BROWSE magazine

BIAZA
BRITISH & IRISH ASSOCIATION OF ZOOS & AQUARIUMS

NEW AFRICAN HORIZONS

How Colchester Zoo establised a nature reserve in South Africa

WELL CHOUGHED

The Wildwood Trust on bringing the lost fire crow back to Kent's skies

PLUS:
BIAZA member highlights | Embracing the new normal to attract visitors | New care sheets | What's to come 2025

WELCOME

Hello and welcome to the very first edition of BIAZA Browse, our new online magazine.
We will be using Browse to tell the stories of our members and share what we've been up to in the Office.

It's been an incredibly busy year for BIAZA and for our member zoos and aquariums. We've been welcoming new members, growing the BIAZA executive team, launching our accreditation scheme, pushing governments for support, putting on our many popular conferences and trying to unpick the intractable animal transfer issues.

This issue of Browse looks at some truly inspirational work going on across our membership and I am so proud that we can include brilliant projects like Colchester Zoo's Umphafa Reserve, and Wildwood Trust's reintroductions closer to home.
These two conservation stories are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the inspiring work being undertaken by our members.

As BIAZA Browse evolves we want to feature a diverse range of stories and voices. This will be a place to celebrate and push forward the zoo and aquarium community through positive cases and challenging articles. I sincerely hope you enjoy BIAZA Browse as much as I do!

Dr Jo Judge,
CEO of BIAZA

Find us on social media:

British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA)

BIAZA

@OfficialBIAZA

@BIAZAOfficial

BIAZA BiteSize:

Stay informed with our weekly e-newsletter, in your inbox every Friday.

BIAZA Browse: December 2024 edition.
Editors: Maria Carbin, Andy Hall.
Thank you to all contributors. Want to contribute to the next issue? Email maria.carbin@biaza.org.uk Advertising is available to BIAZA corporate members.

biaza.org.uk

About the cover: UmPhafa Reserve, via Colchester Zoological Society
Right: Avocets in Waterscapes Aviary, WWT Slimbridge, Sam Stafford

CONTENTS

2. Membership Snapshot

3. Native Species Snapshot

4. Native Species Field Conservation
The Wildwood Trust's red billed chough releases

6. Habitat Highlight
Waterscapes aviary, WWT Slimbridge Wetland Centre

7. Sustainability Highlight
How Dublin Zoo changed waste management

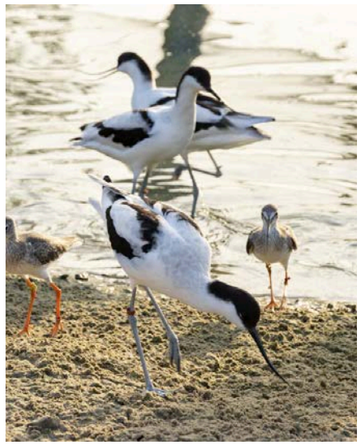
7. Horticulture Highlight
Tropical Butterfly House Wildlife Conservation Park's new butterfly house

8. Field Conservation
Colchester Zoological Society's success in Umphafa, South Africa

10. Care Sheet Highlights

12. Marketing Highlight
Visitor Attraction Trends from Navigate

13. What's on Q1 2025



From the headlines:

MEMBERSHIP SNAPSHOT

The Big Cat Sanctuary

The Big Cat Sanctuary Achieves Milestone

The Big Cat Sanctuary will soon be welcoming four lions, in addition to an already homed lioness Yuna, as part of their Big Cats in Crisis Campaign for rescued lions from Ukraine. After feverous fundraising, a whopping £500,000 target was achieved thanks to the incredible generosity of supporters worldwide.

Work on the new habitat began in July and is expected to be completed in January 2025. Once finished, it will offer these lions a new enriching environment.

ZSL

Endangered Darwin's Frogs arrive safely at London Zoo

A global effort has been launched to save one of the world's most iconic amphibians from extinction, resulting in 53 tiny Darwin's frogs being flown from Southern Chile to London Zoo to kick start a vital breeding and research programme to save the species.

