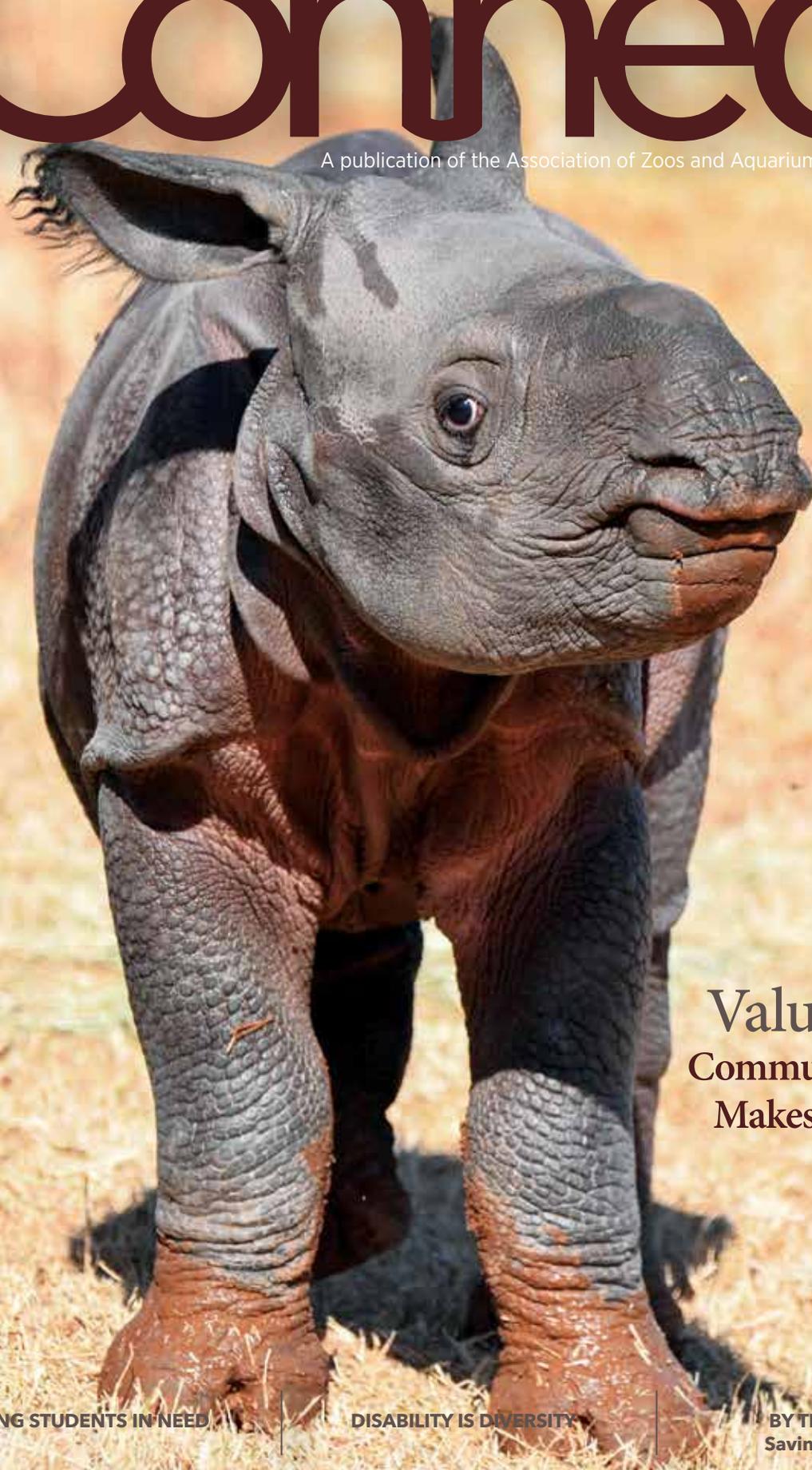


# Connect

JANUARY 2021

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Value Added  
Community Outreach  
Makes a Difference

HELPING STUDENTS IN NEED

DISABILITY IS DIVERSITY

BY THE NUMBERS  
Saving Orangutans

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Zoos and aquariums that have volunteers have the opportunity to provide equitable access to service opportunities where individuals with disabilities can gain skills and build community. The benefits to both the facility and to the surrounding community are manifold.

