

# RESEARCH ROLE

*Zoology graduate Carys Hudson writes about the year she has just completed as the Zoo's first Research Assistant.*

**T**HE Research Assistant position is a new, one year work placement scheme that allows graduates to gain valuable experience in a unique research and conservation environment. Dr Stephanie Wehnelt, the Research Officer, runs a very busy department and it was my job to act as her assistant.

The first assignment was to help to develop an Environmental Enrichment video for use during presentations and for reference. This gave me an ideal opportunity to meet keepers in different sections. I also assisted the production company as they completed the video footage at their studios.

During the following weeks I shadowed the vets on their daily clinical rounds and was extremely lucky to observe and assist with a Black Rhino operation. These amazing creatures are my favourites and as a conditional part of my work placement, I am conducting a research project on the behavioural indicators of oestrus in the Black Rhino. As most methods of detecting oestrus in rhinos involves expensive hormone analysis or invasive procedures, my project investigates the non-clinical signs, which are less expensive but, as yet, generally inconclusive. This project will hopefully identify the behavioural signs of oestrus in order to assist with the conservation breeding programme. Another task was to learn about the medical database system *MedArks* and to input clinical data for the medical records.

*Zootrition* is a database system widely used in zoos to establish the correct diet for specific species. Whilst assisting Mark Pilgrim (Chief Curator) on his Ecuadorian Amazon Parrot studbook, I was able to use the database to research the

recommended nutritionally balanced diets for certain species.

Around 150 students come to Chester Zoo every year to undertake BSc, MSc and PhD research projects. They often need guidance and advice during their data collection period, which is provided by the Research Officer. Having undertaken my own BSc research project at Marwell Zoo, I've been able to offer some help through my own experiences.

Along with the daily task of answering queries from students via email, I also produced information sheets on subjects such as *re-introduction of Chester Zoo animals* and *Chimpanzee Forest* for other zoos and interested parties. One of my first major projects was to produce the proceedings for the 3rd Annual Symposium on Zoo Research that was organised by Stephanie and held at Chester Zoo in July last year. I very much enjoyed taking part in this year's Zoo Research Symposium at Bristol Zoo in July. It was a great opportunity to meet other people in similar jobs and exchange ideas and experiences.

There are many 'in-house' projects taking place, co-ordinated by the Research Officer. I assisted the keepers by observing the animals for set periods during the day and recording their behaviour. Other projects have included Orang utan saliva sample collection for cortisol level analysis. However being spat at at 8am is not a very sociable wake up call!

I attended the Rhino May Day Symposium in London to listen to representatives from Uganda and Zimbabwe. Unfortunately, despite many conservation efforts, the Rhino population is still under serious threat



▲ Getting hands-on experience during a rhino operation.

from poaching. The charity *Save The Rhino International* has organised a sponsored Rhino Cycle ride from Greenwich to Port Lympne in Kent. The 70 mile distance has to be completed in one day – and I think I must be mad to have agreed to take part! It's for a very good cause and all the money raised goes directly to the ground.

Research involves conveying information in an analytical and concise manner and one way to share this information is by giving talks and presentations. Stephanie and I were invited to give a presentation on 'Environmental Enrichment – Theories and Practices' at Cambridge University's Anthropology department. I've also been able to give Power Point presentations to students from Manchester Metropolitan University and Chester College.

It's incredible to think the year is now over. It has been a very enjoyable experience and hopefully will lead on to a job in a similar field. I'm very grateful to Chester Zoo for giving me this unique and varied experience.