The arrival of the devastating chytrid fungus in their remote habitat has lead to a 90% decline in monitored populations. With extinction an imminent risk, conservationists from ZSL and partners swiftly organised a rescue mission to bring the precious frogs to London Zoo.

The Deep

Guide Dogs team delivers Sighted Gide training to The Deep's crew

Much like learning how to perform first aid, sighted guiding is a valuable life skill. Sighted Guide Training is designed to give people the confidence to support someone who is blind or partially sighted.

Katy Duke, Chief Executive Officer at The Deep, said: *"Nearly 50% of people with a vision impairment say they can feel isolated and cut off from the people and places around them. We are proud to be joining forces with Guide Dogs to change this statistic, and help improve accessibility and inclusivity for visitors."*
Click here to find out more about Guide Dogs' sighted guide training.

A record for gift-swapping festive cheer

Over 60 of BIAZA members signed up to exchange gifts for this 2024's BIAZA Secret Santa - a record number of zoos and aquariums!

Thank you to everyone bringing some festive cheer to a fellow zoo or aquarium. Seeing the unwrapping on social media is the an annual highlight for the BIAZA Office team.

Bristol Zoo Project (gifts from Newquay Zoo)

NATIVE SPECIES

New Native Species Zone coming to Marwell Zoo

Marwell Wildlife has secured funding for a new UK Native Species Zone, a critical step for white-clawed crayfish conservation, set to open in March 2025.

The project has been awarded a generous grant of £49,954 from the Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund, administered by Winchester City Council, will showcase UK wildlife while addressing urgent conservation needs. Phase one of the project focuses on white-clawed crayfish and sand lizards. Guests will have the rare opportunity to observe endangered species up close and learn about conservation challenges.

BIAZA members protecting our wild isles

BIAZA continues to celebrate the work of members in native species conservation:

The **Spotted on Site Bioblitz** in October saw hundreds of people log almost fifteen thousand native species from BIAZA members' sites to the citizen science website iNaturalist. An astonishing achievement to everyone involved, and we can't wait to see what the next Bioblitz will bring.

January 2025 will bring the exciting return of the **Great British Wildlife Restoration**. Twenty-three native species conservation projects, undertaken by British zoos and aquariums, have been shortlisted for the award - the winner dependent on the votes of MPs and Lords. See the shortlist.

BIAZA has also produced a **new report** revealing the deep-rooted role of zoos and aquariums in communities across Britain, linked below.

BIAZA Report – the Integral Role of Zoos and Aquariums in our Communities

Hawthorn Shield Bug observed by user cled for Spotted on Site at Chester Zoo. Showcasing the power of an on-site Nature Reserve, Chester Zoo logged the most observations (3,600) during the October Bioblitz.

