

# Committing to Conservation - The World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy

## Creating a Culture of Conservation

*Vision: By helping to create a culture of conservation in our communities, zoos and aquariums are a vital part of the process of generating the attitude and will needed to save species and maintain healthy ecosystems.*

### Editors' Note

*Zoos and Aquarium have tremendous potential to engage the general public in wildlife conservation. These facilities also contribute for conservation research which is fundamental for conservation of threatened species. Since the extinction rate has been accelerated many folds due to anthropogenic activities, modern zoos are contributing for species conservation in the wild as well. This document by WAZA - Committing to Conservation: The World Zoo and Aquarium Conservation Strategy, outlines the key role zoos and aquariums can play in supporting conservation in the wild. We have permission from WAZA to serialize this publication. This is much needed and timely milestone. Happy reading!*

Conservation is often discussed in terms of science or financial resources. However, conservation of nature is really about protecting and restoring natural resources, including species, and people are a tool that can be used to deliver effective conservation. The perception of what is important in the lives of individuals, what internal value nature has to them, and the relationships, both close and distant, between groups of people are all part of this tool. The 'will' of any individual, group, institution, community or country to undertake conservation begins with attitude, which is then put into practice with action. By helping to create a culture of conservation in society, zoos and aquariums are an integral part of the process to generate the attitude and the will needed to save species and maintain healthy ecosystems.

Zoos and aquariums encounter hundreds of thousands of people every day and are generally embedded in local communities in ways that other conservation organisations can only envy, meaning zoological facilities are ideally placed to help implement Aichi Biodiversity Target 1. Zoos and aquariums do make a positive contribution to this Target but are they strategic in how they approach the idea of creating a culture of conservation?

There are three discrete groups that should be communicated with on a regular basis in order to build a culture of conservation: (1) *staff and governing authorities*, which form the foundation upon which the conservation culture is built, (2) *visitors*, who can build upon that foundation and provide access to (3) *the wider community*, giving zoos and aquariums the opportunity to interact with and influence the values of the societies in which they operate to benefit conservation.

## ZOOS AND AQUARIUMS

The staff, boards and governing authorities of zoological facilities must be fully committed to the conservation of the natural world in order to inspire others to engage

in such a goal. This commitment is usually clearly apparent in those who work in animal departments or the scientific staff, who are often already dedicated conservationists with a long history of valuing nature from childhood. However, to be truly successful, this ethos and ethic of care for the natural world must be embedded in all departments. From the staff member who initially greets visitors at the entrance, to the caterer who provides lunch and the cleaner who makes certain the grounds are pristine, every visitor must feel that this is a team committed to the common cause of conservation.

Leadership (CEO/director and board/governing authorities) is essential to ensure that time and effort are spent creating an internal ethos to guarantee that everyone in the institution is committed to conservation. A conservation-training programme for all staff (ideally one that is repeated or reinforced periodically) is fundamental. Creating a conservation culture requires clear lines of communication to all personnel about the conservation work being undertaken, and celebrations of success when conservation objectives are achieved. The aim is for all staff to be proud to be part of any conservation triumphs, sharing them with close family and acquaintances in the wider community.

Members of the governing authorities in zoos and aquariums are not necessarily scientists but may be business leaders, lawyers, bankers and other professionals, including national or regional government officials. Zoos and aquariums must invest in the education of their governing authorities, by taking them out of the boardroom and into the

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#### **AICHI BIODIVERSITY TARGET 1**

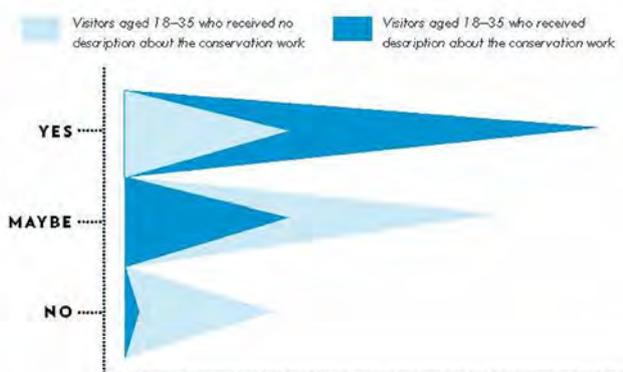
*Strategic Goal A:* Address the underlying causes of biodiversity loss by mainstreaming biodiversity across government and society.

**Target 1: By 2020, at the latest, people are aware of the values of biodiversity and the steps they can take to conserve and use it sustainably.**

field, in order to gain their support and establish a shared conservation vision that can be communicated to the entire community.

This culture of conservation should be prevalent every time a new development is planned within a facility. The pivotal question—‘*How does this planned new experience help the institution to achieve its conservation goals?*’— should be asked by all departments. Master planning should facilitate the One Plan Approach by orchestrating the strategic conservation plan in relation to the construction of infrastructure and facilities for conservation programmes, and the engagement of visitor experience with the conservation activities. When planning new developments, all parties involved, from the institution to the designers, builders and materials suppliers, should question their role in conservation.