BY ANY HOLZWORTH

# Value Added

COMMUNITY OUTREACH  
MAKES A DIFFERENCE

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS





© Potter Park Zoo



**A**

ssociation of Zoos and Aquariums-accredited facilities are known as fun, family-friendly places to visit; however, their value to their communities extends far beyond that to include a wide range of outreach efforts. Whether a zoo or aquarium offers free tickets, educational programs, or volunteer opportunities, it adds to its identity as a community asset. Snapshots of some of these initiatives highlight the creativity and dedication that

define AZA members' efforts to be a good neighbor to people of all ages, abilities, backgrounds, and interests.

**Access and Literacy**

Ensuring that everyone in a community can enjoy its zoo or aquarium is one common outreach strategy. The Potter Park Zoo in Lansing, Mich., won AZA's 2019 Angela Peterson Excellence in Diversity award for its program, Zoo in Your Neighborhood. Lansing has a high poverty level and this program allows people to check out free Zoo passes from 41 community partners, including libraries, community centers, and schools.

"Forty-nine percent of people [who use the passes] say that money is preventing them from coming to the Zoo, so we're definitely filling a need," said Mariah Martinez, community engagement coordinator at the Zoo. In addition to six passes, each partner organization receives two free outreach programs a year.

"I thought it was a fantastic idea to be able to offer access to the Zoo and programming at the library, so we jumped at the chance to partner with them," said Anna Curtis, director, Eaton Rapids Area District Library. "Especially at the beginning of the program, people would ask if they had to pay for the passes ... they are so grateful for this opportunity"

She adds that outreach programs like ambassador animal visits and reading with animals are also a big hit. "When we have a lot of people we'll just do the presentation right in the middle of the library, and regular customers will often pull up a seat to listen."

Families may use the passes as many times as they want during the seven-day checkout period; and the Zoo reports having 7,248 admissions with passes between November 2017 and September 2020.

Similarly, The Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden in Oklahoma City, Okla., collaborated with the Metropolitan Library System to create the Read for Adventure program, which focuses on literacy and engagement to the outdoors and offers



© Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden



# Juniper's Butterfly Garden

A Small Start for a Better World

Written by Autumn Heigle  
Illustrated by Nadia Ronquillo

Juniper's  
Butterfly Garden

A Small Start for a Better World  
Written by Autumn Heigle  
Illustrated by Nadia Ronquillo  
Redeem for admission to the  
OKC Zoo for up to 4 guests!  
Present voucher to any Zoo ticket window.  
Open daily 9am - 5pm.  
Closed Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Expires to price of general admission for adult, child  
or senior. Special events excluded. No other  
discounts may be used with this offer. No cash value.

OKC ZOO OGE

Expires 6/30/21

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“The Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden ... collaborated with the Metropolitan Library System to create the Read for Adventure program, which focuses on literacy and engagement to the outdoors and offers free Zoo access.”



free Zoo access. The program launched locally with 19 metro library locations in 2017 with *Our Day at the Zoo*, a book written by a library staffer. Anyone who checked the book out received a voucher for free Zoo admission for up to four people. The program went statewide in 2018, with 193 participating public and tribal library locations.

“We wanted to keep the program exciting and decided we needed a new book for 2020,” said Candice Rennels, the Zoo’s director of public relations. “Monarch conservation is a big part of our work and it’s big initiative for our state.” A Zoo staff member wrote *Juniper’s Butterfly Garden*; and the Zoo partnered with the Oklahoma Gas and Electric Company to help with printing costs and promoting the program.

“We understand the importance of the monarch and we’ve wanted to do our part,” said Brian Alford, director of corporate affairs, OG&E. “We’ve been building way points for them at some of our facilities and doing very intentional planting. The Zoo is an incredible resource for our community by providing ways for people to learn more, and this was a very good opportunity for us to partner with them.”

Since the program’s inception more than 30,000 Oklahomans have visited the Zoo at no cost.

#### **Learning of All Kinds**

Simply visiting a zoo or aquarium is a valuable learning opportunity, and many AZA members broaden their commitment to learning with a variety of initiatives. For example, Mystic Aquarium in Mystic, Conn., has Sea School, the country’s only accredited preschool located in an Aquarium.

“We want the people in the community to see us as a resource ... and we’re able to turn the whole Aquarium into a learning lab for three-to-five-year-olds,” said MaryEllen Mateleska, director of education and conservation at the Aquarium.

Stephanie Sobotka’s oldest son has completed Sea School; another son is there now; and her daughter will attend when she’s old enough.



