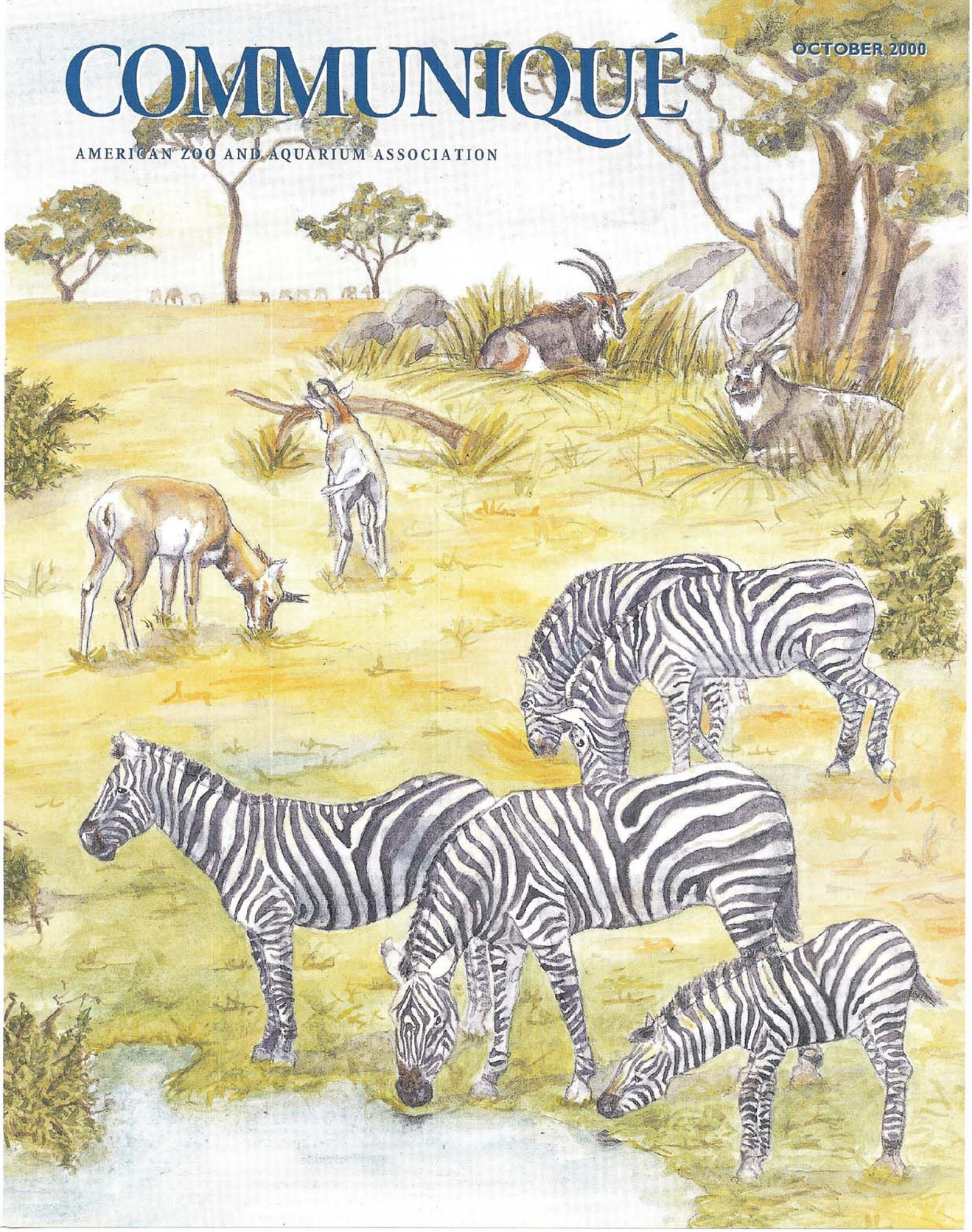


# COMMUNIQUE

OCTOBER 2000

AMERICAN ZOO AND AQUARIUM ASSOCIATION



## Recreating Nature Doesn't Come Naturally

By *Rob Halpern*, Curator of Horticulture  
The Bronx Zoo

What is zoo horticulture? After more than a dozen years in the field, I find myself asking the question more and more, seeking the answer at ever deeper levels of meaning. Perhaps it is because I have been associated with four different zoos where exhibit philosophy, landscape style, regional and cultural tastes were each a little different. Most zoos are a collection of landscape styles, different around the main gate from the animal exhibits, which are different from the shops. But an all-over approach is usually apparent and each zoo will develop its style either by choice or by default.