Native Species Field Conservation

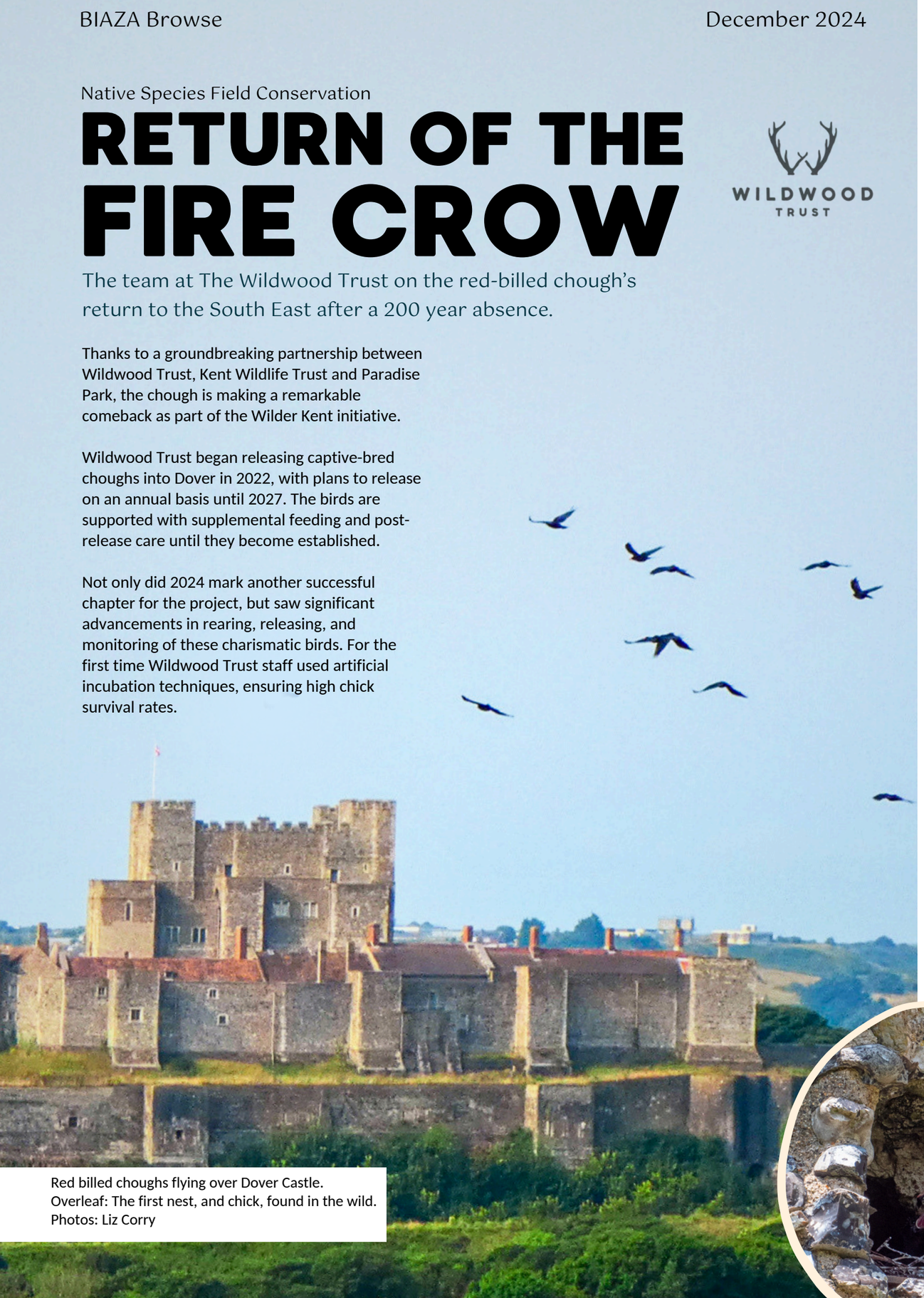
RETURN OF THE FIRE CROW

The team at The Wildwood Trust on the red-billed chough's return to the South East after a 200 year absence.

Thanks to a groundbreaking partnership between Wildwood Trust, Kent Wildlife Trust and Paradise Park, the chough is making a remarkable comeback as part of the Wilder Kent initiative.

Wildwood Trust began releasing captive-bred choughs into Dover in 2022, with plans to release on an annual basis until 2027. The birds are supported with supplemental feeding and post-release care until they become established.

Not only did 2024 mark another successful chapter for the project, but saw significant advancements in rearing, releasing, and monitoring of these charismatic birds. For the first time Wildwood Trust staff used artificial incubation techniques, ensuring high chick survival rates.



Red billed choughs flying over Dover Castle.
Overleaf: The first nest, and chick, found in the wild.
Photos: Liz Corry

Two cohorts of choughs were released near Dover, with the first consisting of crèche-reared birds (i.e. chicks raised communally). The second group consisted of parent-reared juveniles who were socialised in a release aviary with their younger counterparts before taking to the wild.

As a result, there are now 16 choughs soaring freely in the Dover area. Intelligent and highly social, these birds are exploring the local landscape, including iconic landmarks like Dover Castle, while learning to find food, nesting, and roosting sites.

The release aviary continues to play a vital role, offering supplemental food and safe roosting spaces during this critical acclimatisation phase. This approach allows the birds to develop their natural behaviours while ensuring their immediate survival.

Perhaps the most heartening moment of 2024 was the discovery of the first nest in the wild in Kent for almost 200 years. The breeding pair, both reared at Wildwood, surprised everyone by not only selecting an ideal nesting site, but also successfully hatching a chick.