“It is so unique—the environment they have exposure to is unlike anything I’ve ever seen before,” she said. “It’s exciting, fun, different, and very nature-centric, which is something we value in our family. I believe that the program is as magical as it is because of the teachers’ passion. They are teaching the next generation the importance of the connection we have to the ocean and sea life. They have an extensive background in early childhood education, and they are exceptional role models for the children and the parents.” She also praised the School’s inclusivity, noting that scholarships are available.

In Des Moines, Iowa, Blank Park Zoo’s educational outreach includes a Work & Learn Inclusion Program for local high school students with special needs. It began a pilot program in 2016 in response to one parent’s request.

“We had a family in the community whose son with autism had a passion for animals,” said Chris Eckles, chief engagement officer at the Zoo “She wanted to know what the Zoo could do to help him learn job skills while learning about animals. We had education staff who had done this kind of work before, so they sat down with Trevor’s parents and came up with a hands-on learning experience.”

The next year they launched the Work and Learn program with three more students from Trevor’s school. In a one-on-one working relationship with a staff member, each participant learns job and social skills that may eventually lead to jobs or volunteer positions at the Zoo.

Diane Drey’s 17-year-old son, Zack, entered the program last year. “Most people choose to be with the animals, but he chose the maintenance shed,” she said. “They never had anyone do that, but he got a lot of education about tools and the train—greasing the chains and working on the brakes. He even got the chance to drive the train and make sure his brakes worked.”

“You can see the confidence and pride he has now. When we go to the Zoo it seems like everyone knows who he is and says ‘Hi.’ There are not extensive opportunities in the metro area for anyone who’s a little different. The team at the Zoo is so welcoming . . . I feel very comfortable with Zack there because I know he’s going to be surrounded by people who see the value in him.”

### **Hands-On Activism**

Citizen science provides another popular way to engage the community. Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium in Sarasota, Fla., recruits volunteer beach ambassadors to participate in their Beach Conditions Reporting System (BCRS). These individuals collect and report on a wide range of beach conditions ranging from wind speed, wave height, and surf type to crowds, debris, and respiratory irritation related to Florida’s red tide.



© Blank Park Zoo

**“Most people choose to be with the animals, but [Zack] chose the maintenance shed ... he got a lot of education about tools and the train—greasing the chains and working on the brakes. He even got the chance to drive the train and make sure his brakes worked.”**

“Mote is a science and research institution, and outreach and education is a huge component of what we do,” said Kevin Claridge, associate vice president, sponsored research and coastal policy programs at the Aquarium.

Beach ambassadors receive training on how to gather the information and transfer it to a mobile app that becomes a resource for scientists, residents, and visitors.

“The goal of the program is to enhance the beachgoers’ experience and protect public health by alerting people about conditions and hazards,” said Aspen Cook, research technician and outreach specialist, Environmental Health Program at Mote.

Christiane Vinet began reporting on conditions at Pass-a-Grille Beach about two years ago out of personal need.

“We only live about half a block away, and I needed to have information on things like jellyfish and rough surf before bringing my son, Aaron, who has autism, to the beach,” she said. Her other son, Graham, who has joined her in the reporting, adds that he is getting valuable data collection experience that will help him in his environmental science studies at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg. The two are among 150 ambassadors who report on 40 locations.



© Potter Park Zoo



© Blank Park Zoo

“Being a good neighbor  
leads to benefits  
for everyone.”



Roger Williams Park Zoo in Providence, R.I., has empowered community members to educate others about the natural environment by recruiting them to serve as Earth Agents. Last year's program involved educating ten families about the rainforest and asking them to share that information at an event in their communities.

"We were mindful about not defining community, family, or event," said Shareen Knowlton, director of education at the Zoo. "In order for it to work and be authentic, it had to be in their voice. We wanted them to be an extension of us in building capacity and no one let us down."

Amanda Campbell, her husband and two daughters, a pre-COVID homeschool family, invited members of their homeschool organization to gather for a fun day at a local Boys and Girls Club. The event included a presentation about the rainforest; petitions to sign; a Jenga game that featured keystone species; information about an app that helps people shop for products with sustainably sourced palm oil; and rainforest Beanie Babies for the young kids to play with.

"I told the people who came, 'Our family is the stone that was cast into the pond and the ripples are all of you,'" said Campbell. "'Now you go out and be the stone.' One of the families asked us to do our presentation for seven other homeschool families. And the kids have been much more intentional about sharing the information."

Programs that lead to a more educated and engaged community will naturally result in a larger pool of advocates for the zoos and aquariums themselves and for conservation in general.

Being a good neighbor leads to benefits for everyone.

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