Every zoo recognizes its role as a public park, at some level, a recreational facility, and annuals are bedded out. In some zoos, the beds feature geraniums, in others cannas and bananas. Many beautifully landscaped zoos maximize bedding out and prefer a park-like arrangement of lovely trees, flowering shrubs and perennials. I have watched young parents walk through such zoos with their children and I am certain they are thinking how pretty it all is. I agree with them. We could carp that this is 19th century zoo design, but that does not make it any less pretty or popular. Then there are many zoos that create "naturalized" plantings such as beds of various ornamental grasses by the lions or peaceful and interesting woodland gardens by the wolves. I can think of a number of very attractive zoo landscapes around animal exhibits. They are less apt to call attention to themselves, but are still noticeable as "horticulture". Visitors may want to take notes on plant combinations and recreate such landscapes at home. They are all what we recognize as "zoo horticulture".

The Bronx Zoo (New York) is 265 acres of woods, for the most part, and perhaps because for its 100 years it was not developed as a landscape park, I am becoming more focused on creating experiences with Nature, which are beautiful and visually powerful but not "naturalized." To explain this difference with an example: our native woodlands are beautiful and a hiker can have many rich experiences of Nature, while a Japanese woodland stroll garden is also beautiful, but Nature is interpreted, rearranged, to heighten one's awareness. While subtle, the landscape does call attention to itself as something some person crafted (no matter how well). Can zoo horticulture appear less crafted without looking weedy, I wonder? More spontaneous, while still impressive?

The Congo Gorilla Forest at the Bronx Zoo is a 6.5-acre exhibit,

mostly outdoors, featuring 2 troops of lowland gorillas, okapi, mandrill, red river hogs, several guenon species, Congo peafowl and other birds, fish, reptiles and insects of the central African tropical rainforest. We broke ground in late 1995 and opened in June 1999. The design process began with discussions in 1988 and continued until the last minute. Since the beginning of construction the design team, including the Curator of Horticulture, each week walked through the site to discuss, evaluate and redesign recent and upcoming developments. Through these close and constant collaborations, the paths, waterfalls, planters, viewing areas, interpretation, and animal areas all developed together with the landscape. The questions I found most useful, as we examined the site were "Where is this? When is this? What happened here?" I could have just designed a planting plan of nifty, rare temperate species to create a tropical effect (a "naturalized" landscape), but developing the clear ecological logic of the area with the entire design team helps develop the architectural elements and the landscape towards a coherent expression, an inevitable conclusion. Lacking this process, the project ends up as another zoo exhibit.

Why do most zoo exhibits usually look like, well, zoo exhibits? We know that they are not Nature. They are architecture disguised and decorated. (This seems antithetical to Nature). It is a challenge not to think of them as constructions, but unless we can break away from that paradigm, we will create horticulture, not Nature. This is a big problem with planting plans done only on paper, not in the field. Such plans assume that the constructed exhibit is reality, and work within its constraints. If we are to succeed at recreating Nature, we must appear to transcend or at least obliterate those constraints.

The quintessential part of any zoo exhibit is the artificial rock-work (mud bank, fallen tree, etc.). The exhibit designer or landscape architect who designs these elements as part of the larger landscape should ask themselves, "What will be planted here? How will the plants be arranged? How will this be maintained?" How can the designing of the exhibit be separated from these questions? The design should start with the final look and work backwards. When it starts with the architectural elements and works forward, the result looks like a zoo exhibit, a planted landscape. Exhibit designers usually know what they want the final look to be, but unless they are excellent plantsmen and experienced zoo grounds managers, they are unlikely to succeed at their goal on their own. Even when the designer has such experience and skill, the end product benefits from the dialogue between

(continued on page 49)

## **Recreating Nature Doesn't Come Naturally**

exhibit design and planting design, between construction elements and green elements, between what was planned and what seems right during planting. So as the zoo's horticulturist, I want to start a project before the beginning, not after the fact and I am very interested in exhibit design, construction and installation.

A zoo exhibit can be a journey to the realm of Nature, inspiring a love of Nature and a commitment to conservation. Zoo horticulture contributes best to that experience, I find, in exhibit landscaping where the illusion of unself-conscious Nature is created consciously. Zoo horticulturists learn quickly that they are not the stars of the zoo production, so we have very little opportunity to put a lot of ego into our creations. Perhaps our most successful creations have no ego at all. Our craft is at its best when it is not apparent that we were ever there. But we must be there. cq

---