

AZA and TITAG – How'd I get here, what am I doing and where am I going?

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Abstract

Institutions at IECC that are affiliated with Zoos are familiar with AZA and the many and oft-time confusing facets it encompasses. For those not affiliated and who have attended the IECC Conference there has been an entity that has existed on the conference periphery, but are unaware of what its role involves. Many know who TITAG consists of but not necessarily what the group is, what it does and how it fits in as an organization at the IECC. This paper will try and explain its structure, goals, actions and my personal experiences and development over the last 6 years.

Intro – Quick Explanation and Background

What is AZA you may ask? By its own definition:

The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) is a globally recognized brand representing the best of the world's aquariums and zoos. The mission of the Association is to provide its members with the services, high standards and best practices needed to be leaders and innovators in animal care, wildlife conservation and science, conservation education, the guest experience, and community engagement.

But what does that actually mean? A generic explanation is that it essentially is the gold standard that Zoos and Aquariums strive to achieve. A very rigid and comprehensive accreditation process must be passed that holds institutions to an exceptionally high level of care and professionalism. It might not sound like much, but approximately only 10 percent of Zoos and Aquariums reach this level. Not only that, they must pass this highly scrutinizing examination every 5 years to keep their membership.

AZA encompasses far too many avenues to give an accurate depiction here, but focusing on what they do in animal management and care and how that relates to the invertebrate world will be the main focus here. AZA sets very high care standards for all animals in its purview, which includes the invertebrates. Just a few of its roles include setting recommendations for minimum habitat sizes, health care practices, shipping protocols and guidance for what species should be included in animal collections in Zoos and Aquariums.

To accomplish what it does, animals are separated into taxonomic groupings of like animals. A few examples are New World Primates, Elephants, Amphibians and where we fit in, Terrestrial Invertebrates. A Taxonomic Advisory Group, or TAG, is set up for each grouping and the TAG

ends up acting as a “big picture” management group. They oversee and set an “action plan that identifies essential goals, scientific investigations, and conservation initiatives needed to best serve ex situ and in situ populations” (AZA.org).

The Terrestrial Invertebrate TAG (TITAG) works very hard to progress the field of invertebrate husbandry and conservation and accomplish this in a number of ways. The main way is by providing resources for those striving to make a difference.

Early Days

My first dealings with TITAG began during the 2008 IECC. I started working part-time at the Saint Louis Zoo Insectarium during the summer of 2004 and immediately heard stories from my managers who attended the conferences. My initial reaction was, “Cool, a bunch a bug geeks running around collecting in the desert. Sign me up.” At this time I was still unaware that TITAG even existed. Over the following few years I began realizing that the conference was much more than just collecting.

To attend the conference with our institutions support, our managers required that we write a paper and present it during the paper sessions. The year leading up to the conference we had to do our observations, have the papers and presentations ready to go months ahead. Overall I considered it a very good deal.

During the registering and prepping for the conference I found out we would be attending the TAG meeting prior to the conference. Not truly being privy so far to what occurred at said meetings I figured I would just be a passenger and go along for the ride. Once we arrived at Rio Rico it was time to start and get to work. And I soon realized how wrong I was.

The TAG meeting is essentially a full day affair covering a number of different topics with discussions, break out working groups, presentations and action planning. After the initial introductions and agenda curriculum, I felt the meeting was a nonstop blur. Quickly, the realization hit me that there was no way to simply keep your head down and your mouth shut. That first year I will admit that I was wholly ignorant of AZA/TITAG and much that was discussed went over my head. Regardless, I was actively invited to voice my opinions, of which I did little then, and engage in any way that I felt comfortable. At the end of that day I figured the TITAG portion was finished and I could just move along with the conference. Once again, I was partially mistaken.

While I did my best to just attend the conference, there was much going on behind the scenes that the TAG was doing that I didn't see. My manager was constantly helping out with the silent auction and other details and asked me if I would like to pitch in. And truthfully, I initially did my best to avoid helping out more than I had to that year unless specifically asked. A large portion of that was it being my first year attending and partially I was still just unsure of how I fit in the picture. A lot of the people in TITAG were names I had heard a lot about and didn't necessarily feel comfortable just jumping in like I was one of the “gang.”

That all changed by the end of the conference though. The main reason is I helped out with the silent auction that TITAG runs each year. The interaction with all the TITAG members while we ran around setting up, monitoring tables and dashing the hopes of would be item bidders at the buzzer was more than enjoyable. It was satisfying to watch a small group of dedicated people working together while sacrificing their time and achieving tangible results. The money raised from this endeavor was used to fund small grants for individuals doing research or conservation projects concerning invertebrates.

More TITAG

While TITAG is a component of AZA and officer and steering committee positions have to work at AZA institutions, the TAG meeting is not limited to those people. It is open to anyone who would like to help. There are a multitude of tasks that need to be accomplished during the meeting and even more that need attention over the following year. Topics and tasks at meetings vary greatly year to year and require skill sets of all types to be successful. Just a small example list: Graphic design for web design, creating surveys, event planning, IT help, putting together manuals, etc.

