

PEOPLE, PLACES, AND PRIORITIES

Conservation Success in the Backyard and Beyond

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS



Staff from Association of Zoos and Aquariums-accredited facilities have been involved in wildlife conservation across the globe for decades. They share a passion for the work and a commitment to effecting change, but they also have a finite number of resources to devote to their efforts. Add to this reality the fact that fifteen out of 21 SAFE species require support in countries outside of North America. How does the AZA community, primarily based in the United States and Canada, choose where and how to allocate their expertise, time, money, and personnel? It depends on whom you ask.



Identify the Focus

Many factors go into deciding what to include in a facility's conservation portfolio, but those choices aren't completely set in stone. For example, over the past two decades San Diego Zoo Global in San Diego, Calif., has added a domestic focus to their conservation work.

"When I was first here 25 years ago, about 100 percent of our conservation efforts were international," said Ron Swaisgood, director of recovery ecology at the Zoo's Institute for Conservation Research. "Now it's about two thirds domestic, mostly focused in southern California and Hawaii. The change was intentional and partly mission driven. As an organization, we decided we needed to do a better job with backyard conservation. We weren't known as a go-to place for conservation by organizations like Fish and Wildlife ... they didn't realize the tools and expertise we had. But the growth of the local was not at the cost of global programs." Their species project focus has ranged from the California condor to the giant panda.

Bart Shepherd, senior director, Steinhart Aquarium, California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, Calif., explained that 85 to 90 percent of their conservation work is international because it reflects their mission "to explore, explain, and sustain life."

"We have been thinking beyond our own backyard from the get go," he said. "We thought that amphibians, coral, and coral reefs were where we could make a measurable impact. They're a good match with our current exhibits, space capabilities, and staff talent." Hope for Reefs, a global coral restoration project currently makes up the bulk of their conservation portfolio.

At the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium in Powell, Ohio, vice president of conservation, Mike Kreger, estimates that their focus is 20 percent domestic and 80 percent international, with a portfolio that includes freshwater mussels and hellbenders in North America as well as bonobos and gorillas in Africa.

"Nationally, we choose projects where we have some expertise, where we can offer space for meetings, research, or breeding, or where we can serve the community," said Kreger. Most of the facility's international work takes place through a robust grant program, which in 2018 awarded almost \$1 million to support projects and organizations in 42 countries. "We see the value in checkbook conservation," Kreger added. "We fund projects that we think have a good chance of meeting their objectives and having an impact on the species."

In contrast, the North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro, N.C., emphasizes boots on the ground for both domestic and international projects, according to Rich Bergl, director of conservation, education, and science. "Our approach is to have Zoo staff involved in all of our conservation projects. In 95 percent of what we do, staff is working directly on the project. If we're doing the work we can communicate about it more authentically and we can better establish our identity as a conservation organization. We select projects where we have expertise that is relevant; and we also work on species or parts of the world that are represented in our Zoo—our two exhibits are North America and Africa." Their efforts have focused on species including hellbenders and the American red wolf as well as gorillas, chimpanzees, and elephants.



The Human Dimension

Although one might assume that working internationally is more challenging than working close to home, professionals at AZA-accredited facilities dispel much of that notion. They agree that obstacles differ and timelines vary, but the bottom line in any location is the importance of people and partnerships. You need to create buy-in, encourage collaboration, and identify champions, all of which take time and effort.

When San Diego Zoo Global added the domestic component to their conservation portfolio, Swaisgood said, "We had to build important partnerships and relationships with regulatory agencies and get past the prevailing bias that zoos are only about captive breeding. That's less of an issue now that we've been partners ... but we still get moments of shock and surprise [and comments like] 'That's what you do?' Also, the state and federal permitting process can be cumbersome and time-consuming."



Some foreign countries do present challenges not found in North America, including political instability, violence, poachers, and cultural and language barriers. But in any location, conservationists won't get far if they don't deal with the realities of daily life on the ground, according to Kreger.

"The human dimension is critical to solve any conservation problem anywhere. When the grizzlies in Yellowstone move out of protected areas and cross through private land, the human dimension is that you have people who love and want to protect them, and people who want to gun them down. To be successful worldwide, you need to educate people about what the problems and solutions are and work with them."

The human aspect of conservation isn't limited to building trust and relationships with organizations, agencies, and communities that are located in proximity to certain habitats. It is equally important to create stakeholders who will





And Shepherd said, “We do a ton of work with graduate students from other countries who are doing a master’s or a PhD at UC Berkeley or UC Santa Cruz. We mentor them and our curators serve on their thesis committees. On our coral conservation work in the Caribbean, I hope we can build capacity through training and infrastructure and then hand it off to them.”

become conservationists in their own lives, and perhaps, the next generation of leaders at home and around the world.

For example, Shepherd reports that the Steinhart Aquarium’s Philippine coral reef exhibit, which includes one of the deepest and largest displays of living coral in the world, has become a source of pride for the local Philippine community. “Families come and bring their visitors to see it. We know it’s reaching and inspiring people and raising awareness.”

And Kreger calls the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium a mouthpiece for the awareness of migratory birds. “You may not belong to the Audubon Society, but you can come to the Zoo and learn about different species. You can learn through talks and real conservation activities. We can tell people how to create bird-friendly habitats and give them practical solutions that are easy to implement. If we want people to see zoos as partners in saving species, we have to give them positive take-home messages.”

Internationally, conservationists often adopt a more formal process of educating the people who will follow in their footsteps. “We have training programs where we work with and mentor people very closely,” said Swaisgood. “For example, we take Peruvian college students to Cocha Cashu, our biological research station [in Peru], with the idea of them becoming the conservation leaders of the future.”

What Constitutes Success?

We can define success as the achievement of a goal, but when determining how to measure conservation success, the only thing agreed on is the fact that there are too many nuances to come up with a single metric.

“The ultimate metric is delisting,” said Swaisgood, who is also the co-head of the giant panda conservation unit. “When we were able to delist the giant panda from endangered to vulnerable, that was a major professional achievement. But success can also be just moving the needle. Getting support from a local community can be a success.”

Shepherd also looks at success through a broad lens. “Research success



can be publications, the impact of the publications, and the news coverage of the work. It can be that a community-led and managed marine protected area is being established in a place where it will make a difference and help people understand the biological riches in their own backyard.”

Bergl sees no difference in the way we measure domestic and international conservation successes. “The practice of conservation science is the same. The United States may have more resources [than some other countries do], and the details of the engagement will differ, but the principles and the approaches taken will be the same.”

In their quest to protect species and preserve habitats all over the world, conservationists understand they are likely involved in a long game, no matter where they’re playing it. But once they choose their priorities, they’re confident that the perfect blend of partners, persistence, and patience will move the needle ever closer to whatever they define as success.

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