



THE CONSERVATIONIST REDEFINED

Empowering People to Identify as Conservationists

BY KATIE MORELL





IT WAS LATE SEPTEMBER 2019

when Jill Burbank stepped out of a car in the middle of Russia's 467-square-mile Lazovsky Nature Reserve with her ears on high alert to every sound—every cracking branch, every gust of wind.

She held her breath and silently asked herself a single question: What if I get attacked by an Amur tiger?

“But then I realized that if that was to happen, I wouldn't hear it coming anyway,” said Burbank, a senior forest keeper at the Indianapolis Zoo in Indianapolis, Ind., with a nervous laugh.

Her initial concern abated thanks to the calm of her colleague, Dr. Linda Kerley, Russian project manager for the Zoological Society of London, who has been living in Russia for more than two decades, studying tigers. The pair started their hike through tiger territory—one of the only places on the planet where Amur tigers still roam free—in search of camera traps, and repeated this same ritual almost daily for the next two weeks.

The trip was the realization of a dream for Burbank; she's long been passionate about the plight of tigers. When Kerley came to the U.S. in 2018 to give a talk, Burbank was in the audience and jumped at the chance to go to dinner with her afterwards.

“Linda mentioned that if anyone wanted to come visit her in Russia, they were welcome,” remembers Burbank. “I

laughed at first, but then asked if she was serious. She nodded.”

Burbank went back to the Indianapolis Zoo, applied for a slot in the Zoo's Keeper Grant Fund and found out in early 2019 that she'd been awarded enough money to pay for a two-week trip to Russia to study the very animal she'd been working with for more than nine years.

Now Burbank beams with delight when she talks about the experience.

“It reignited my passion,” she said. “Being a keeper brings with it a lot of passion, but it is a hard and physical job. After that trip, I'm even more excited to tell the public all about it and spread the word of conservation even farther than before.”

The Keeper Grant Fund is one of many efforts within the Indianapolis Zoo to involve staff in conservation efforts. The institution's focus on empowering staffers who may not normally go on conservation trips—or consider themselves part of a conservation effort at all (i.e. frontline staff, office workers, admissions team members)—is part of a blossoming trend across Association of Zoos and Aquariums-accredited facilities.





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Among these efforts is the creation of the AZA’s Conservation Culture Taskforce, of which Renee Bumpus, senior director, wildlife conservation programs at the Houston Zoo in Houston, Texas, is a member. The taskforce was formed in 2019 to create a system around supporting and fostering an internal culture of conservation at zoos and aquariums.

Who (Exactly) is a Conservationist?

Of the often-hundreds of people who work inside a single AZA facility, only a few of them may identify as conservationist—usually their titles include the words “curator” or “director of conservation,” or involve duties such as off-site fieldwork. But the tide is changing. Zoos and aquariums are realizing that in order to further their missions of saving wild animals, everyone needs to get on board and identify themselves as conservationists.

While this concept sounds great in theory, in practice it can be a bit sticky.

Bumpus knows this from experience. In 2013, she and her team decided to spearhead a survey of all Zoo staff on their feelings about conservation. Many didn’t identify with the term “conservationist.” Some thought that only the people who traveled to far-flung places to help animals in the wild were conservationists. Some even thought that conservation meant sending money out of the zoo and not helping the mission at home.

Bumpus spent time listening to people’s thoughts around the term, and realized the problem had to do with relatability and vernacular. She decided to change the conversation by using the term ‘saving wildlife’ instead of ‘conservation.’ That small tweak allowed for an expansion in the conversation beyond wildlife field trips to how people could help the planet by recycling and reducing threats by other daily activities.

In 2016, the Houston Zoo announced its new mission: Connect communities with animals; inspiring action to save wildlife. With it, the Zoo launched a host of programs designed to connect staff members across all levels to that mission. The programs included quarterly meetings where staff would share personal stories on how they were saving wildlife; wearing “Ask Us How We’re Saving Wildlife” uniform t-shirts to training opportunities; a staff conservation fund to enhance existing projects; and the expansion of the Zoo’s Wildlife Warriors project, which empowers its admissions department to research and vote on the funding of conservation projects through the sale of bracelets to Zoo visitors.

The Zoo tracked these programs for three years and released findings in 2019. Among the findings was a 20 percent increase in participation across all staff in efforts to save wildlife, an enormous return on investment for the Wildlife Warriors Program (bracelet sales increased by 600 percent between 2012 and 2018), positive changes in staff behaviors and even a rise in staff productivity.



