence of poor preparation
- Lack of modern zoological practices and philosophies
- Director does not have final authority over animals, staff, or programs
- Unstable or unclear governing structure
- Unstable or unclear financial support
- Lack of forward momentum or progress

Primary Considerations

Primary considerations include:

1. The Animals

Animal wellbeing must be a top priority of the institution. The Visiting Committee shall consider the size *and* nature of the living environments provided for the animals, and whether the physical *and* psychological wellbeing of the animals is being met. The team will look closely at the animal welfare assessment program and process, and will make certain both input- and output-based measures are used to complete assessments. The scope of the institution's enrichment program will be closely reviewed. The Visiting Committee will also check to be sure that the institution's collection plan adheres, at minimum, to accreditation requirements. Animal transaction records will be checked, and particular close attention will be paid to transactions with non-AZA entities. The record management system will be evaluated. An institution must participate in every SSP program that pertains to an animal belonging to the institution; however, institutions may indicate at what level they desire to participate in each SSP.

2. Animal Health Care

An institution's animal health care program must be under the direction of a licensed veterinarian, an appropriate number of persons must be employed in the animal health care program, and the extent of professional services provided to the animals must be considered adequate for the number and nature of the species at the institution.

3. Animal Security

The security program employed by the applicant institution shall be sufficient to provide appropriate protection to the animals. The Commission shall base its judgment with respect to security on the operation, location, size, and physical facilities.

4. Conservation and Education

The scope of the institution's conservation and education programs will be closely reviewed. Both of these programs require a written plan. Consideration is given by the inspectors and the Commission on the size, budget, and other areas affecting these programs. The institution should participate in SAFE species programs; however, the institution may indicate at what level it desires to participate in each SAFE program. The institution's Annual Report on Conservation and Science (ARCS reports) will be reviewed for each of the five years since the institution's previous inspection.

[Note: Accredited Related Facilities that occasionally host a small number of guests by appointment only need not have an education program. However, facilities that have a regular flow of public guests and/or school groups (whether by appointment or not) must have an education program that meets AZA standards.]

5. Potentially Dangerous or Venomous Wildlife

Institutions maintaining venomous animals must have an appropriate supply of sera available and policies/procedures in place for the safe handling of those animals. Likewise, procedures must be in place to reduce the risk of injury by potentially dangerous animals. The alarm system and emergency procedures will be closely reviewed by the Visiting Committee.

6. Finance

The institution's financial health will be reviewed and considered in terms of meeting the needs of the institution for the five-year period of accreditation. Contingency plans will also be reviewed.

7. Campus Plans, Strategic Plans, Policies, & Procedures

Campus plans, strategic plans, written policies, and procedures should be reviewed on a regular basis and updated as necessary (see Campus & Strategic Planning standards), and should include a focus on animal wellbeing in the planning process. Campus plans and strategic plans must be reviewed and/or updated every five years.

8. Physical Facilities

The physical condition of the institution will be closely observed in both public and restricted areas, and maintenance programs reviewed. Exhibits and holding areas will be considered in terms of modern zoological design, philosophy, and practices (see "Preamble" appearing on pages 6–8).

9. Policy on Responsible Population Management (RPM)

The Visiting Committee shall ascertain the institution's policy covering acquisitions, transfers, reintroductions, etc. adheres, at minimum, to AZA's Policy on Responsible Population Management (RPM), and that the policy is being followed.

10. Record Keeping

The institution's animal record-keeping system is of primary concern to the Accreditation Commission and will be carefully reviewed by the Visiting Committee.

11. Safety

The Visiting Committee shall review the institution's safety programs employed for the protection of its employees, the visiting public, and the animals. Inspectors will look for potential safety hazards in both public and restricted areas.

Areas of Primary Focus

Following are some of the areas of primary focus for the inspection team and the Accreditation Commission when evaluating an institution. Issues are broken into the main section headings covered by the Accreditation Standards. Institutions are encouraged to go beyond these focus areas.

