

# Lions, Tigers, and Caring

ANIMAL KEEPER REBECCA STITES CARES FOR GREAT CATS AT THE SMITHSONIAN'S NATIONAL ZOO AND HELPS PREPARE NEW TIGER CUBS FOR THEIR PUBLIC DEBUT. BY LESLIE QUANDER WOOLDRIDGE

Rebecca Stites kneels outside a safety wall as two African lions pace inside. The golden-hued sisters, Shera and Nababiep (aka Naba), look sleek and strong—and very aware of the fact that Stites, 32, is on the other side of the woven metal mesh. Dressed in a gray zoo shirt and khakis, she stays behind the yellow safety line on the concrete floor before alighting to fetch a tray of raw meatballs. She closes an interior door to separate the two cats and walks closer to the gate.

“Shera, down,” Stites says, and the nearly 300-pound animal drops to the floor. Then: “Shera, bench,” Stites says, and the lion ambles to the bench in the corner. The big cat even stands on her hind legs at one point, towering over the five-foot-four-inch-tall Stites, before allowing the animal

keeper to peer into her mouth with a flashlight. After each completed request, Shera gets a meatball—positive reinforcement test.

forcement—and the treats begin to dwindle.

“I recognize that it’s a special experience,” Stites says after the exercise is over. As a great cats keeper at the Smithsonian’s National Zoo, she helps care for its lions (the two sisters and a male, Luke) in addition to pitching in with Sumatran tigers: a male, Kavi, and a female, Damai, who gave birth to two cubs this August to much fanfare. “I’m always outside. Everything I need to do with these guys, I can do with a barrier between us,” she says, still outside the gate. “You spend a lot of time building a relationship with the animal... you just have to [make it] a positive experience.”

Stites grew up in the DC area and thought she’d become a veterinarian after seeing her first animal surgery as a child. She later discovered a love for the National Zoo, began volunteering, and started working there in 2005.





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After recently completing her master’s degree (studying zoo collections, of course), Stites begins her workday as early as 6:30 AM. Her tasks? She helped prepare the new tiger cubs for their swim test before their public debut—planned for late fall at press time—ensuring that if they fall into their enclosure’s moat they can get back to dry land. (The three-foot-tall wall between the moat and the yard is an obstacle for a young animal. That said, the very tall wall between the moat and public area helps prevent *all* tigers from escaping.) Her ongoing work includes securing animals, a process that requires coordination, and training them to deal with veterinary exams.

Stites was also at the zoo in 2010 for the births of Shera and Naba’s seven lion cubs—fathered by Luke, they were the first for the zoo in 20 years—and later said good-bye when cubs were sent to other parks as recommended by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ Species Survival Plan Programs. Now, with the two sister lions expected to go into heat again and would-be-dad Luke ready to be “introduced,” she says, this winter “we may have two pregnant lions.”

It’s exciting to see these adorable creatures enter the world, but their births are also key for conservation efforts. The world’s great cats are struggling to survive. Wild tigers are classified as “endangered” and as few as 3,200 exist in the wild today, reports World Wildlife Fund (WWF). And African lions are “vulnerable,” according to the International Union

for Conservation of Nature.

Like other animals on the watch list, tigers compete for space with humans—they’ve lost 93 percent of their historic range—and “face unrelenting pressure from poaching, retaliatory killing, and habitat loss,” according to WWF. And even though wild Sumatran tigers are legally protected in Indonesia, less than 400 of these tigers remain in the wild partly due to unyielding poachers, who trade tiger parts (from whiskers to tails) in illegal wildlife markets.

“What’s really important is education for the public so that they have an understanding of some of the trouble the animals are in,” Stites says, as she stands near Shera, who reclines quietly on the other side of the gate. “The tiger population needs to have an increase in the gene pool. We also need to increase genetic diversity.”

And so the flashlight-toting Stites watches over the zoo’s precious cargo. Though the sharp-toothed great cats are nothing like pets, she feels “comfortable” with them—in part, perhaps, because she enjoys high-adrenaline activities—but she also respects them, along with the zoo’s safety protocols. The tray of meatballs long gone, she reflects on the animals she loves. “[To] have a chance at repopulating an area—if we don’t completely lose the land we have left,” she says, “keeping a healthy population in captivity may be the only way of doing it.” **CF**

FROM ABOVE LEFT:  
Sumatran tigers, like  
this one born at the  
National Zoo, are  
endangered in the  
wild; Shera came to  
the zoo from a  
private reserve in  
South Africa.