For the released flock, this was their first breeding season in the wild. They were also still technically sub-adults in the chough world which made the event even more special. Although the chick disappeared shortly after fledging, this milestone represents a significant breakthrough in the project's goals, showcasing the birds' ability to adapt and thrive in their natural environment.

The red-billed chough's reintroduction has been celebrated in unique ways, including the creation of murals and media pieces that connect the birds to Kent's cultural heritage.

Drawing inspiration from historical references, such as Shakespeare's King Lear, the project blends nature conservation with storytelling to inspire a broader audience.

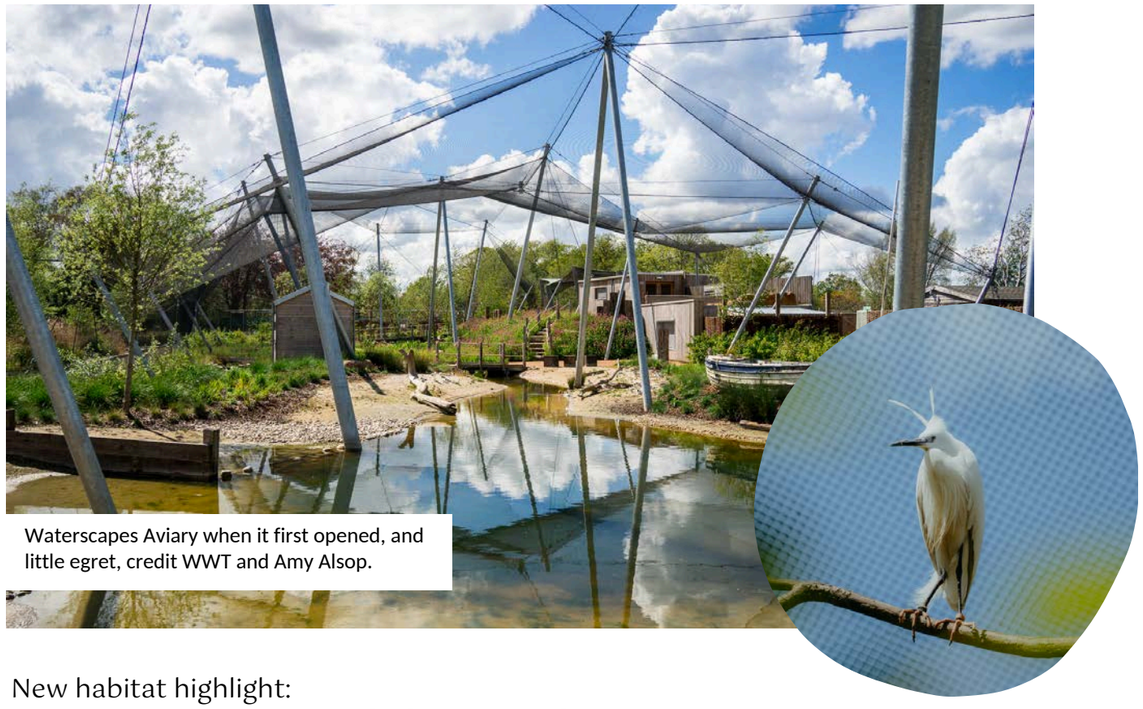
The reintroduction of the chough is about more than just saving a species; it's a flagship initiative for restoring Kent's coastal chalk grasslands and maritime habitats. These ecosystems are being revitalised to support not only the birds but also a myriad of other wildlife species such as dung beetles and the adonis blue butterfly.

With a goal of establishing a stable population of 50 choughs, including 15 breeding pairs, over the next decade, the project aims to become a model for chough reintroduction elsewhere in the UK. It also seeks to advance research into chough husbandry and ecology, fostering academic and citizen-science collaborations that will enhance the success of future rewilding efforts.

The success of the chough project underscores a hopeful message: even faced with the prospect of declining biodiversity, it is possible to restore nature and bring back lost species. By combining innovative conservation techniques with public engagement, the chough is not just surviving, it's thriving!

