

San Diego Zoo leads fight against extinction

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Black footed ferrets, Arabian oryx, California condors, Guam rails, Caribbean iguanas and Wyoming toads are just a few of the many species that have been recovered and successfully released back into the wild through the work of accredited zoos and their partners. In a study published recently in the journal of Ecology Letters, paleontologists called the current rate of species loss the sixth extinction, comparing it to past extinction events like the one that wiped out the dinosaurs. With most of the species currently at risk still threatened by human activity, the ongoing work of zoos to fight extinction seems more important than ever.

San Diego Zoo Global and other accredited zoos understand that in order to combat the current extinction crisis we must first and foremost be conservation organizations that use their parks to raise awareness, educate the public, safeguard endangered species, and raise funds for conservation action in the field. This is a role that we have grown into and embrace, made all the more poignant for us here in San Diego by the recent loss of one of the last four northern white rhinos in the world.

Rhinos are just one group of species disappearing from the face of our planet. There are many others, numbering in the thousands. For some of these — like tigers, African elephants, Tasmanian devils, Hawaiian crows and western pond turtles — we are building sustainable populations in zoos that are providing a hedge against extinction. For others like the northern white rhino, we still do not have any or enough in zoos to be able to protect them as they are increasingly threatened by wildlife trafficking and habitat destruction. Knowing this, we strive to conserve those species that can be sustainably managed in zoos, while at the same time working to save others in their native habitats. Where possible, we seek to reintroduce animals bred at our parks back into the wild. It can be argued that zoos are ideally positioned to be world leaders in the fight against extinction.

San Diego Zoo Global has taken this challenge to heart. Our mission is a simple one — to save species. In 2014, we raised enough funds through our parks, memberships and charitable gifts and grants to apply millions to on-site and off-site conservation activities, including monies directly invested into field conservation in more than 70 countries around the world. Through our efforts, we have shown that contributing to conservation can be economically viable for zoos when there is full organizational commitment and unity of purpose. With the communications reach of zoos, people can be inspired to invest in saving species.

San Diego Zoo Global has been working to save species for almost 100 years. Given our long history, we have many stories — of hope, of failure, and of success. One story that is especially close to my heart is that of the Anegada iguana — the ancestral species to all 10 living species of Caribbean rock iguanas living today. In the mid-1980s, there were fewer than 200 of these unique iguanas left in the world, all of them living on the small island of Anegada. Introduced predators and habitat destruction had reduced their numbers to a critical low. The biggest challenge for the species was that all of the hatchlings were being preyed on by feral cats and the population consisted only of aging adult animals. If nothing had been done, the species would have surely gone extinct.

Working with the British Virgin Islands National Parks Trust and the Fort Worth Zoo, San Diego Zoo Global began an effort in 1997 to head start this species by bringing hatchlings into a special on-island facility where they were raised until they were large enough to fend for themselves and survive in the wild. Successfully rearing these animals required the husbandry experience of zoos, knowledge that has since been transferred to our in-country partners. Since 2003, over 200 head-started iguanas have been

released on Anegada, with an 80 percent survival rate, resulting in a near doubling of the wild population. Zoo scientists continue to monitor the wild population and guide the release program to ensure healthy genetics, while zoo educators are engaged in outreach to build local pride and awareness. The commitment and expertise of zoos has been instrumental in rescuing this species from the brink of extinction and building a sustainable population for the future.

This is just one success story, but it serves as a compelling example of what can be achieved when zoos commit their financial resources, science and husbandry expertise, and public reach to the cause of species conservation. No other group is better equipped than zoos to take on the challenge of saving species in the wild, and none has a stronger obligation to do so. Together, we can lead the fight against extinction, one species at a time.

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