

Champion the champions

THE NEW EAZA SPECIES CHAMPIONS PROGRAMME GIVES ZOOS THE CHANCE TO HELP THE PEOPLE WHO ARE OUT THERE SAVING SPECIES

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Global indicators such as the IUCN Red List show that species are becoming increasingly threatened worldwide. In fact, the Living Planet Report recently estimated that over 50% of our wildlife has been lost in the last 40 years. Alongside this, globally it is estimated that approximately \$3-400bn a year is needed for biodiversity protection and yet there is something like \$50bn currently being directed to conservation. While these figures are estimates they tell us what we already know: that funding needs for nature conservation are increasing and the costs are not being met by existing sources.

Nonetheless, the conservationists we meet and work with are the most dedicated and passionate people out there. Managing a successful conservation project and delivering these positive results requires a combination of skills that extends far beyond the technical; successful conservationists are managers, leaders, fundraisers and communicators. In most successful species restorations, this whirlwind of activities, skills, partners and needs all revolve around singular or a very small group of individuals. These individuals provide the core and vision of the project and ensure that with all the competing demands, activities stay on track towards that vision. When we find failures in conservation, it is often because these individuals have been missing from the project. These individuals are Species Champions and without them and their dedication, more species would be extinct and conservation would be a far less effective and much more depressing affair.

You may be asking what is the role of zoos in this discussion? Over 148 million people visit European zoos each year. While looking for an enjoyable experience, these visitors are at least motivated to see more

of the natural world and wildlife. Equally zoos have become increasingly focused on their role in protecting and restoring species and educating their visitors – thus helping to meet several of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets. But there still remains a very wide variation in the degree to which zoos actually support conservation – some are highly effective and there are several species that would have gone extinct without the help and expertise provided by the zoo community. In many cases, zoos that do not have very active conservation programmes are looking for opportunities to support conservation in the wild.

NEW CONCEPT

With this fundamental need and opportunity in mind, and striving to find new ways in which the zoo community can support effective conservation in the field, the EAZA Conservation Committee is developing the Species Champions concept. The aim is to provide a mechanism whereby EAZA member institutions can identify individuals who are having or can have a major role in halting the decline or loss of a species in the field.

Species Champions can be proposed by any zoo and a working group in the EAZA Conservation Committee will nominally approve these individuals as EAZA Species Champions.

Then these people can link to participating zoos based on the interests of either party, either through the species being protected or the region. The goal would be for institutions to raise the profile of these individuals and raise funds to help them run their projects. Through the conservationists they would be engaging their visitors to donate or learn more about what the zoo does to support conservation. The participating zoos would guarantee a certain level of financial support to the conservationist and in return the

conservationist would guarantee a certain level of communication and material to the zoo.

The important component is that this would be a partnership between the EAZA member and the conservationists (or their NGO) and not with EAZA as an organisation. This would not be a one-way provision of funds. However, funding should be provided without conditions – these funds should be given to help the conservationists achieve their goals but would not be restricted to particular activities, otherwise this becomes like another donor scheme that makes management and reporting more complicated for the conservationist. As this concept develops we will highlight Species Champions through the EAZA website and *Zooquaria*, profiling their work and helping to facilitate links with potential zoos that could provide support.

It will take some time to develop the specific details and the limits of the role provided by EAZA. But given the scale of challenge we face globally, the commitment of conservationists to meet the challenge and the opportunity provided by many zoos, this is an important initiative for EAZA to support and promote. To get you started we have included short biographies of two such species programmes and their Champions: people who have made a real difference to the fate of highly threatened species and who need our support. Please watch this space in coming issues to learn more about the Species Champion programme.

References

- WWF. 2014. Living Planet Report 2014: species and spaces, people and places. [McLellan, R., Iyengar, L., Jeffries, B. and N. Oerlemans (Eds)]. WWF, Gland, Switzerland.
- CreditSuisse, WWF & McKinsey. 2014. Conservation Finance. Moving beyond donor funding toward an investor-driven approach. Pp 1-30.



THE PYGMY HOG CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

Standing just 30cm at the shoulder the pygmy hog (*Porcula salvania*) is the world's smallest and most threatened hog species. Its habitat is the strip of rich tall grasses that runs along the foothill plains south of the Himalayas in northern and northeastern India. For many years these grasses have been under great threat from habitat change, over-exploitation and too frequent burning; so much so that by the 1960s the pygmy hog was thought to have gone extinct.

Thankfully it turned out that a small number of hogs remained in the wild and early efforts to survey the species were started by William Oliver, a true Species Champion, who sadly passed away earlier this year. From the first surveys in 1977 until the Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme began in earnest in 1995, William was a tireless campaigner and advocate for the species. It took those 18 years to get agreement and a formal partnership in place to deliver an Action Plan for the Species. The hog had been reduced to its last stronghold, with a few hundred animals remaining in the Manas National Park.

With a partnership between the Government of India, Forest Department of Assam, IUCN and the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust in place and with support from the EU, it was possible to start a breeding programme at a centre near the regional capital of Guwahati. A captive population of over 70 hogs has been maintained in two breeding facilities and 85 hogs have been released back to the wild in two new areas: Orang National Park and Sonai Rupai Wildlife Sanctuary. Working closely with wildlife wardens and forestry staff, the programme has trained hundreds of staff to use hog-friendly grassland management. Research into the hogs and their habitat has supported PhDs and Masters programmes.

THE PHILIPPINE COCKATOO CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

Once found across the Philippines, the Philippine cockatoo (*Cacatua haematuropygia*) declined dramatically during the 20th century mainly because of its value to the caged bird trade and loss of its native forest habitat. There are now fewer than 1,000 birds remaining in less than 2% of its original habitat. One of the strongholds for the species was Rasa Island, but the population there was reduced to about 25 birds due to poaching.

Responding to the perilous situation faced by the cockatoo, Peter and Indira Widmann began the Philippine Cockatoo Conservation Programme (PCCP) in 1998. It focused on immediate conservation needs as well as research, captive breeding and translocation. Through this combined approach they have been able to increase the population of cockatoos on Rasa Island to over 300 and start projects on five other islands encompassing more than 50% of the remaining range of the species. They started the Katala Foundation and through their commitment to the cockatoo and its habitats have broadened out to work with a number of highly threatened species including green turtle, Palawan peacock-pheasant and dugong.

David Waugh (Loro Parque, long term supporter of the project) said 'one of their innovative approaches was to employ ex-poachers as wardens to protect the cockatoos. The ex-poachers not only now have a source of regular income working as wardens on the projects but their local knowledge and skills also increase its success.'

'Peter and Indira typify what it means to be a species champion' says Philippine cockatoo EEP coordinator Eric Bairrão Ruivo from ZooParc de Beauval. 'They have rallied against major challenges to bring attention and support to a species that could have easily gone extinct.' Roger Wilkinson from Chester Zoo adds, due to their campaigning a major threat to this important population from a proposed nearby coal plant has been averted.'

For a full list of supporters and to find out more about this important programme visit: www.philippinecockatoo.org.