The project's achievements have not gone unnoticed. It has been shortlisted for the prestigious Great British Wildlife Restoration Award, a testament to its impact on both wildlife and the community. As choughs continue to explore Kent's skies, they serve as a living symbol of what can be accomplished when dedication, innovation, and collaboration come together for the natural world.

Needless to say the team are pretty "choughed" to see these birds flourish, bringing with them the promise of a wilder Kent.



Waterscapes Aviary when it first opened, and little egret, credit WWT and Amy Alsop.

New habitat highlight:

THE WATERSCAPES AVIARY

WWT Slimbridge's new Waterscapes Aviary was created to deepen public engagement with wetland conservation, and explore the rich biodiversity of native wetlands.

Within the aviary there are lagoon areas, lakes, ponds, reedbeds, a wooded wetland, and a diving duck tank - complete with an underwater viewing window where visitors can marvel at the agility of ducks beneath the surface. It also serves as a gateway to the wetland centre's reserve hides.

Accessibility is a priority throughout, with wide pathways for wheelchairs and buggies, and a full height window at the entrance.

The aviary is home to a diverse array of waterbirds including smew, redshank, ruff, ringed plover, black-tailed godwit, red breasted merganser, garganey, European oystercatcher, pied avocet, and little egret. Visitors can experience something new with each season, from the growth of wildflowers to the birds' beautiful breeding plumage and courtship displays.

Waterscapes has also become a successful breeding site for species including avocet, redshank, and ruff, demonstrating it's not just a place for education, but a safe and thriving habitat for its residents.

The water sources are on a closed water system, filtered by a few small mechanical processes, but mostly by wetland plants – making it biosecure, as well as sustainable. All the plants are native wetland species and are suited to the environment and birds. The beach is made from silica sand - proven to keep the wader's feet in good condition. From the silica sand that's beneficial for waders' feet, to the carefully curated native plants, a huge amount of effort has gone into creating a space that feels as natural as possible while prioritising the care of the animals.

With the help of National Lottery Heritage Funding, WWT launched a £6 million project to inspire wetland appreciation and understanding. Central to this effort was the launch of eight new exhibits at WWT Slimbridge, including the Waterscapes Aviary. These projects honour the legacy of WWT's founder, Sir Peter Scott.

Sustainability:

EXCITEMENT OVER EXCREMENT

Zoo and aquariums are all united in one challenge: managing animal waste.

Dublin Zoo's system, specifically for their African Plains herbivore waste and plant material, was significantly improved in both efficiency and sustainability in 2023.

A bespoke concrete manure bay was constructed, measuring 36 metres in length and 8 metres in depth. In addition to proper drainage for effluents collection, this provides optimal conditions for composting.

This is done through careful management of material mixes, oxygen levels, moisture content, and maintaining the carbon to nitrogen ratio between 20:1 - 40:1 for essential and fast microbial activity.

Fresh manure heaps are rotated every two weeks and irrigation methods were also implemented, including an overhead sprinkler system and water tender. The zoo also acquired a versatile vehicle equipped with grab and forklift attachments to handle all the waste.

It has now been over a year of implementation, and the system has yielded consistently reduced and well-composed manure after each 12-week cycle. Dublin Zoo also won the 2024 BIAZA Award in Sustainability for this system.

General Curator Miguel Bueno said; "*After a year of efficiently composting animal waste, we have observed significant improvements in our organic waste management. By transforming waste into a valuable resource through the principles of the circular economy, we have addressed logistical, environmental, and financial challenges. This process has not only increased our efficiency in recycling organic materials produced by our animals but also enabled us to put our sustainability policy into action and engage our staff in these efforts.*"

Horticulture:

NEW BUTTERFLY PARADISE

Last year Tropical Butterfly House Wildlife Conservation Park opened their new butterfly habitat.

Their mission was to create an accessible, energy-efficient and ecologically friendly habitat for butterflies and tropical plants. The ethos behind the planting scheme was to support pollinating insects all year round.

The planting was carefully designed to showcase the significant horticultural relationships between butterflies and their environment. Selected plants were grouped into caterpillar host plants, nectar sources, and tropical species.

Tropical Butterfly House Wildlife Conservation Park

Positioning of planting was carefully structured to mirror the needs of each butterfly species - with 95% grown from seeds and cuttings of stock plants, and just a small portion obtained from other butterfly houses.

