

3 June 2020

As we continue to adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic, the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) stands in solidarity with all those affected by the virus. As the world's leading authority on species conservation, SSC recognizes the burden to BIAZA zoos and aquaria resulting from Covid-19 closures and urges local and national authorities in the UK and devolved administrations to reach out and prioritize these facilities for re-opening strategies and financial relief. People around the world are eager to find safe outdoor spaces to begin to reconnect. BIAZA zoos and aquaria offer such spaces and will work with authorities to provide safe recreational opportunities adapted to our unusual circumstances.

An important sector of the conservation community significantly impacted by Covid-19 is *ex-situ* conservation organisations: accredited zoos, aquaria and botanic gardens. Their work spans species management, animal welfare, field conservation, research and education and is critical to the future of many species around the world.

In efforts to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many closed their facilities to the visiting public and with that, cut off much of their revenue. The work of zoos, aquaria and botanic gardens continues, so many expenses accrue when closed while most revenue streams are interrupted. Closures are threatening the future, and the conservation mission, of many of these organisations.

SSC urges governments, donors and communities around the world to support accredited zoos, aquaria and botanic gardens at this time and to work with them to ensure safe reopening as quickly as possible.

Members of the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums (WAZA) welcome over 700 million visitors annually. Similarly, Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) reports that they receive 500 million visitors per year. These organisations are key tourism and cultural pillars within their communities. More than that, they provide exposure, engagement and education to visitors about nature and conservation. Often, they are the only portal through which urban families can connect with species from around the world and learn about the actions needed to protect them.

Zoological and botanical institutions provide critical opportunities to advance conservation knowledge, animal welfare best practices and plant propagation and management. They are crucial players in each step of the species conservation cycle, from assessing the risk of species extinction, to convening multi-stakeholder conservation plans and mobilizing priority actions.

The Zoo Information Management System (ZIMS), managed by Species360, holds records of more than 22,000 species. ZIMS is not only valuable to inform conservation of species in the wild, but also reflects the contributions of numerous skilled staff who understand the husbandry and management of species in human care.

Zoological and botanical organisations also make fundamental contributions to scientific research. Between 1993 and 2013, members of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) in North America published 5,175 peer-reviewed articles (Hvilsom *et al.* 2020¹). Similarly, between 1998 and 2018 members of the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) published 3,345 peer-reviewed manuscripts (Loh *et al.* 2018²). This output is globally significant, and valuable to support decision making and conservation action.

The Covid-19 pandemic is affecting conservationists around the world, many of whom are reporting uncertainty about their employment, while also raising alarm over the potential for increases in poaching, pollution and deforestation without conservation presence in the field.

Zoological and botanic gardens are important employers of conservation professionals, but their support to others through grants, equipment, expertise and administration extends well beyond their institutions. AZA members provide funding to over 2,500 conservation projects in more than 100 countries, contributing on average US\$160 million per year. EAZA members, since the mid 1990s, have contributed approximately €132 million to more than 575 conservation partners working on 875 species.

The *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* highlights that more than 31,000 species are threatened with extinction. Scientists estimate that we are losing more than 10,000 species per year, a rate that is 1,000 times faster than at any other time. While ex situ organizations provide critical conservation efforts to many species, they are perhaps most important to the 75 species of plants and animals classified as Extinct in the Wild. Zoos, aquaria and botanic gardens are the last line of defence against extinction for these species.

The Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to increase threats to species around the world, as well as cut-off lifelines of support to the men and women who work to conserve them. While countries work to restart their economies, we must ensure that those working to protect nature are included amongst the highest priorities.

SSC recognizes the burden to zoos, aquaria and botanic gardens resulting from Covid-19 closures and urges local and national authorities to reach out and prioritize these facilities for reopening strategies and financial relief. People around the world are eager to find safe outdoor spaces to begin to reconnect. Zoos, aquaria and botanic gardens offer such spaces and will surely work with authorities to provide recreational opportunities adapted to our unusual circumstances.

Sincerely,



Jon Paul Rodríguez
Chair, IUCN Species Survival Commission

¹ <https://jzar.org/jzar/article/view/486>

² <https://www.facetsjournal.com/doi/full/10.1139/facets-2017-0083>