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JoEllen Doornbos recently contributed an unprecedented \$1 million gift to endow the SAFE program. She credits her years of experience with the Phoenix Zoo with broadening her interest in and knowledge of the natural world and sees her support of SAFE as a natural outgrowth of her commitment to the Zoo in her own community.

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

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Close to Home: Community Based Conservation Survives the Pandemic

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March 2020, members of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums were faced with a big question: Without the use of their best "tool," i.e. the institution itself, could they sustain visibility and keep local audiences engaged?

BY CATHIE GANDEL

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A Conservation Medicine Approach: Crocodile Conservation in Cuba

The critically endangered Cuban crocodile is an emblem of the Zapata swamp and of Cuban pride. Within the swamp ecosystem, crocodiles are top predators and ecosystem engineers, playing a key role in the determination of the health of an environment.

BY KELVIN ALVAREZ,
JAMIE PALMER, AND
LAUREN AUGUSTINE

JoEllen and Philip Doornbos



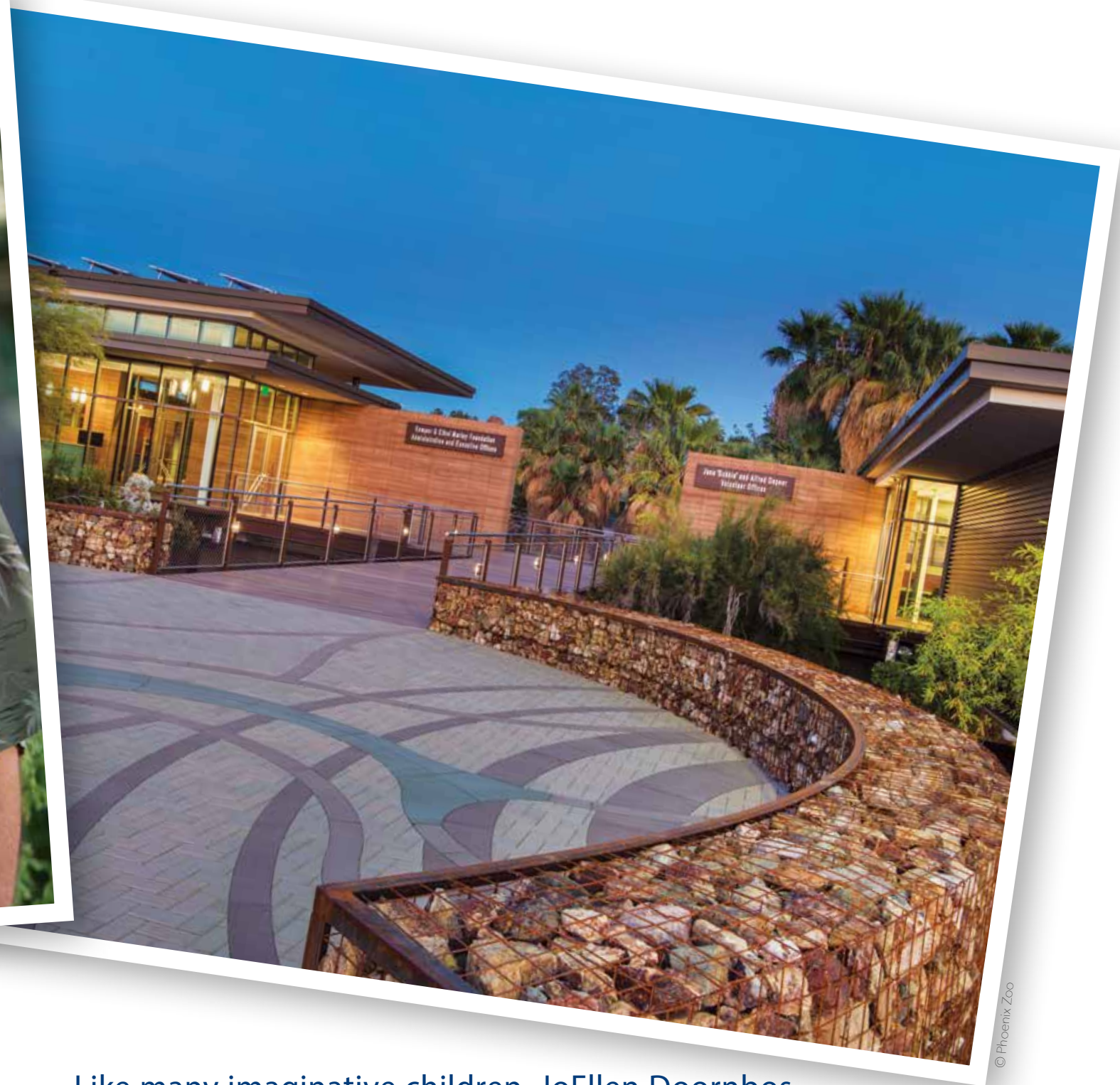
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BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

Big Picture

Philanthropy

JOELLEN
DOORNBOS
ENDOWS
SAFE PROGRAM



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Like many imaginative children, JoEllen Doornbos envisioned having a wild animal as a pet. Parental wisdom squelched that idea, but JoEllen's affinity for creatures great and small eventually manifested itself as a love of her hometown zoo and an impressive commitment to help species around the world.