Needless to say, the following conferences and TAG meetings went more smoothly and provided additional avenues in which I could help. One year was as impromptu minutes taker, another assisting with surveys. Most of the time, goals and tasks are met and everyone is happy. Occasionally, items fall through the cracks and need to be revisited at subsequent meetings. I think the most important thing is that there are people willing to volunteer their time to accomplish these often times lofty expectations.

The best parts of the meeting for me are the conservation presentations. Each year individuals who work with species of concern talk about what they have done in the past year. Oftentimes the presentations are just updates from previous years. Sometimes a new project is brought up and gets everyone really excited or causes us to reevaluate what we have been doing with our own current projects. Projects like the Toledo Zoo Mitchell's Satyr Butterfly that utilizes local elementary schools growing host plants, or Roger William Park Zoo's involvement in Panama building habitats and teaching insect husbandry to grow native insects as food items instead of mass cultured crickets and mealworms, are just a couple examples.

Ultimately, these conservation topics and needs led me to look for opportunities in which I could make more of an impact.

Look No Further

We house two endangered species of invertebrates at the Saint Louis Zoo. The first is the American Burying Beetle (*Nicrophorus americanus*). Our unit has spent a lot of time field surveying, captive raising and releasing this once widespread carrion beetle back into its native

range. The second is the Partula Tree Snail (*Partula nodosa*). It is a Polynesian snail that is extinct in the wild and now resides at six institutions inside the U.S. and with our help it will hopefully be reintroduced back into the Pacific. With my exposure at the TAG meeting, it is this Snail that has allotted me the ability to become more involved.

At approximately the same time both the Partula Snail Studbook Keeper and Species Survival Plan (SSP) Coordinator stepped down after long tenures in those positions. As we housed the snails, I thought this would be a good species to begin with and applied for the Studbook Keeper position during the spring of 2013. The TITAG committee actually determines who gets to become the Studbook Keeper. I personally believe that even my limited involvement in the TAG definitely made the decision to award me the studbook position that much easier. That and being the only applicant helps. Snails don't always elicit the same response as a tiger.

In the zoo world, all species of concern are appointed a studbook that is intended to track species movement, lineages and maintain as much of the genetically diversity as possible. With the studbook, the SSP Coordinator will make breeding recommendations that will hopefully continue to keep the diversity as high as possible. To become a Studbook Keeper or SSP Coordinator, a week long of intensive training is required that is put on by AZA.

The only downside to this is that the system is mammal centric and isn't always relevant to invertebrates. And with a hermaphroditic, possibly self-fertilizing population like the snails the issues become even greater, nigh impossible. The positive trade-off is that this program opens your eyes to all the other possibilities that occur within AZA institutions through networking. You are meeting with participants that are actively working towards conserving animals of all types and can potentially lead to more doors being open. Having learned a greater understanding of how AZA works led me to a greater understanding of how TITAG works as well and can improve my ability to make more of an impact within the Tag.

Going Forward

Opportunities abound for me going forward. The only limiting factor in the process is my determination to make them happen. Working with Polynesian Tree Snails means the possibility of traveling to Tahiti for reintroductions or research. Further professional development within the AZA school programs can potentially lead to me running an SSP program which would allow me to advocate a species of concern like the Partula Snail.

There is also the potential for collaborating with our Herpetarium with their project in Ecuador to both help educate on the plight of amphibians and working with the locals to raise native inverts to feed those animals. I never would have thought of something like this if it were not for the exposure I received in the TITAG meetings over the years.

I have a very ambitious list of projects I would like to start or even piggy-tail on to. Some of it is for selfish reasons, for example to travel to some of these exotic locals, but mostly it is to make a difference in my own field. Invertebrates are such a pervasive part of our everyday life and are

regularly overlooked as something positive. I am lucky and grateful I work for an Institution that allows us to champion their cause.

Conclusion

The AZA and zoo world can be very confusing organizations to navigate for a novice. Acronyms run rampant. Many tiers of hierarchy have to be reached sometimes to reach a consensus and for action to take place. The invertebrate world doesn't fit the "normal" mold and therefore has to think outside the box to circumvent problems not experienced by mammals and birds. But upon learning some of its intricacies it can also lead to valuable resource for making change.

Our TITAG has a monstrous undertaking. Most TAGs work very small numbers of species. Bears have eight, felids have thirty six and invertebrates have more than a million. That makes it very hard to parse through and make determinations on what we should be focusing our efforts on. It also is a valuable resource. Their website (TITAG.org) covers topics like education, conservation and husbandry care sheets for experts and beginners alike. They provide grants for research and projects. Even listservs that many of us already use for communication for the "Bug" community initially go through TITAG.

TITAG attempts to cover a lot of ground before the conference in what amounts to a short amount of time. Then during the conference many of the members help with numerous conference tasks where needed and they even facilitate a silent auction. This paper may sound like an unofficial and shameless advertisement for TITAG, but it has been an invaluable resource that has directly influenced what I have done and what I could eventually do.

Lastly, I strongly advise anyone wanting to help or curious as to what else goes on to talk to the TITAG members. They want your input and they could use your skills whatever they happen to be.