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CELEBRATE NATURE

ANSWER THE CALL
OF THE WILD

INTERVIEW WITH DR. MARK BEHIND THE SCENES AT ANIMAL KINGDOM

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Behind the Scenes

with Dr. Mark Penning

Vice President of Animals, Science, and Environment for Disney Parks

INTERVIEW BY RAIN BLANKEN

Often smiling and always eager to share information, Dr. Mark Penning is well-known among superfans of the resident animals at Disney's Animal Kingdom. Dr. Mark (which he prefers over "Dr. Penning") got his start in South Africa and specialized in working with birds and reptiles as well as performing surgery on lions and elephants there. His work at Disney as the Vice President of Animals, Science, and Environment includes supervising the care of animals and environments at Disney Parks locations all over the world.

I had the chance to ask Dr. Mark a few questions about what it's like behind the scenes at Animal Kingdom.

Rain: How did your previous work in South Africa prepare you for working with the multitude of species at Disney's Animal Kingdom?

Dr. Mark: South Africa is a beautiful country. There is nothing quite like being alone out in the wilderness and knowing there is such an incredible array of wildlife around you—you just don't know what you might encounter next. It makes one feel so alive! I was accustomed to working with minimal support and working out solutions on the fly.

At Disney, our incredible animal care team really does offer the best care to our animals, with a talented professional cast and an exceptional support team, with the best medical equipment. When we are confronted with a challenging task, people from all over the amazing Walt Disney Company come out to assist—engineers, scientists, technicians, Imagineers, and more. We are very lucky here.



A candid moment with the elephants. PHOTO BY BRETT SVENSON

Can you tell us a bit about what it's been like working with the National Geographic team on the *Magic of Disney's Animal Kingdom*? Feel free to reveal any bloopers, awkward moments, or challenges.

The Nat Geo experience was amazing; it was a pleasure working with such a professional group of people. They split into four separate teams to capture footage at several different locations at Walt Disney World, and they all had to wear keeper costumes so as not to be unfamiliar to the animals. They had tons of camera equipment and made it all look so easy.

They showed a lot of patience too. Animals don't always do what you expect them to do, and we had all agreed that we wouldn't do anything just for the cameras—the cameras were there to capture things we were doing. Safety was a top priority during the filming.

Many of our animals are extremely dangerous, and one has to be constantly mindful of our safety protocols. We had zoological managers present at all times

to make sure everyone was safe. They got some incredible footage, and I loved seeing the excitement at the end of a long day of filming. The animal care team did really well; some of us hate being in front of a camera, and others love it. Luckily we had enough folks who love it and are proud to share what they do here.

The keeper and veterinarian teams at WDW are seldom seen—but do such dedicated work. Many of the keepers on *Magic of Disney's Animal Kingdom* appear to have long-lasting relationships with the animals. Can you speak to the importance of these relationships?

In our profession, those relationships are as important as any other element of what we do. We want our animals to thrive here, and we work hard to make sure that each individual animal has a team of keepers who can build a relationship of trust with that animal. When an animal trusts the keeper, it is calm, curious, relaxed, and it feels comfortable doing its normal range of behaviors. That helps us tremendously when we need to do health checks or examine an animal with an injury.

With the relationship of trust, we can do physical exams, blood draws, and various tests and procedures to help those animals and even have them participate in their own medical care. We have to build a relationship of trust with the animal without compromising our safety or the safety of the animal. We usually start off with one keeper being the point person, but that person's job is to have

the animal get comfortable with other people as well to set that animal up for success. It is a team effort.

What inspired you to work with animals?

I have had a profound love of nature from my earliest memories and used to love visiting the national parks in South Africa, the famous Kruger National Park in particular. Those visits always inspired me, and the more I learned about the ecology and about animals, the more it drew me in.

I found it fascinating, and studying veterinary science along with some of the smartest people I have ever met was both humbling and inspiring at the same time. I have learned so much from the people around me, and I am very grateful to them all. David Attenborough and

Gerald Durrell were great inspirations, and I owe much of my career aspirations to Dr. Dolittle and his Pushmi-Pullyu.

Let's talk about animal personalities—they can be so expressive and particular. Can you tell us about a specific individual animal (and by name) who has a big personality?

Gorilla dad, Gino, is an imposing figure, and he takes his role as protector of his family very seriously. He also likes us to acknowledge that he is the number one. When we do backstage tours with VIP guests, he sees how people treat the VIP guest with reverence, and he notices little cues that suggest this person is actually number one.