Animal Care, Wellbeing, & Management

An institution must comply with all wildlife laws. In developing its accreditation program, AZA has been especially concerned with the need for assuring the highest standards of animal care, wellbeing, and management. It is our belief that this objective is paramount to the overall wellbeing of living creatures and that good conscience permits no higher priority. Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. The animals and their overall and wellbeing
2. The institution's animal welfare assessment process (how it works, how often it is performed, how both input- and output-based measures are used for assessments, how changes are made, and the facility's welfare reporting process)
3. Institutional Collection Plan
4. *All* animal facilities, including those that may be located off-site
5. Whether the animals are protected from adverse environmental conditions both on exhibit and off exhibit (e.g., weather, temperature, sound, vibration, light, air quality, water quality)
6. Whether the animals are provided sufficient shade in outdoor exhibits
7. Whether the animals have access to potable water both on and off exhibit
8. Whether each animal is maintained in numbers sufficient to meet their social and behavioral needs (display of single animals should be avoided unless biologically correct for that species)
9. Whether the institution has a sufficient *written* enrichment program
10. Whether all of the institution's animals are being provided with appropriate enrichment on a regular and frequent basis
11. Whether exhibit enclosures are of sufficient size and nature to provide for the psychological *and* physical wellbeing of each animal
12. The written policy for animal and public safety in animal contact areas
13. The animals used in public contact areas
14. The animals used in education programs
15. The animals used in off-premises programs
16. Whether animal records are current and accurate
17. Records for animals *not* in a zoological records management system [i.e., fish, insects, etc.]
18. Animal diets, food coolers, freezers, etc.
19. Whether there are noticeable signs of pests, and pest control solutions being utilized
20. Whether staff is aware of the institution's euthanasia policy
21. Whether the facility's RPM policy incorporates, at minimum, *all* requirements contained in AZA's RPM Policy
22. Whether acquisition, transfer, euthanasia, and reintroduction records are up-to-date
23. How verification is made that collection procedures used by the collector do not cause environmental abuse [for institutions utilizing aquatic collectors and dealers]
24. How verification is made that commercial collectors are properly permitted to legally collect animals from the wild [for institutions dealing with commercial collectors taking animals from the wild]

25. Whether all SSP animals are registered with the appropriate SSP
26. Whether the institution actively participates in and shares information with all appropriate SSPs
27. Whether there are any Studbooks published by the institution
28. PMCTrack Accreditation Report

Institutions Maintaining Elephants

Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. Whether there is compliance with the AZA Standards For Elephant Management & Care
2. The written elephant management protocol, which must include: •management policies, •staff responsibilities, •proper training techniques for restricted contact style of management, •behavioral profiles on each elephant, •incident reports, •acceptable discipline methods, •chaining practices, •staff training protocols for new elephant handlers, •foot care schedules, etc.
3. The responsibilities of the Elephant Manager
4. Whether the Elephant Manager has completed the AZA Principals of Elephant Management training course
5. Whether there is a minimum of two *qualified* elephant care professionals present during any contact with elephants.
6. Whether continuing education and training are supported by management
7. Whether elephant staff are aware of, or involved in, AZA, EMA, AAZK or the elephant TAG
8. Whether the elephants have access to natural substrate for dusting
9. Whether the elephants have shade provided during the heat of the day in a sufficient amount to accommodate every animal
10. The most recent incident reports, if any

Institutions Maintaining Cetaceans

Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. Whether there is compliance with the AZA Standards For Cetacean Care & Welfare
2. Written cetacean management protocol
3. The structure and responsibilities of the cetacean staff
4. The institution's policies and records on acquisition, disposition, and transfer of cetaceans
5. The institution's conservation and research efforts on behalf of cetaceans
6. The institution's public education programs about cetaceans
7. The institution's veterinary care program for cetaceans
8. The institution's cetacean and guest interactive programs, if they are offered
9. Environmental considerations for cetaceans
10. Transportation protocol for cetaceans

Veterinary Care

The institution's animal health care program must be under the direction of a licensed veterinarian. Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. Whether the institution follows the *Guidelines For Zoo and Aquarium Veterinary Medical Programs* and *Veterinary Hospitals* of the American Association of Zoo Veterinarians
2. The animal record-keeping system

3. The preventative health care program
4. The vaccination protocols
5. The available medical equipment and diagnostic laboratory services
6. The euthanasia policy
7. Handling and storage of animal carcasses and tissues
8. Whether medical records are up-to-date and complete
9. Whether an adequate number of persons are employed in the animal health care program
10. Whether the extent of veterinary services provided to the animals is adequate
11. USDA reports, if applicable, and what is being done to correct concerns
12. Quarantine procedures and their implementation
13. The alarm system and emergency procedures
14. Drug emergency protocols
15. Whether the veterinarian's response time from home is adequate in an emergency
16. Whether adequate sera is available
17. Whether drugs used in aquariums or aquatic exhibits comply with FDA guidelines
18. Whether outdated drugs are disposed of properly
19. Whether animal food, especially seafood products, are purchased from sustainable or well managed sources
20. How the institution ensures that the animals are not exposed to toxic plants from browse material and/or plants growing naturally on the grounds of the institution
21. Whether pre-shipment animal evaluations/exams are performed and documented

Conservation

The scope of the institution's participation in conservation programs is important. Consideration will be given to the size, budget, and other areas affecting these programs. Each institution should participate in SAFE species programs, although it may decide at what level. Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. The number of staff dedicated to conservation programming
2. Whether the facility is contributing sufficiently to AZA conservation programs based upon budget and/or staff size
3. Participation in field conservation programs
4. Efforts undertaken for energy and natural resource conservation (i.e., recycling, water conservation initiatives, etc.)
5. Local and national program literature
6. Level of participation in conservation programs with colleges and universities
7. The institution's Annual Report on Conservation and Science (ARCS reports) for the previous five years.

