

BIOLOGIST JOSÉ KOK:

‘We are responsible for the wellbeing of the animals’

José Kok, head of Animal Care at Ouwehands Zoo, is often recognized by children these days as ‘the lady on TV’. ‘I quite often see a budding biologist in a child like that. Maybe I can stimulate their interest by talking about the zoo’s mission. That’s why I do it.’

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A hot summer’s day in Rhenen, and the Netherlands is enjoying a ‘corona holiday’. At the entrance to Ouwehands Zoo there is a long and winding queue to show the tickets bought online. The two giant pandas from China are a star attraction, especially since they had a baby at the beginning of May. ‘But José is a star too,’ says the receptionist when I ask for the head of Animal Care. José Kok, who graduated in Biology from the Agricultural College in Wageningen in 1986, knows all there is to know about big bears, including the giant panda.

Two young pandas, the female Wu Wen and the male Xing Ya, came to Rhenen from China in 2017 after long negotiations. Accommodation fit for royalty was built for the pair, styled like a pagoda and with several storeys and rooms, and a farrowing hole

in the cellar. A square and a section of ‘Great Wall of China’ complete the panda palace.

Today, Xing Ya is hanging almost motionless in a tree in front of an audience of hundreds. Young mother Wu Wen is still in the farrowing hole, and no one is allowed near her. But on an enormous screen, the visitors can see a baby giant panda lying on its mother’s belly, and looking at least as relaxed as his dad a few storeys higher up.

TELEVISION PRIZE

The receptionist is right. As we walk around the zoo, it seems all eyes are on José Kok. ‘That’s the lady on the TV,’ we hear repeatedly. In her ‘natural habitat’, José Kok just goes on talking, but there is no escaping the attention. She is asked to pose for a photo twice during the guided tour. Kok has her appearances on the children’s news pro-

gramme *Jeugdjournaal* and the Dutch TV series *Real Life in the Zoo* to thank for this star status. The second season of the series finished just before the summer, and was nominated twice for the Dutch TV prize, the Gouden Televizier-Ring. ‘In the series, we show the behaviour of animals in the zoo and the things we do to take good care of them,’ explains Kok. ‘Children recognize me from the TV series and the *Jeugdjournaal*. The attention doesn’t interest me. What interests me is that I quite often see budding biologists in those children. Maybe I can stimulate that interest by talking about the zoo’s mission. That’s why I do it.’ For Kok, part of that mission is to let the animals be ‘ambassadors’ for their species in the wild, whose survival is under threat. ‘That is only possible if they display behaviour typical of their species, which they >



José Kok, head of Animal Care in Ouwehands Zoo, at the panda enclosure.



José Kok and a colleague deliver food to the giant pandas' outdoor shelter in Ouwehands Zoo.

will only do if they are well looked after in good housing,' says Kok. She came to work at Ouwehands in 1994 after responding to a newspaper advertisement for a 'biologist-educator', and she was allowed to get straight to work on the educational role of the 'Bear Forest', two hectares of wooded land set aside for brown bears that have been abused in the past. There is such a long queue at the entrance to the 'Bear Forest' that Kok phones Security to ask them to come and enforce physical distancing. 'We work with time slots so as to spread visitors over the day. At any given time of day we are allowed to have 2500 visitors here.'

Do the visitor numbers confirm the popularity of the zoo – thanks to the giant pandas?

'People have a thing about giant pandas. They make them start thinking about the fate of this species. My motto is: "Be amazed

and admire": knowledge breeds respect for nature. Not just the pandas' habitat, but that of almost all the animals here that is threatened. We want to do something about that. Ouwehands Zoo Foundation donates more than a million euros a year to protecting the habitats of species found here in the zoo, including the giant panda. We replicate their habitat as closely as we can here, and we breed the animals.'

What are the breeding programmes for?