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“We see a better work ethic out of our team members, an increase in donations, and better longevity of staff,” said Bumpus. “The biggest result is around having more impact in the wild. Now that every department is thinking of ways to be more effective at saving wildlife, we are reducing threats.”

Efforts at other AZA facilities are also yielding positive results. At the Oregon Zoo in Portland, Ore., team members are encouraged to go on Staff Conservation Action Trips (SCATs) a few times per year. SCATs were launched in early 2019 after Community Conservation Volunteer Coordinator Indie Lewis was hired. The idea: to offer local trips and workshops, in partnership with non-profits, that point to conservation.



“We go out and restore habitats as one example,” said Lewis. “We will create the trip and advertise internally. Staff members are paid and fed while on the trip. It’s a great way to introduce the non-profit we are working with and talk about how that work relates to animals on our grounds and conservation in general.”

The trips aren’t mandatory for staffers, but instead, “embedded into professional development,” Lewis adds. “No one is required, but we try to make them as attractive as possible.”

The reaction has been positive, and has brought people who work on various teams closer to one another.

“Zoos are like cities; it can be hard to cross barriers,” said Lewis. “But to have interaction and networking as part of these trips is a great way to add cohesion to the culture at the Zoo in general.”



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Programs can be started for free, like at Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium in Sarasota, Fla. Melissa Bernhard, senior biologist, leads a team of 300 volunteers (ten of them staff members) to the beach every morning during sea turtle nesting season to conduct surveys. “People do this at dawn, before they come to work, and it doesn’t cost us anything, but they truly love it. We usually have a waitlist.”

More than 2,800 miles east in Baltimore, Laura Bankey is the vice president of conservation programs at the National Aquarium in Baltimore, Md., and lights up when talking about how the organization is working to encourage a culture of conservation.

“At the end of 2018, our leadership took a hard look at our culture and realized people who work here loved their job, but when we talked about conservation, they didn’t identify with the concept and instead defaulted to their respective roles,” said Bankey. “My focus this year has been to update our conservation plan to reflect our work.”

So far, Bankey and her team has sought to raise awareness of the staff benefit of one paid day off per employee for conservation efforts (something in place since 2014), highlight conservation projects at staff and board meetings, hold quarterly conservation lectures free to staff and volunteers, and create an internal conservation committee to recommend initiatives like the elimination of all single-use plastic at the Aquarium.

“Everyone is really positive about it,” said Bankey. “In 2019 alone, more than 60 percent of our staff took a day to focus on a conservation project.”

Over at the Newport Aquarium in Newport, Ky., Lauren Connolly is a dive safety officer and also the lead of the Aquarium’s new Resource Conservation

Team (RCT), which launched in spring 2018. The RCT meets once per month (during work hours) and consists of volunteer staff members looking to create conservation initiatives.

“We are trying to get one person from every department on the RCT; right now in a typical meeting we have about ten people that show up,” said Connolly. “We try to do quarterly challenges where we will try not to use plastic bags, plastic water bottles, and plastic straws. Another challenge might focus on flat plastic—things like the bags that cereal or newspapers come in that can’t go in recycling.”

The results of these efforts include increased awareness about how practices can impact the planet. After the plastic bag challenge, for example, 77 percent of staff reported being much more aware of the bags they used.

Culture-Changing Advice

AZA-accredited facilities interested in empowering staffers to get more involved in conservation are smart to heed advice from the experts:

Start small. Connolly recommends partnering with local non-profits or other organizations where your staff can help. She and her team at the Newport Aquarium visited a local high school known for recycling and compost to learn more about the process.



Make sure leadership is on board. When Houston’s Bumpus first sent out surveys in 2013, she polled Zoo leadership and even the institution’s board. “Leadership has to be behind the effort; that’s the ceiling.”

Don’t fixate on funding (or lack thereof). Programs can be started for free, like at Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium in Sarasota, Fla. Melissa Bernhard, senior biologist, leads a team of 300 volunteers (ten of them staff



members) to the beach every morning during sea turtle nesting season to conduct surveys. “People do this at dawn, before they come to work, and it doesn’t cost us anything, but they truly love it. We usually have a waitlist.”

Expand an existing program. Bumpus recommends, “Look at something already happening and see how it can be more accessible to more employees.”

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