Education and Interpretation

Education must be an element in the mission statement of the institution, and all institutions must have a written education plan that matches current zoological and aquarium professional standards.

[Note for Accredited Related Facilities: Facilities should strive to have an education program if the facility has a regular flow of public guests and/or school groups. If a program exists, it should be based on accreditation standards.] Education need not be an element in the mission statement of the related facility. Facilities that host only a small number of guests or by appointment only need not have an education program. However, facilities

that have a *regular* flow of public guests and/or school groups (whether by appointment or not) should strive to have an education program that meets accreditation standards.

Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. The number of staff dedicated to education programming
2. That one paid staff member is dedicated to education on (at least) a part-time basis
3. How the education message is conveyed to the casual guest
4. How education programs are evaluated to assure effectiveness
5. Publications, brochures, or other printed material
6. Classrooms and teaching areas
7. The availability of funds allocated for education programs
8. Whether exhibit signage contains appropriate information
9. The level of education department contact with local schools, colleges, and other academia
10. The volunteer and outreach programs
11. The level of outreach programming and whether appropriate animals are being used
12. How graphics are developed and designed

Scientific Advancement

Consideration will be given to the size, budget, and other areas affecting these programs. Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. The protocol for evaluating potential scientific studies
2. How scientific studies are coordinated
3. How scientific studies are viewed by staff
4. Whether results are shared and/or published in appropriate journals
5. The level of involvement with local and regional academia

Governing Authority

The governing authority must be supportive of the institution's decision to abide by the AZA Code of Ethics, Policy on Responsible Population Management, Accreditation Standards, and Charter & Bylaws, and must recognize and support the institution's goals and objectives. Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. The governing authority's perception of what the Director's role is in the decision making process
2. The process of hiring and firing personnel
3. The lines of authority for acquisition, transfer, euthanasia and reintroduction of animals
4. The relationship between the governing authority and the Director
5. The levels of control on the part of the governing authority, and whether they are appropriate or inappropriate
6. The governing authority's role in the day-to-day management of the institution, including animals, staff and programs

Staff

A key element of an institution's successful operation is maintaining a staff sufficient in education and training, experience, and number. Effective communication and working relationships are also important. Among the things we will examine are:

1. Whether an adequate number of staff are present on a daily basis to administer all of the institution's programs
2. Job descriptions and the qualifications of staff in those positions
3. How familiar staff are with their responsibilities
4. Management's relationship with staff, including problems and proposed solutions
5. Staff's relationship with management, including problems and proposed solutions
6. Whether policies and procedures are in place and being followed to address concerns regarding inappropriate workplace behavior
7. The institution's diversity, equity, access and inclusion program for staff, guests, and suppliers
8. Animal care staff roles and responsibilities, and relationship with management, including problems and proposed solutions
9. Clarity of lines of authority for staff
10. Frequency of staff training and professional development, etc.
11. Staff involvement with AZA, SSPs, TAGs, etc., and institutional support for staff in these roles
12. Funding for staff travel and participation in meetings, and which staff members are eligible to participate
13. Staff salaries to determine if levels are appropriate

Support Organization

A support organization must share an institution's goals and objectives, and have a good working relationship with the institution. Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. The society representatives' roles at the zoo or aquarium
2. The society's support and fund-raising efforts
3. How funds are allocated and distributed
4. Financial reports and how funds benefit the zoo or aquarium
5. The relationship between the society board and staff
6. Whether having a support organization might be helpful, if one does not exist

Finance

An institution must provide sufficient evidence of its financial stability, including contingency plans, and funding for capital improvements and maintenance. Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. Whether the facility will be solvent for the five-year accreditation cycle, including long-term funding, contingency plans, emergency funds, etc.
2. Whether budget cuts or other financial problems are anticipated in the future
3. All financial records
4. The budgeting process, including who has control, how do requests originate, what is the role of the governing authority in the process, what are your in-house controls on spending, and is there an audit process, etc.

Physical Facilities

While the Commission is interested in an institution's future plans, *accreditation will be based upon its operations and facilities at the time of inspection and review, and in consideration of the institution's performance over the previous five-year accreditation cycle.*

[Note for Accredited Related Facilities: Aesthetics and amenities evaluated in terms of how often the public is present.]

Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. Facilities and conditions that exist at the time of the inspection and review
2. Appearance and condition of the buildings and grounds
3. Adequacy of maintenance program
4. Adequacy, appropriateness, and condition of exhibits and holding areas
5. Adequacy of furniture in exhibits
6. Appropriateness of exhibit groupings
7. Adequacy of ventilation in buildings and holding areas
8. Whether the animal facilities meet or exceed all relevant federal and state requirements
9. Whether all service areas have sufficient space for safety
10. Program of water quality monitoring for *all* animals, including written records

Safety/Security

The security program employed by an institution should be sufficient to provide appropriate protection for the animals, its employees, and the visiting public. Adequacy will be based on the operation, location, size, and physical facilities. Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. Whether the institution is conducting required drills in accordance with standards
2. Location of escape procedures throughout the institution
3. Files on safety incidents over the past five years (i.e., escapes, accidents, injuries, attacks, public problems)
4. Whether staff knows the process of treating an injury to a guest, and where the nearest first-aid station is located
5. Whether exhibits are safe for the animals, the staff, and the public
6. Whether walkways, steps, and other public areas are free of debris and in good repair
7. Whether work areas are free of clutter and safe work environments for employees
8. How flammables and other hazardous solutions are stored
9. The facilities and protocols in place for the safe usage of ozone, chlorine, and other oxidizing agents
10. Whether adequate safety procedures are in place for potentially dangerous animals
11. Whether adequate safety procedures are in place for venomous animals, including properly labeled enclosures and alarm systems and envenomation response protocols
12. The alarm systems and emergency procedures
13. Whether minimum operational safety standards for diving are being met [for institutions using underwater diving] and appropriate safety equipment is available
14. Whether adequate security is provided for the animals both day and night
15. Whether incidents of vandalism have occurred, how prevalent the problem is, and how it is being addressed
16. Security personnel routines for nightly rounds, emergencies, etc.
17. Firearms storage and training
18. Whether the perimeter fence is of sufficient height and construction, and is separate from all exhibit fencing

Guest Services

While the Commission is interested in an institution's future plans, *accreditation will be based upon its operations and facilities at the time of inspection and review, and also on its historical record and reliability.*

[Note for Accredited Related Facilities: Aesthetics and amenities evaluated in terms of how often the public is present.]

Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. Facilities and conditions that exist at the time of the inspection and review
2. The public's overall experience [examples: the entrance; parking; the restrooms (cleanliness and convenience); drinking fountains (cleanliness and convenience); refreshment stations (number and convenience); quality of food being sold; benches and rest areas (number and convenience); ADA compliance; etc.]
3. Way-finding: availability of maps and signs
4. Overall aesthetics of the exhibits, buildings, and grounds
5. Adequacy of maintenance and trash collection
6. Adequacy of ventilation in public buildings

Campus & Strategic Planning

An institution should have a campus plan and strategic plan to guide the institution in continuous forward progress and development. Among the things we will closely examine are:

1. The campus plan and whether it is on schedule (what will be done and when)
2. The strategic plan (how to cover anticipated costs)
3. Whether animal wellbeing is being considered during the design and planning stage
4. How often the campus and strategic plans are reviewed and/or updated.
5. Other programs being developed or already in place

General Administrative Policies of the Accreditation Commission

Accidents or Incidents Involving Potential Injury or Welfare

AZA's incident reporting policy exists to validate that accredited members are managing significant accidents/incidents related to human safety and/or animal wellbeing in compliance with accreditation standards. In addition, timely reporting of incidents, especially those incidents that may generate public scrutiny or media attention, provides an opportunity for AZA to provide support for the reporting institution in terms of technical expertise, confirmation that an institution is in compliance with accreditation standards, or other public relations support from AZA staff/leadership.

Should an accident or incident occur that meets one or more of the criteria below, Accreditation staff should be notified and a written report must be submitted to the Accreditation Commission within thirty (30) days explaining what happened and noting what corrective actions are being taken by the institution as a result.

The Commission will determine if a special inspection or other action is necessary and will notify the institution in writing once a decision has been made. All information submitted to the Commission will be kept strictly confidential.

For the purposes of this policy, potentially dangerous animals are defined as those species that could likely cause significant injury or death to a human. Significant injury or illness is defined as an injury/illness that results in in-patient hospitalization.

Considerations for submitting such reports include:

Staff or Public Injuries – site and/or animal-related injury to a human resulting in death, dismemberment, permanent disability, or significant injury or illness.

Unusual Animal Death/Injury – unusual, unexpected, or preventable circumstances resulting in death or grievous injury to an animal, particularly those events that could or do result in public scrutiny, regulatory investigation, or media attention.

Mortality/Morbidity Events – death, injury, or illness involving multiple individuals of the same or different species due to a single cause/etiology that exceeds reasonable expectations for a species, group, situation, or habitat.

Animal Transport Events – escape of any species during transport; unforeseen or preventable death of individuals or groups of individuals related to transport. [For taxa routinely shipped in large numbers/bulk (e.g., fish and invertebrates), see "Mortality/Morbidity Events" above to determine if the mortality event warrants reporting.]