The building industry (construction and operation combined) consumes more energy than any other sector and is among the largest contributors to climate change. However, using on-site renewable resources and sustainable building technologies it is possible to build for (net) zero energy consumption and a minimal carbon footprint. Innovative methods, such as Living Machine, can reduce energy-intensive life-support systems and maintaining species suited for the local climate can reduce the carbon footprint. The One Plan Approach should also be implemented when selecting species to make certain that any new development can and does link to and support conservation work in the wild and species with the greatest conservation need. Actions must reflect values when creating a culture of conservation.



#### ZOO AND AQUARIUM SURVEY

A recent survey by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) asked people about their views on zoos and aquariums. Some were asked to place themselves into one of three categories: those having no objection to keeping animals in zoos and aquariums (YES), those who said it was all right to keep some animals but not certain very large or intelligent species (MAYBE), and those who said animals should never be kept in zoos or aquariums (NO). Others were first given a description of the conservation work being carried out collectively by AZA-member institutions. For visitors aged 18–35 who received no description about the conservation work, 25% had no objections, 51% had some objections and 24% said animals should never be kept in zoos or aquariums. However, for respondents who had been given the conservation-work description first, 69% had no objections, 26% had some objections, while only 5% said animals should never be kept in zoological institutions.

**WOODLAND PARK ZOO, WA, USA**  
 Zoo Doo is a fully composted blend of animal manures mixed with straw bedding, grass, leaves and wood chips from the grounds of the Zoo.



**CINCINNATI ZOO & BOTANICAL GARDEN, OH, USA**  
 Cincinnati Zoo has installed a green roof on their Giraffe Ridge Barn as part of their institutional green initiative.

**VISITORS**

Once the foundation of an internal culture of conservation has been created, attention should be turned towards the visitors. Essentially people must understand and believe that visiting a zoological facility helps to save animals in the wild. However, rather than visitors seeing the animals at the zoo or aquarium, understanding the institution’s conservation activities, and leaving happy and contented that there is nothing more to be done, they should learn enough to feel inspired and motivated to become active supporters of zoological facilities and advocates for conservation.

**VIENNA ZOO, AUSTRIA**  
 A solar power plant installed on the roof of the elephant’s living quarters produces around 90 megawatt hours of energy annually

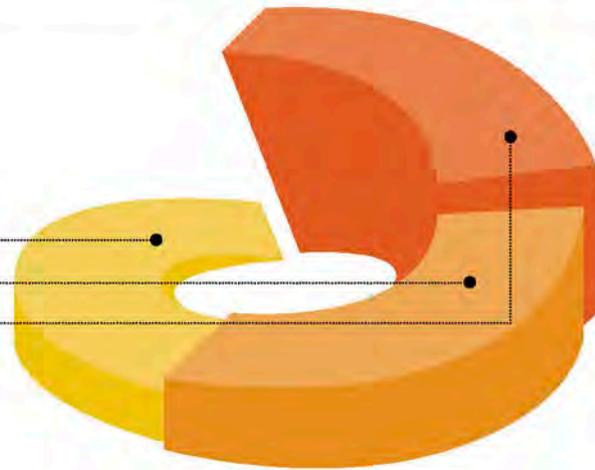


## COMMITTING TO CONSERVATION

### THE LEVELS OF INFLUENCE

Building a culture of conservation occurs through constant communication with three discrete groups.

- STAFF AND GOVERNING AUTHORITIES
- VISITORS
- THE WIDER COMMUNITY



Creating that ambience is not simply a matter of providing informational signs, important as they are; visitors must be engaged by applying all the knowledge that has been amassed from a burgeoning body of work in conservation psychology (see *Engagement—Influencing Behaviour Change for Conservation*).

The information provided to visitors walking through zoological facilities must be clear, helping them to engage with any ongoing conservation work related to the species in front of them and highlighting how they can become involved. It is essential to reach not only the minds but also the hearts of visitors. Enlisting staff and volunteers to recount conservation stories to visitors is an effective way to connect the animals in zoos and aquariums to field-conservation programmes. Such stories can be used to excite visitors about conservation efforts and successes, encouraging them to take direct action for conservation in their own daily lives.

Institutional commitment to conservation should be apparent to visitors as they walk around the grounds. Zoos and aquariums provide visitors with an opportunity to practice conservation actions that can be repeated in their daily lives. During a visit it should be easy to recycle waste, to choose restaurant food that has been ethically sourced and is sustainable, and to purchase goods from the shop knowing that these further conservation goals, all of which are important aspects of creating the culture of conservation. The identification of ways in which to engage visitors in actions that enforce their own awareness of not being wasteful will help them to achieve small conservation actions that develop into long-term conservation commitments. Experiences and opportunities for visitors to contribute directly to the conservation of species in the wild must be created using a conservation-messaging framework, supported by behaviour change tools and techniques.