'In breeding programmes we exchange animals with other zoos to keep up the genetic diversity and prevent inbreeding. We often consult the international nature conservation organization IUCN – the organization behind the red lists of threatened animal species. We bring their work to our visitors' attention. The aim is to keep the species going. Yes, see the zoo as a reserve population for the animals in the wild.'

But if you want to save, say, the giant panda, surely you've got to stop the damage to the biotope too?

'Of course the decline of the giant panda is due to the growth of the Chinese economy and population, with the creation of motorways, railway lines and dams, and the massive expansion of urban areas. I am critical of that, and I am pleased that the Chinese president Xi Jinping has embraced the giant panda as a symbol of China, and has pledged to protect it. We are contributing by creating green corridors for the giant pandas, together with the Worldwide Fund for Nature, so that isolated habitats are connected. The population in the wild is actually growing!

'In the 15 years that we'll have Wu Wen and Xing Ya here on loan, we'll have paid China a million dollars a year. We have verified that 85 per cent of that is spent in China on research, conservation of the panda's

‘In fact, the visitors fund all the research as well. I think that’s a good thing’

habitat – which benefits many other species too – and releasing pandas into the wild. We recoup that million dollars plus the investment in the giant panda pagoda from ticket sales and merchandising. In fact, the visitors fund all the research as well. I think that’s a good thing. I’m not the tree-hugging kind of biologist. I want to save animal species through green business.’

The Party for the Animals (a Dutch political party) talks of ‘harming animal welfare’ and wants an end to zoos ‘in their current form’.

‘Sadly, the Party for the Animals doesn’t let us – or any other Dutch zoo – inform them about the role of zoos in nature conservation. They have not responded to any of our invitations so far. They would be enthusiastic if they saw what we do here for the animals and for the survival of their species.

‘Just last year we provided photos of our polar bears for the development of a method for identifying polar bears in the wild. That’s what I do this for! Information from zoos is used to protect the species in the wild.’

Why did you study biology yourself?

‘When I was 11 we moved to Oostburg in Zeeuws-Vlaanderen, where I developed my love of nature. I learned to milk cows and shear sheep, I spent a lot of time on the beach and I was involved in a local nature conservation project. Biology was the obvious choice.’

Why at Wageningen?

‘The great thing about studying in Wageningen was the freedom of choice.

As well as the compulsory biology courses, I did other things such as epidemiology. The logical fact-based reasoning skills that I learned still come in useful in my current work.

‘And the feeling I got when I came into Wageningen by bus in autumn 1977, after a false start doing Dutch for a year at Utrecht, and saw things like the Bijenhuis bee centre with its honey for sale. And then the dance

parties at Unitas, the pub sessions with the basketball team in Loburg and Troost. That feeling of “yes, this is where I belong”. And I still feel that way, because I came back to live here again some time ago. It’s a small town in a beautiful area. The university has a cosmopolitan atmosphere – and it’s really multicultural.’

Have you got the dream job you envisaged as a student?

‘I don’t think dream job is the right term. I’ve got an incredibly nice job with a lot of freedom that enables me to work towards my dream: conserving nature with a place in it for humanity. But there is also the ethical dilemma about keeping animals in captivity. I carry that around with me all the time. Every day there is the question: how can we keep the animals in a way that feels responsible to us, so that they can fulfil their ambassador role? How can we improve their housing so that they can display their natural behaviour such as climbing, digging or swimming? Is the make-up of the group right, and how can we improve the choice of partner? To that end, we’ve got a dating aviary for young vultures.

‘Upsetting things happen sometimes, too – like the death of a baby polar bear in June. It was taken by its older sister and the mother didn’t intervene. That is strange. Dissection at Utrecht University showed that the victim had a lung condition, which might be why the mother didn’t do anything. A polar bear doesn’t invest in new life that is not viable. We don’t know. But there is always the fear that we did something wrong. We are responsible for the animals’ wellbeing. That is the tough side of this work.’ ■



JOSÉ KOK (61)

Degree: Biology, Wageningen Agricultural College (1978-1987)

Job: Zoological manager at Ouwehands Zoo