Animal Escapes – escape of a potentially dangerous animal or mass escapes of any species.

Barrier Breaches – incidents in which a guest, or other unauthorized individual crosses animal containment, putting themselves, others, or the animal in jeopardy of serious injury or death.

Unintentional or Unexpected Sharing of Space – incidents in which a human unintentionally or unexpectedly shares unprotected space (in breach of protocol, as a result of a shifting or containment error, etc.) with a potentially dangerous animal regardless of the outcome of the incident.

Accidents Resulting in Human Fatality

An on-site inspection shall be automatic after any accident *involving an animal* that results in a human fatality. The inspection shall focus on the incident and shall be scheduled to take place as soon after the incident as can be reasonably scheduled. Site related human fatalities not involving an animal shall be immediately assessed by AZA relative to the AZA Accreditation Standards. The Commission shall determine if a special inspection is necessary in those cases and will notify the institution in writing once a decision has been made. Institutions are responsible for submitting a written report to the Accreditation Commission as noted under “*Accidents or Incidents Involving Potential Injury or Welfare*”, above.

Accreditation Cycle

The cycle of accreditation shall be five years, after which an institution must undergo the full accreditation process again. *Exceptions:* •In cases where an applicant processes and is granted accreditation on a cycle in conflict with the geographic rule, its *initial* accreditation cycle will be adjusted to place it on the proper seasonal cycle for future inspections (see *Geographic Location*, page 47). •If an extension is granted, the year of extension shall be deducted from the institution’s subsequent five-year accreditation cycle if the institution receives accreditation at the end of the year of extension (see *Extensions of Accreditation*, page 46). •If an institution is granted provisional accreditation, the provisional year shall be deducted from the institution’s subsequent five-year accreditation cycle if the institution receives accreditation at the end of the provisional year (see *Grant Provisional Accreditation*, page 29).

Achieving Accreditation

Accreditation can only be achieved by a judgment from the AZA Accreditation Commission that the applicant institution meets or exceeds all AZA standards, and supports and employs AZA practices and philosophies. This decision is preceded by a lengthy application and full evaluation process, involving information from a number of sources, including a thorough on-site inspection.

Addition of an Elephant Inspector

For institutions with elephants, an inspector who specializes in elephants will be added to the regular team and will focus on the institution’s elephant program.

Addition of a Specialist Inspector

It is occasionally necessary for a specialist inspector to be added to an inspection team. The Commission will determine, on a case by case basis, when this is justified and will notify the institution. Examples would be zoological parks with aquarium facilities of a sufficient size and nature to require an inspection team member specializing in aquatics. The same would be true of aquariums with exhibits containing land-based animals, etc.

Attendance at the Hearing (Who Should Be There)

The institution’s CEO/Director must attend the hearing to answer questions, authorize action, and to make any statements desired. The CEO/Director may bring to the hearing any individual(s) he or she would like to have present. This may include members of the institution’s staff, governing authority, support organization, or local government officials. If the CEO/Director cannot attend, a written notification must be provided to AZA as soon as possible. The notification must include an explanation, and give full authority to an individual selected by the CEO/Director to represent the institution in place of the CEO/Director.

CEO/Director Requirement for Applicants Not Currently AZA-Accredited

Any institution not currently accredited may not apply for accreditation if it is without a *permanent*, full-time CEO/Director. Materials may not be submitted under the leadership of an *Interim* or *Acting* Director.

CEO/Director Vacancy

When a vacancy occurs in the position of CEO/Director the AZA-accredited institution must notify the Accreditation Commission in writing, and a follow-up letter must be submitted to the Commission every six months thereafter reporting the status of the search until such time as the position is filled. The status update must include details as to what has occurred, how the institution is being managed in the interim, and an estimate as to when it is expected the position may be filled. An AZA-accredited institution that is without the services of a permanent, full-time, compensated CEO/Director for longer than one year may be subject to loss of accreditation and membership. An AZA-accredited institution that is temporarily without a permanent fulltime CEO/Director must process for accreditation on its regular 5-year cycle. Extensions may not be granted. Institutions that are not accredited by AZA may not apply without a permanent fulltime CEO/Director in place.

CEO/Director Vacancy Occurring Immediately After Receiving AZA Accreditation

If a CEO/Director vacates his or her position at the institution within ninety days of receiving accreditation, the Commission may, in its discretion, require written biannual progress reports, or may require that the institution reprocess again at the earliest opportunity to do so once a new CEO/Director is in place.

Change of Governance

A change in governance refers to a change of the governing authority, such as from a governmental agency to society or vice versa. If a change in governance occurs, a letter or affidavit from the CEO or chairperson of the new governing authority is required pledging to uphold and abide by accreditation standards, including the AZA Charter & Bylaws, Code of Ethics, Policy on Responsible Population Management, and other related policies. The letter must be sent to the Commission within 30 days of the governance change.