Growing up in Tempe, Ariz., she remembers when the Phoenix Zoo in Phoenix, Ariz., first opened. “I loved animals and always thought I would love to volunteer there,” said Doornbos. She realized that dream when she became a trail guide in her early thirties, the start of a decades-long relationship with the institution. She has spent 28 years as a member of the Auxiliary, the

Zoo’s oldest volunteer fundraising organization; and has also served on the Board of Directors. JoEllen is a tireless advocate, chairing signature fundraising events including Rendez-Zoo and Zoofari; and she gives generously to a wide range of projects. Although she supports many local organizations, the Zoo is her priority.

One contribution of which she is most proud was made with her husband, Philip—helping to design the Philip and JoEllen Doornbos Volunteer and Administrative Center, which opened in 2015 and was part of a \$22 million campaign.

“One of the reasons I wanted to fund that part of the capital campaign was because I started as a volunteer ... and we were working out of one room with no meeting space,” said Doornbos.

The couple contributed \$1 million to that Center; and later gave \$1 million to build the education and program facility which also bears their name—the Doornbos Discovery Amphitheatre. In 2000 and 2010, the Zoo recognized their generosity by awarding them the prestigious Oryx Society Award to “honor magnanimous, lifetime contribution to The ACNC/Phoenix Zoo.”

“The Phoenix Zoo has been a second home for JoEllen and Phil Doornbos. Their lead gifts to our capital campaigns have been catalysts, inspiring others to join them in moving our progress forward. We are profoundly grateful for their support,” said Bert Castro, president and chief executive officer of the Arizona Center for Nature Conservation/Phoenix Zoo and the chair of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums’ board of directors.

Philip Doornbos passed away in 2019, but JoEllen continues to support many programs and areas at the Zoo, and typically focuses on wherever the need is greatest.

She fulfilled another childhood dream—traveling to Africa—through trips organized by the Zoo. And she loves visiting the Zoo, especially for evening events and special programs.

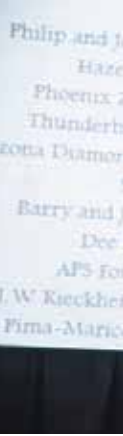
“I find the Zoo at night to be especially peaceful, and when I enter the day’s stress just melts away. The night lighting is softer and you can hear sounds different from daytime. Being in the natural setting of the Zoo just makes me feel closer to nature,” said Doornbos.

JoEllen credits her years of experience with the Zoo with broadening her interest in and knowledge of the natural world. She joined AZA as an individual member in 2005 and began to attend conferences and meetings.

“I’ve become much more conservation minded,” she said. “I’ve learned a lot—and that has become my priority—to preserve not just the animals, but the whole land. I love elephants. I think they’re the most intelligent, fantastic animals and I really don’t want to lose them. I also love wolves. I think they have a reputation that’s undeserved, and I really want to see them succeed. That’s where conservation comes in.”

Her interest in the wellbeing of animals in managed care and in the wild has included extending her financial support to include AZA, after learning about SAFE: Saving Animals from Extinction from Castro.

“Since Bert came to our Zoo, I know everything he has done and brought to us,” she said. “And he told me that one of the main things he wants to see succeed was the SAFE program. I started reading about SAFE and thought this is really something I want to support.” She recently contributed an unprecedented \$1 million gift to endow the SAFE program.





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Left: Opening of the Doornbos Discovery Amphitheater; Lorraine Frias, Vice President of Development, JoEllen Doornbos, and Bert Castro, President and CEO, Phoenix Zoo

Right: Phoenix Zoo Auxiliary



Asian elephant

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Doornbos Discovery Amphitheater



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“The JoEllen Doornbos Endowment is a gift that will keep on giving, fueling a sustainable SAFE Grant Program, and supporting AZA members in perpetuity,” said Dan Ashe, president and chief executive officer of AZA. “In its two-year history, this program has fueled more than \$1.1 million in member-sponsored conservation, with \$360,000 in SAFE grants and nearly \$780,000 in partner matching funds. SAFE is working to join and multiply the exceptional talents of AZA members, their partners, and visionary philanthropists like JoEllen Doornbos, creating the scale that is increasingly important to conservation success. Thanks to JoEllen’s generosity, SAFE is now even-better positioned to support member-driven conservation for the long term.”

Twenty-nine SAFE species programs are currently designated, and more are being proposed all the time.

“We’re ahead of where we expected to be in the growth of SAFE,” said Shelly Grow, vice president, conversation and science at AZA. “When you come in as a partner, as JoEllen

has, it shows a long-term trust in SAFE and is a huge boost that adds credibility and reinforces what the program does. There are so many animals to save, and the AZA community is seeking to make a difference. She is a part of that partnership, and we are so grateful.”

Doornbos sees her support of SAFE and AZA as a natural outgrowth of her commitment to the Zoo in her own community.

“My number one priority is the Zoo, and we are members of AZA. It’s just another arm. It’s all connected,” she said.

Her attitude not only epitomizes the necessary collaborative nature of our work and our profession; it is also an inspiring example of how one person’s generosity and a big-picture perspective can make a difference at home and in countries around the globe.

Mary Ellen Collins is a writer based in St. Petersburg, Fla.

Fennec fox



© David Wagner, Phoenix Zoo



Golden eagle

© David Wagner, Phoenix Zoo



Doornbos Discovery Amphitheatre