

Assistant associate veterinarian at Al Ain Zoo, Majid Al Qassimi is just starting out in his career but he already has firm ideas about what he wants to achieve. Abu Dhabi Week caught up with him to find out more



One of very few UAE nationals working as a vet in the country, Majid Al Qassimi graduated last year from Saint Istvan University of Veterinary Sciences in Budapest and listening to him talk eloquently and passionately about his chosen profession it's hard not to be impressed.

"I just started here at Al Ain Zoo in February – I haven't even completed a year but it feels like I've been here a lot longer," laughs Majid. Yet despite the casual comment, it is immediately clear that this young Emirati takes his career very seriously.

"The reason I became a vet in the first place was not so much just the animals but biological sciences in general. A lot of people assume that you're a vet so you must love animals but it's very dangerous to think that alone can get you through the degree – there are a lot of hard

decisions that come with the territory.

“I have studied so many different things under the umbrella of veterinary science – it’s this big picture approach to the profession that I enjoy. With the huge variety of animals here and the focus on sustainability and environmental conservation, Al Ain Zoo and the profession in general really marries well with what I want to do.”

And despite being a relative newcomer at Al Ain Zoo, it has not taken long for the facility to get under his skin.

“Al Ain Zoo is the largest in the Middle East and also one of the oldest – it’s something that any national should be proud of, as well as anybody that visits the UAE. Since I started working here, I’ve come to realise what an incredible establishment we have.

“The zoo is so important to me not just as a conservation entity but also as an organisation that communicates with the public. When you have a visitor base over Eid holidays reaching close to 100,000, that’s a lot of contact with the public and for me I feel it’s the strongest platform that I can use to educate on the importance of conservation and on the importance of the interactions we have with animals and nature.”

It is this aspect of conservation combined with the desire to pass on his knowledge and spread awareness among other young Emiratis that Majid finds most appealing.

“We’ve developed some vet talks that I did for our Summer Camps involving kids between the ages of four and 14, discussing what it takes to become a vet, the importance of veterinary work, animal conservation and exotic animal trade. I feel that it’s important to get these kids as young as you can to instill the right message in them. Also, when we open the Sheikh Zayed Desert Learning Centre, I hope to have some more interaction and hold more lectures and talks with the public.”

With such altruistic goals clearly very important to him, how does Majid reconcile this with his regular duties as a vet at the zoo? We take a look at a typical day in his life.

7.30am: “Every day, including weekends, we start with our vet meeting. All the vets on duty and the technicians will meet in the clinic and briefly discuss all the cases for the day. We’ll assign duties, so who’s going out into the field, who’s going into the core zoo and who’s staying in the clinic with which patients.

“We’re involved firstly with making sure all the animals we have here are in the best of health. We’re also in charge of ensuring that any new animals that come in to the zoo are screened so there’s a quarantine that we run here to make sure they don’t introduce any foreign diseases into our collection.

“We also deal with the day-to-day issues that occur – maybe there has been a fight or one of the animals feels under the weather – even animals can have an upset tummy every so often.”

12am: At noon, all of the zookeepers take their lunch break so it’s time for Majid and his colleagues to catch up with some admin.

“There’s always some paperwork to be done or following up on lab work, that sort of thing. There’s a lot of work that can be done without a syringe in our hands – there are plans to draw up, protocols, vaccination schedules and so on.”

3pm: Once the keepers are back with the animals in the zoo, the Veterinary department can also return their focus to more specialised tasks.

“We’ll be looking to do specific procedures where we know we’ll have to bring a full team to bear on an animal that needs an intervention. We also plan schedules for coming weeks when we maybe have vaccination programmes and we need to be ready to go as soon as we arrive in the morning.

“There’s always certain logistics that need to be arranged. Of course, throughout the day there’s always someone on standby for emergencies –we could be writing papers and suddenly an

animal will come in so we all need to be at the ready.”

5.30pm: Majid’s working day is drawing to a close and although it can be tiring and demanding, he admits that the initial thrill of working with such majestic animals has never really gone away.

“The first time I saw the lions here was pretty dramatic. When you get to work in such close quarters with these animals it’s pretty shocking how big they actually are. I’ve also got a new fascination with giraffes – the more time you spend with them, the more endearing they become. I’ve worked closely with a couple of patients and whether you like it or not, you slowly become emotionally invested.”

7pm: Despite being fully committed to his chosen profession, Majid certainly knows how to fill whatever spare time he gets.

“I love to play and produce music – I’ve been drumming for the last 13 years now. To keep fit, I play rugby for the Al Ain Mens team and coach the under eights at the club twice a week. I also like to draw, I do a lot of comic-style drawing and when it’s none of these things, I might even find some time to bake.”

Final thoughts: “To the best of my knowledge, there are only four nationals in the country that are vets and I’m the only one to have studied in Europe so I’m very fortunate to have been given the opportunity to work here at Al Ain Zoo – it’s quite a gift. If I could show everybody what my work is like every day, I know there’d be more vets here that are nationals.

“I would say that is my life goal. If I could get more nationals to become vets or to get into biological sciences then I will feel I have achieved something.”

Jon Muller