Change of Location

In the event of a relocation of an accredited institution, the institution must reprocess for accreditation as soon as the new location is officially open. An application must be received by the submission deadline that falls immediately prior to, or following, the opening.

Change of Ownership

A change in ownership refers to the sale or formal transfer of ownership of an institution. In the event of a change in ownership of an accredited institution, the institution must reprocess for accreditation within 12 months, regardless of when its accreditation is scheduled to expire. A letter or affidavit from the CEO or chairperson of the purchasing or receiving organization is also required pledging to uphold and abide by accreditation standards, including the AZA Charter & Bylaws, Code of Ethics, Policy on Responsible Population Management, and other related policies. The letter must also indicate the new owner's intent to submit materials applying for accreditation within the required time period. The letter must be sent to the Commission within 30 days of final sale or transfer.

Change of Scope

Accredited institutions must notify the Commission in writing in the event that a change in the scope of its facility occurs (for example, the opening of a new exhibit of significant proportions, or an exhibit that changes the overall scope of the institution, such as an aquarium in a zoo, or land-based animals in an aquarium, etc.). The Commission may assign a team, or individual, to conduct an inspection. Cost of such inspection shall be borne by the accredited institution concerned. (See *Follow-up Inspections*, page 46, and *Interim or Special Inspections*, page 47.)

Complaints

If a documented, written complaint is received from a member of the general public, the institution's staff, or a professional colleague regarding an AZA-accredited institution, the Commission will take steps to investigate the situation. In most cases this will involve reaching out to the institution for their comments and to obtain specific

documentation related to the complaint (e.g., exhibit photos, policies, procedures, etc.). Based upon its findings, the Commission will make recommendations to the institution to ensure that accreditation standards are being maintained, or take appropriate action. In some cases the Commission may assign a team to conduct an inspection. (See *Follow-up Inspections*, page 46, and *Interim or Special Inspections*, page 47.)

Determining Compliance

The AZA Accreditation Commission, based on the collective professional training and experience of its 16 member panel, is the body officially tasked with determining whether a standard is being met or not. The Commission's decision is absolute. In cases of denial of accreditation, an appeal of that denial may be made to the AZA Executive Committee [see page 30].

Elephant Management and Care – Requesting a Temporary Variance Under the AZA Standards

Institutions requesting a temporary variance under the AZA Standards For Elephant Management & Care should submit that request to the Accreditation Commission at the time it becomes apparent that a temporary variance may be needed. The request should be in the form of a letter detailing the temporary variance being requested, and should include all necessary documentation. The Commission will consider the requested temporary variance and will thereafter notify the institution of its decision. Temporary variances must be re-applied for prior to the expiration date contained in the variance, or documentation must be provided that the reason for the temporary variance has been addressed. **NOTE:** institutions not currently AZA-accredited must be in full compliance with AZA standards at the time application is made.

Elephant Management and Care – Special Wellbeing Variance

In cases where an elephant's physical and/or psychological wellbeing is believed to be at risk by implementation of a standard, an institution may request a special wellbeing variance under the AZA Standards For Elephant Management & Care. To qualify for a special wellbeing variance, the elephant(s) in question must be considered geriatric, and the institution must provide evidence that the elephant's physical and/or psychological wellbeing will be at risk without the variance, or that moving the elephant could result in serious injury or death. Evidence must be in the form of documentation from the institution's veterinary and animal management professional staff. The request for a special wellbeing variance must be in the form of a letter detailing the variance being requested, and containing all necessary documentation. The AZA Accreditation Commission will consider the request and will thereafter notify the institution of its decision. If granted, the variance will be for three (3) years and must be re-applied for prior to the expiration date contained in the variance. If granted, institutions must submit an annual report documenting the status and health of the elephant(s), including veterinary records, assessments, behavioral profiles, and the written recommendations of the institution's veterinary and animal management professional staff. **NOTE:** for the purpose of this variance, wellbeing should be assessed with a focus on physical and psychological health and function.

Elephant Management and Care – Substantial Compliance Extension [to an existing variance]

In cases where a deadline is set in a standard, and an institution has an existing variance until that deadline but has not yet achieved full compliance by the deadline, a Substantial Compliance Extension of the existing variance may be considered by the Accreditation Commission. Approval may be granted only if the institution can demonstrate clear and steady progress toward compliance with the standard, is actively engaged and working towards full compliance, and has identified a realistic completion date. Regular updates will be required until compliance is achieved, and the Commission may require an inspection of the elephant program, at its discretion, as a condition of maintaining accreditation.