That simply won't do for Gino! So he will sneak up toward the VIP guest and suddenly launch into an astonishingly



It's very important to remember who the real VIP is. PHOTO BY MIKE BILLYCK



Growing gorillas need to get their greens in. PHOTO BY LAURIE SAPP

loud and vigorous demonstration of his power, complete with beating of his very impressive chest with arms that are as wide as an average person's waist. I dare say even the strongest and bravest of our VIP guests may feel intimidated by Gino's display. Once satisfied that everyone knows who is actually number one, Gino will happily settle down to munch on some of his favorite grapes.

Lilly is like the older sister who isn't sure if she should get them in trouble or help them out of trouble. The moms are busy doing what moms do to make the family successful, and dad Gino has an afternoon snooze after playing with the rambunctious boys. The youngsters especially love the large viewing window and seeing our guests—it is their very own big-screen TV.

The gorillas at Gorilla Falls are peaceful, playful, and seem to effortlessly hold up a mirror to our own families. What can you tell our readers about these gorilla families and their similarities to humans?

Gorillas are amazing animals, and I have been lucky enough to follow them and observe them in Rwanda and in Uganda. At Disney's Animal Kingdom, the family group certainly functions in some ways similar to humans. The two little boys like to play rough and charge around their habitat with reckless abandon.

Here at WDW Magazine, we love to talk about animal babies! Can you set the scene for our readers and let them know about the anticipation, anxiety, and excitement that comes with the birth of a new baby at Disney's Animal Kingdom?

There is always a lot of excitement around new births. Whether a giraffe, an elephant, or a giant stingray, the experienced moms are generally pretty relaxed and usually want a little privacy. We stay close by and keep an eye on them in case they need some help.



Disney has welcomed many giraffe births over the years.

PHOTO BY CLIFF WANG

First-time moms sometimes need more attentive care. Our keepers train them to voluntarily position themselves for ultrasound scans so that we can monitor the development of the fetus, and of course, these exams can tell us how many babies to expect.

We always celebrate new births, whether it be the hatching of a leaf-tailed gecko, a critically endangered blue-crowned laughingthrush from China, or a giraffe

calf being born. Babies are generally cute, but the most adorable for me are baby elephants, rhinos, and aardvarks; they are always so funny to watch. The young elephant getting frustrated with his trunk that doesn't seem to do what he wants it to, or the rhino that looks like the incarnation of a bouncy ball—they all make one appreciate the magic of nature.

What are some of the quiet or backstage moments that the animals and keepers have experienced that were impactful to you, but that guests never get to see?

Doing a dive in the main tank at The Seas with Nemo & Friends at EPCOT is always inspiring to me. It is so quiet down there and so rich with life. I value those quiet moments when one can be surrounded by nature and shut out everything else. Walking through Disney's Animal Kingdom at sunrise is such a beautiful experience, with the lions roaring in unison, the gibbons sounding like a wayward ambulance siren as they leap around on branches high up in the trees, the birds all celebrating the birth of a new day, and the crisp fresh air of early morning. It is a special time indeed.

Let's face it: You're Insta-famous! And so are the animals you so diligently post about. What do you hope your Instagram fans take away from these intimate looks at the lives of these animals?

That is very kind, thank you, but I hope it is my team and the animals they care for that are famous. My hopes for the



impact of these posts are very ambitious.

I would love folks to take away a couple of things: firstly, an appreciation of the incredible animal care team and their work; secondly, an appreciation of the fantastic animals that we have here; thirdly, curiosity about these animals and a desire to learn more; and finally, a desire to protect habitat for all these animals, starting in their own backyard. If they don't do so already, I hope your readers will join us on Instagram by following @DrMarkatDisney.

Finally, what have you learned from the animals you have worked with? Any profound lessons to share?

I am a firm believer that life lessons abound in nature! They are everywhere we look, and we just have to look hard enough to find them. One can learn much about teamwork by carefully watching painted dogs hunt

or leadership by watching an elephant matriarch and her family.

Seeing sweet green grass growing out after a devastating fire makes you think about resilience and coming back stronger; seeing frogs and fish magically appear from a dusty and seemingly lifeless river bed after the first spring rain makes you think of adaptation in the face of adversity; watching a baby antelope run on wobbly legs within minutes of being born makes you think of courage and doing the best you can with what you have. The lessons are endless.

Most importantly, being out in the wilderness and seeing the big sky, watching the sun set over a horizon of thorny trees and thousands of animals, or the orange/pink glow of a million flamingoes—it makes you realize how priceless nature is and how important it is that we protect it. 🍀

For more animal fun, tune in to *Magic of Disney's Animal Kingdom* on Disney+

Follow Dr. Mark on Instagram
[@drmarkatdisney](https://www.instagram.com/drmarkatdisney)

