

try and deny this theory, Rafa believes that if the animals don't have the conditions around them that allow them to behave naturally, the results will be as undesirable as those that happen in the wild. He was referring to natural phenomena such as animal parents eating their young if they sensed a genetic defect, including birds. Some birds will reabsorb the eggs into their bodies before they lay, some species of birds, some falcons for example, will have two chicks one of which will kill the other. It's called Cainism from Cain and Abel - the survival of the fittest, with the parents opting for the strongest.

On the day we spoke to Rafa, a zoo was being criticised because of news that a lion had eaten her cubs and claims were being made that zoos were therefore bad things. However in nature "this is something normal, for whatever defect an animal might have. It even happens sometimes with the parrots' eggs. They may see that an egg isn't perfect, or the embryo isn't developing properly so they stop incubating them or they eat them. I'm often asked by breeders and workers in our field projects if this is normal – yes it's normal. Nature is very wise and sees things that we can't see because human eyes are not the same as those of the wild. Parrots can tell if they are male or female or from the same family, something that we can't tell with our eyes. What happens in the wild, always has an explication and today, if the modern zoo hadn't been invented, you'd have to invent it.

"This is a phrase that is underlined by our President Wolfgang Kiessling, because it is true, the modern zoo is the only place where you can scientifically observe what is almost impossible to see in the wild.... The majority of the time the animals are hidden, you can't see them, and what happens there is very difficult to observe even if you have hidden cameras.

"Animal behaviour is something thrilling that you can see in modern zoos. You can scientifically study these animals and help those in the wild with the knowledge you acquire. That is what we do at The Loro Parque Foundation and that is my job right now, to blend what happens in controlled environments with what happens in the wild and we've been working with successful projects for many years now."

Speaking of the recent trip, Rafa referred to the amazement and sometimes envy of his colleagues in the field because of the depth and breadth of knowledge the Foundation staff have obtained about breeding and animal behaviour at the zoo. The field workers have maybe 10 seconds to watch a bird before it disappears over the horizon; modern zoo workers have the luxury of watching it much closer and for much longer.

To those who say animals shouldn't be in cages, Rafa admits that zoos haven't always been what they are today, however conditions and laws have changed and brought forth the modern zoos. "We are an example at a worldwide level for our track record of working for excellence not just in breeding but in making sure the animals are well cared for... As humans we have our own cages – cities. Most of us like to live near a health centre, a supermarket, a vet. We like to eat every day at a table. That happens too with species in controlled environments, you have to make an effort so that all the conditions are perfect."

During the field trips he saw that "there are still places on the earth that you can protect and that investigation is protecting them, because it's investigation that gives us the knowledge, about what they eat etc. Often what these animals need isn't only a territory, but their food (some animals only eat one species of plant for example) and the tranquillity that the species needs. Knowing this is vital."

Some animals have to travel to remote areas to find what they need, curiously some have found their refuge near man when cities have expanded and planted tropical gardens, the cities are a little warmer and they find protection against predators etc. "So, being near a city can also be the salvation of some species although that seems incredible."

Rafa fights shy when asked about his favourite projects. He claims that his favourites are the latest ones he's working on, although he admits to a particular weakness for the projects that involved Bolivia's Blue-Throated Macaw, which they managed to reproduce in captivity and in large numbers, the first in the world to do so, and it's one of the nine species the Foundation has helped to save from extinction. But Rafa gets emotional when he mentions his other choice, the Lear's Macaw. After their spectacular success with the Spix,



↑ Rafa checking one of the twin baby sloths (2010)

Brasil sent the Parque a pair of these birds and to date they have raised more than 30, of which 15 have been returned to Brasil and six were set free in the wild in the Caatinga area after being taught how and what to eat and drink in the wild and all about predators – including man. He filled up when he showed me the video of his "babies" flying free.

A lot goes into looking after these animals that the public never sees, such as growing a specific food for a particular animal on their organic farm, heat lamps for the colder evenings of winter for the smaller species, comforting lighting during storms or fireworks to show them where to take refuge or a permanently heated false thermal rock for the reptiles to warm themselves on.

Rafa is an avid reader and insists that you can't get everything off the Internet – you need books. He is also an internationally-renowned, award-winning speaker and writer, has won recognition for his articles in specialist publications, authored in three different languages. He has written scripts for animal documentaries, regularly takes part in TV and radio forums and his articles on breeding and conservation are published in the five continents.

The Foundation is also now putting special emphasis on trying to make their scientific discoveries and articles easier for the general public to take in and understand. They aim to provoke the curiosity of people so that they will look deeper into what interests them and not just accept the

conclusions or claims of the first articles they see. Waking that curiosity is one of the reasons why you can see into the nursery, laboratory, operating and x-ray rooms as well as the 'pantry'.

And finally, Rafa would like to recommend to everyone who

visits Loro Parque that they make a point of seeing the Animal Embassy where there are representatives of the Max Planck Institute – specialists in animal behaviour. They are working with the parrots which are able to open combination locks or follow quite complicated numerical sequences and

it to me how intelligent a parrot is?'. Well, it's very important, because the way to protect the parrots, the lions, the rhinos, the elephants, orcas, cetaceans, and all that we can imagine is based on investigation. Any knowledge that we obtain from the animal world is knowledge too about



win a seed or a peanut as a prize if they get the answer right. They can be observed through a one way vinyl-covered window. The scientists have found that they have to wear opaque sunglasses to work with the animals or the parrots will follow their eyes to the answers instead of working it out!

"The interesting thing about this is that there are a lot of people who will say, 'and what's

the human species and that is a very important heritage. Everything that science can offer has a value that could help us save life on the whole planet. Anything that adds to that knowledge has a unique and specific value and we have to keep it in a sort of shared safe where we all have the key to access the information and that is the motto of The Loro Parque Foundation." ■

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