Enforcement of Standards

Institutions holding accreditation from AZA must maintain all AZA standards, and support AZA practices and philosophies during the period that accreditation is held. If AZA has evidence that this is not taking place, it will work with the institution to see that standards are met, or will take whatever action is appropriate to ensure the

integrity of its process, including removal of AZA-accreditation when deemed necessary. (See *Follow-up Inspections*, page 46, *Interim or Special Inspections*, page 47, and *Rescinding Accreditation*, page 48.)

Extensions of Accreditation

Under extenuating or special circumstances extensions of accreditation may be granted to extend current accreditation by one year. An institution desiring an extension must submit a request in writing to the Accreditation Commission, including a full explanation as to why the extension is being requested, as soon as possible to avoid a potential lapse in accreditation and AZA membership. Before considering the request, the Commission may require a site visit to assess the institution's ability to maintain accreditation standards during the period of extension. If a site visit is deemed necessary, it must take place prior to any decision being made by the Commission. The Commission will thereafter make a determination, and the institution will be notified. A second extension will be considered only in extreme cases, and will require a site visit. If an extension is granted, the year of extension shall be deducted from the institution's subsequent five-year accreditation cycle should the institution receive accreditation at the end of the year of extension. [NOTE: *Missing a deadline will not be considered an acceptable reason for extension of accreditation. Extenuating or special circumstances shall not include a vacancy in the position of CEO/Director.*]

Follow-up Inspections

A follow-up inspection shall be conducted for all provisionally accredited and tabled applicants at the end of the tabled/provisional period, as a condition of proceeding forward in the process. While on site, the inspection team may, at their discretion, inspect all or portions of the institution. Cost of such inspection shall be borne by the institution as a requirement of maintaining and/or achieving accreditation. (See *Mid-Cycle Inspections*, page 48).

Geographic Location and Accreditation Cycle

To optimize weather conditions for inspectors and to create a more even distribution of the case load for the Commission, institutions located in geographic areas that typically experience a mild winter season will be placed on a five-year accreditation cycle that affords a fall-winter inspection (i.e., will have their accreditation expire in March). Institutions located in geographic areas that typically experience a harsh winter season will be placed on a five-year accreditation cycle that affords a spring-summer inspection (i.e., will have their accreditation expire in September). In cases where an applicant processes and is granted accreditation on a cycle in conflict with the geographic rule, its *initial* accreditation cycle will be extended to five and a half years to place it on the proper seasonal cycle for future inspections. **NOTE:** Because aquariums, by their nature, are primarily indoor facilities, they will be placed on a five-year accreditation cycle that affords a fall-winter inspection (i.e., will have their accreditation expire in March).

Implementation of New Standards

The Accreditation Standards and Related Policies document is thoroughly reviewed and updated annually. New editions are released in the Fall for the following year. New standards and revisions go into effect beginning January 1st. (Example: The 2026 standards will be released in Fall 2025 and will go into effect on January 1, 2026.) **All facilities are expected to begin implementing new standards as soon as they are released.** It is not practical to expect facilities to be fully up to speed as soon as new standards go into effect, but they should begin to develop a plan for implementation as quickly as possible.

Institution's Membership In AZA

An institution's membership and participation in AZA must be maintained as a condition of accreditation.

Institutions Under Construction

Institutions currently being constructed may apply for accreditation prior to the opening date; however, the on-site inspection will not take place until the institution is officially open to the general public and a permanent, full-time CEO/Director has been on board for at least six months. (See *Deadlines*, page 17, and *Early Submittals*, page 18).

Institutions Within Institutions

In order to be accredited, a zoological park or aquarium which is a part of a larger institution (such as a university, museum, or botanical garden) must be distinct enough to be separately identified and must adequately fulfill the definition of a zoological park or aquarium as earlier defined. When accreditation is granted in such cases, it will apply only to the zoological park or aquarium concerned and not to the non-zoological activities of the larger organization or adjacent entity in fields in which AZA has no expertise (see also *Museums Within Animal Facilities*, page 48).

Interim or Special Inspections

The Accreditation Commission or AZA Board of Directors may, at its discretion, assign a team to conduct an interim or special inspection of any AZA-accredited institution at any time during the five-year accreditation period. While on site, the team may, at their discretion, inspect all or portions of the institution. Cost of such inspection shall be borne by the institution as a requirement of maintaining and/or achieving accreditation. (See *Mid-Cycle Inspections*, page 48).

“Last Minute” Inspector Replacements

Although it is highly unusual, a “last minute” change in inspectors may become necessary in a sudden emergency. In this case, there may not be sufficient time for AZA to follow its standard procedure and provide the institution with a list of potential replacements. Every effort will be made to alert the institution in advance, but in extreme circumstances, AZA will assign a replacement inspector and notify the institution thereafter.

