



Internship Case Study: David Meyer

Before becoming a volunteer at ZSL London Zoo, David thought he wanted to go into mechanical engineering. His experience working with primates however inspired him to study anthropology instead. David is currently doing his undergraduate degree at the University of Wales, Lampeter, and is spending a study year abroad in Canada.

How did you go about volunteering at ZSL London Zoo?

Almost all zoos have a volunteer scheme, and are always looking for new recruits. It was simply a matter of filling out an application form. I found myself finishing sixth form without a job, and my Grandma, who had always loved animals encouraged to apply while I wasn't doing anything.

What did your placement entail?

I worked almost entirely with the public, despite my friends' misconceptions that all I did was shovel elephant poo. I would talk to people about the animals; mostly the primates: what they eat, how long they live for, and how well they have settled in to the zoo. A volunteer also learns to notice when an animal is stressed or excited, and you have to tell people to behave themselves. I also cleaned out the less venomous snakes' cages, and got to handle them occasionally as part of display about the illegal trade in animal skins.

How did your placement influence your interest in anthropology?

Before I started working at the London Zoo, I wanted to study mechanical engineering. I thought all humanities were at best poor examples of science, and at worst, political agendas made to look like a scientific study. After working with ZSL London

Zoo however, I realized that this wasn't the case at all. When I joined a year ago, the 'Gorilla Kingdom' had just opened. The team of Primatologists were working hard to ensure the two new gorillas; Bobby and his partner Zaire, were comfortable in their new home. Needless to say the new exhibit was a hit, and thousands of visitors flocked in daily to see the new arrivals. Gorillas have very subtle body language; a change in position and a certain 'look' can mean that a gorilla's thinking 'If they don't stop, these guys are going to see the theatrical version of King-Kong'.

A volunteer very quickly becomes a master of primate body language. I was interested in the body language but it was Zaire's intelligence that made me really interested in biological anthropology. Zaire had a fondness for sitting outdoors on sunny days, regardless of temperature. On a particularly windy, cold day, she pulled out a selection of stumps of reeds, and fashioned them into a windbreak. She also likes small children, often looking into prams that mothers have turned to face the enclosure. Zaire is a very old gorilla, and she never had any children of her own.

A person cannot help but to draw the conclusion that her affection for human children is an expression for her longing, but her inability to conceive. Eventually the pair settled down, and the keepers made the pair a threesome, with Effie, the very attractive sixteen year old gorilla. Zaire understandably disapproved of the attention Bobby gave to this new, much younger female. For several months Zaire's envy divided the group, neither Effie nor Zaire allowed the other to be with Bobby. Recently a new gorilla was introduced, Jukie, an even younger Gorilla than Effie, whom Zaire took a liking to, but Effie saw as a threat to Bobbie's attention. The saga is ongoing, but with the introduction of a new gorilla, the inter-sexual politics is currently at a stalemate.

Zaire's interaction seemed more complicated than most soap operas, and was undeniably human in action and intention. This is what really sparked my interest in biological anthropology. I feel that what separates humans from the rest of the rest of the animal kingdom, most definitely isn't behaviour and perhaps not even intelligence.

What do you want to learn with your degree in biological anthropology?

The way biological anthropology works, is that it studies human society, and human evolutionary development in a scientific way, and as such is at the forefront of the 'Social-Natural Scientist' cold war. I think that the skills you can learn are incredibly exciting. Applying the scientific method to the study of humans requires a large degree of knowledge which must be devoted to critique and logic, which appeals to my mathematical nature. It also requires an understanding of biology, anatomy and an appreciation for culture, language and humanity, which appeals to my curiosity about people in general. In short, I feel that studying biological anthropology is the best place for an aimless would-be scholar.