Zoos and aquariums can be living laboratories where visitors view a world designed for conservation. Buildings should highlight sustainable building practices and lead by example in reducing the carbon footprint. For example, the landscape around zoological facilities should demonstrate to visitors how their lawns, parks and cities could look if measures were taken to improve water quality with green infrastructure, such as bioswales (landscape elements that remove silt and pollution from surface run-off water), healthy ecosystems without invasive species, and habitat

ZOOS VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

Creating a culture of conservation among visitors to zoological institutions starts by connecting them to animals, exciting them about conservation efforts and successes, and encouraging them to take direct action for wildlife in their own daily lives.



HOUSTON ZOO, TX, USA

Cell-phone display shows guests where components for electronics derive from and how recycling a cell phone prolongs the life of usable phones thereby decreasing the need for more coltan mining. Equally it educates visitors, especially children, about the connection between cell phones and gorillas as eighty per cent of the coltan (columbite- tantalite) / tantalum in electronic devices is mined in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This region is also prime gorilla habitat.

for native flora and fauna. Information alone does not create change; culture is transmitted through experience and participation.

### THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Once there is a strong internal culture of conservation within an institution, and a community of visitors committed to conservation has been created, it will be necessary to engage with people and organisations outside the perimeter fence. Zoos and aquariums are part of a larger society where their influence can be used to create a culture of conservation. Neighbours, suppliers, local, regional and national governments, the media and other conservation-orientated partners are all there to interact with. Well-planned public-engagement strategies and integrated conservation messaging can be used effectively to increase social awareness of specific conservation efforts, and social media makes it possible to disseminate such information widely.

In any community where a zoological facility is located there will be a variety of corporate neighbours with which to engage. As environmentally friendly products are increasingly incorporated into zoological operations, the goals, progress and experiences should be shared with local businesses in the community. These may become new suppliers or partners to disseminate the conservation message and actions further afield. The opportunity should be taken to work with the printing shop across the road to encourage them to use environmentally friendly inks or the local garden centre to develop user-friendly information about invasive plants for their customers. Zoos and aquariums could develop as local hubs of conservation practice, using policy statements to declare the conservation message to society. By inviting corporate and non-corporate neighbours into zoological facilities to attend social events and functions that highlight specific issues, new, non-traditional conservation relationships will be created, providing further opportunities to work together to change the community culture.

Among all zoos and aquariums in organised associations there is a powerful 'buying' group. Supply-chain activism is beginning to be effective in issues such as palm oil, sustainable feed for animals and humans in zoological facilities, and building materials. Individual endeavours could be further enhanced by neighbouring zoos and aquariums joining together to work with and stress the need for suppliers that source more ethical and sustainable materials for use in conservation organisations, thus sending a powerful message to visitors and the wider community.

Local and national media are always happy to print images of young animals—and powerful images can tell compelling stories—but any interaction with the media to talk about conservation should be used to let people know that a modern professional zoo or aquarium is more than a nice day out. Conservation is an exciting story.

One of the most important aspects of the wider community is interaction with elected representatives and the advocacy for nature that can be engendered. If a successful culture of conservation is created in staff, visitors and neighbours in the wider community, collectively this group of people will ask for conservation to be higher on the political agenda—if zoos and aquariums provide the right tools. A first step is to develop a strong relationship between the zoological facility and local governmental representatives. A simple way to capture their attention is to highlight the economic impact a zoological institution has in the community. This conversation can then transition into a discussion about conservation. Politicians should be invited into zoos and aquariums on a regular basis, and shown what these institutions are doing for society and for nature.

## CONCLUSION

Conservation takes conversations—between individuals, groups, communities and countries. Local coalitions of zoological facilities, botanical gardens, museums and universities can help with either a local biodiversity focus or a global project. By engendering a culture of conservation in all aspects of operations, zoos and aquariums help to make the important conversations happen. Being strategic about creating this culture of conservation and understanding how cultural transmission takes place will be key to an optimistic conservation future.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Talk about conservation throughout the institution, including with staff, volunteers, governing bodies, boards, trustees, visitors and the wider community, and incorporate proven social-science techniques to facilitate the uptake of pro-environmental behaviours that reduce human impacts on wild populations.
- Engage corporate neighbours and suppliers in order to broadcast the conservation message and promote sustainability in the supply chain, including a commitment to creating green sustainable environments.
- Use media contacts to disseminate the conservation message.
- Establish relationships with local members of government by inviting them into the institution and advocate for conservation.
- Publicise every success, however small, to endorse the mission and status of the zoo or aquarium in the community.

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