Mid-Cycle Inspections

The Accreditation Commission may, at its discretion, require a mid-cycle inspection as a condition of maintaining accreditation. When such an inspection is required, the visiting team will focus on key areas identified when accreditation was issued, and will also review the institution as a whole. Cost of such inspection shall be borne by the institution as a condition of maintaining accreditation. An application and application fees are not required.

Mid-cycle inspections may apply to the following:

- Institutions that are granted provisional accreditation and receive full accreditation one year later; or institutions whose initial (new) applications are tabled and receive accreditation at the end of the tabling period.
- Institutions that meet minimum standards when accreditation is granted but that the Commission believes may be challenged in successfully maintaining AZA standards throughout the full five-year cycle of accreditation.
- Institutions with a large number of identified concerns; institutions with significant safety and/or animal wellbeing concerns; institutions that are not well prepared for the inspection.

Multiple Facilities Under One Authority

If two or more institutions are under the same ownership and governing authority, administration, or control, are located on the same property, and public admittance for all institutions is covered by a single entrance fee (or a combination ticket can be purchased that allows entrance to all institutions), they will be considered as a single institution. All facilities are subject to inspection. If it is determined that the institutions do not meet the above criteria, processing as separate facilities will be necessary.

Museums Within Animal Facilities

If a museum exists as a part of an animal facility, or if an animal facility exists within a museum, only the animal facility is inspected and considered as falling under AZA’s standards of accreditation (see also *Institutions Within Institutions*, page 47).

Offsite Facilities

The inspection will include an institution's offsite facilities. An offsite facility is one that is owned and operated by the institution, functions in support of the institution, but exists at a separate location away from the institution itself. Institutions must list all offsite facilities in the space provided on the application for accreditation. Examples of offsite facilities include, but are not limited to: food storage areas, maintenance and equipment facilities, quarantine spaces, and animal holding areas or exhibits. The Primary Reviewer, in consultation with the inspection team chair, will determine which of these areas must be inspected.

Provisional Accreditation

The Commission may implement provisional accreditation at any time during the five-year cycle if it concludes that accreditation standards are not being consistently met and/or maintained. In such case, if practicable, the institution shall receive immediate notice of the Commission's decision. The Commission may also choose to conduct an on-site inspection, after which the facility will be afforded an opportunity for a hearing. The hearing will be scheduled for an upcoming monthly virtual meeting of the Commission. The Commission may take any additional action it deems appropriate upon consideration of the issues.

Rescinding Accreditation

The Commission may rescind accreditation at any time if it concludes that accreditation standards are not being consistently met and/or maintained. In such case, the institution shall receive immediate notice of the Commission's decision. The Commission may also choose to conduct an on-site inspection, after which the facility will be afforded an opportunity for a hearing. The hearing will be scheduled for an upcoming monthly Zoom meeting of the Commission. The Commission may take any additional action it deems appropriate upon consideration of the issues. Rescinding or denial of accreditation is appealable under the bylaws to the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors.

Seasonal Closings

Institutions that are closed for winter months must be on a summer inspection schedule. No regular accreditation inspections will be done when institutions are closed for the winter.

Special Wellbeing Variance

In cases where it is believed that an animal's physical and/or psychological wellbeing would be at risk by the implementation of a standard, an institution may request a special wellbeing variance. To qualify for a special wellbeing variance, the animal(s) in question must be considered geriatric or handicapped, and the institution must provide evidence that the animal's wellbeing will be at risk if the standard as written is imposed, or that moving the animal isn't possible and/or could result in serious injury or death. The request for a special wellbeing variance must be in the form of a letter detailing the variance being requested, and containing all necessary documentation from the institution's veterinary and animal management professional staff, and any other experts involved. The AZA Accreditation Commission will consider the request and will thereafter notify the institution of its decision. If granted, the variance will be for three (3) years and must be re-applied for prior to the expiration date contained in the variance. If granted, institutions must submit an annual report documenting the status and health of the animal(s), including veterinary records, assessments, and the written recommendations of the institution's veterinary and animal management professional staff. NOTE: for the purpose of this variance, wellbeing should be assessed with a focus on physical and psychological health and function. For elephants, see "Elephant Management and Care – Special Wellbeing Variance" (page 115).

Temporary Closings

Institutions temporarily closed to the public will retain their accreditation and their AZA membership. Should an institution's cycle of accreditation review fall within the period of temporary closure, an extension must be requested in writing prior to the institution's regular deadline for submission of accreditation materials. During the period of closure, a written Progress Report must be submitted every six months until such time as the institution

has re-opened. Upon re-opening, the institution must submit materials for full accreditation review by the first deadline that falls after re-opening. In the case of institutions closed for less than six (6) months, a waiver may be requested in writing.

AN IMPORTANT NOTE:

The criteria and procedures of the accreditation program are under continuous review by the Commission and Board of Directors. Constructive comments and suggestions are welcome and will receive careful attention.

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