With a central pond, stepping stones and accessible wide paths, you can see an array of species including blue morpho, monarch, flame, postman, zebra, malachite and the owl butterfly. Half of the butterflies are sourced from Mariposario del Bosque Nuevo (Butterflies of the New Forest).

Not to mention, this project supports the reforestation and rewilding of this ex-plantation in Costa Rica. This slice of tropical paradise won a BIAZA Horticulture Award in 2024.

Field Conservation

RESERVE: RESERVED

How Colchester Zoo officially established a nature reserve in the eyes of the South African Government

On the 3rd of October 2024, after several years of work from Colchester Zoo and reserve staff, the area of UmPhafa was officially declared a Nature Reserve.

This new declaration is an enormous step in the conservation of this African landscape. It highlights the immense value and important contribution to the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province and South Africa's and biodiversity targets.

South Africa is one of the 196 signatories of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and is therefore obliged to extend its conserved and protected areas to cover over 17% of its land mass. The only meaningful way to achieve this is through cooperation between government and private and communal landowners, where the high priority and conservation-worthy habitat is located. As a result, South Africa developed a Biodiversity Stewardship Programme, which enables landowners to have their land declared as protected areas in an effort to achieve expansion goals.

For UmPhafa, the declaration process began in late 2022. This contained a detailed site assessment, including a field assessment from biodiversity stewardship staff at the regional nature conservation board (Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife), district conservation staff and ecologists. The results of the assessment confirmed that UmPhafa and its highland thornveld landscape has significant biodiversity value and conservation importance:

- The reserve contributes close to 9% of the province's conservation target for this iconic vegetation type.
- Significant portions of the reserve fall within the highest priority for protection in the region to meet critical biodiversity targets.
- The UmPhafa area plays an important role in buffering the catchment area of the uThukela River, contributing towards water security for neighbouring agricultural and downstream communities.

- The declaration was made by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs and the National Environmental Management: Protected Areas Act 2023.
- It was made possible with the help of South African non-profit organisation, Conservation Outcomes, and assisted by financial support from WWF-SA's 'Gernhard Froneman Grassland Bequest,' as part of WWF-SA's Grassland Community Stewardship programme targets.

UmPhafa Reserve, South Africa. Photos: Colchester Zoo

About UmPhafa Nature Reserve

The UmPhafa Nature Reserve is a 6,000ha reserve three hours north of Durban, South Africa, owned by Colchester Zoo and managed by the newly created UmPhafa Conservation Trust.

With the dramatic Northern Drakensberg mountains as a backdrop, UmPhafa forms part of a vital conservation corridor between reserves. To the west; the Spioenkop Nature Reserve – a site which has seen historic battles, now an idyllic grassland surrounding a dam. To the southeast: the riverine Tugela Drift and the acacia savanna of the Weenen Nature Reserves.

The team at Colchester Zoo alongside the thirty-one staff employed on the reserve have worked tirelessly over the past twenty years to restore and conserve this valuable habitat.

UMPHAFA NATURE RESERVE

COLCHESTER ZOO

After this site assessment was presented to the KZN Biodiversity Stewardship Working Group the recommended stewardship category was agreed upon: a 'Nature Reserve' with title deeds endorsed as such for the next ninety-nine years.

Underpinning this declaration is a management plan which is the primary tool the UmPhafa Conservation Trust, plus other conservation partners. This plan must now be followed to ensure its conservation value.

Now looking to the future, UmPhafa's management going forwards will focus on promoting the quality of the habitats in line with recommendations made from a Rangeland Condition Assessment sponsored and conducted by the Natural Resources Department of the KZN province.

The team on UmPhafa are delighted to now be a part of South Africa's network of protected land, working alongside other Private Nature Reserves, as well as 19 National Parks, 42 Marine Parks, 5 UNESCO Biosphere Reserves, 8 UNESCO World Heritage sites, 27 Wetland (RAMSAR) sites and a number of Transfrontier Parks collectively striving to conserve South Africa's biodiversity.

This overseas conservation work is a major part of Colchester Zoological Society's charitable goals.

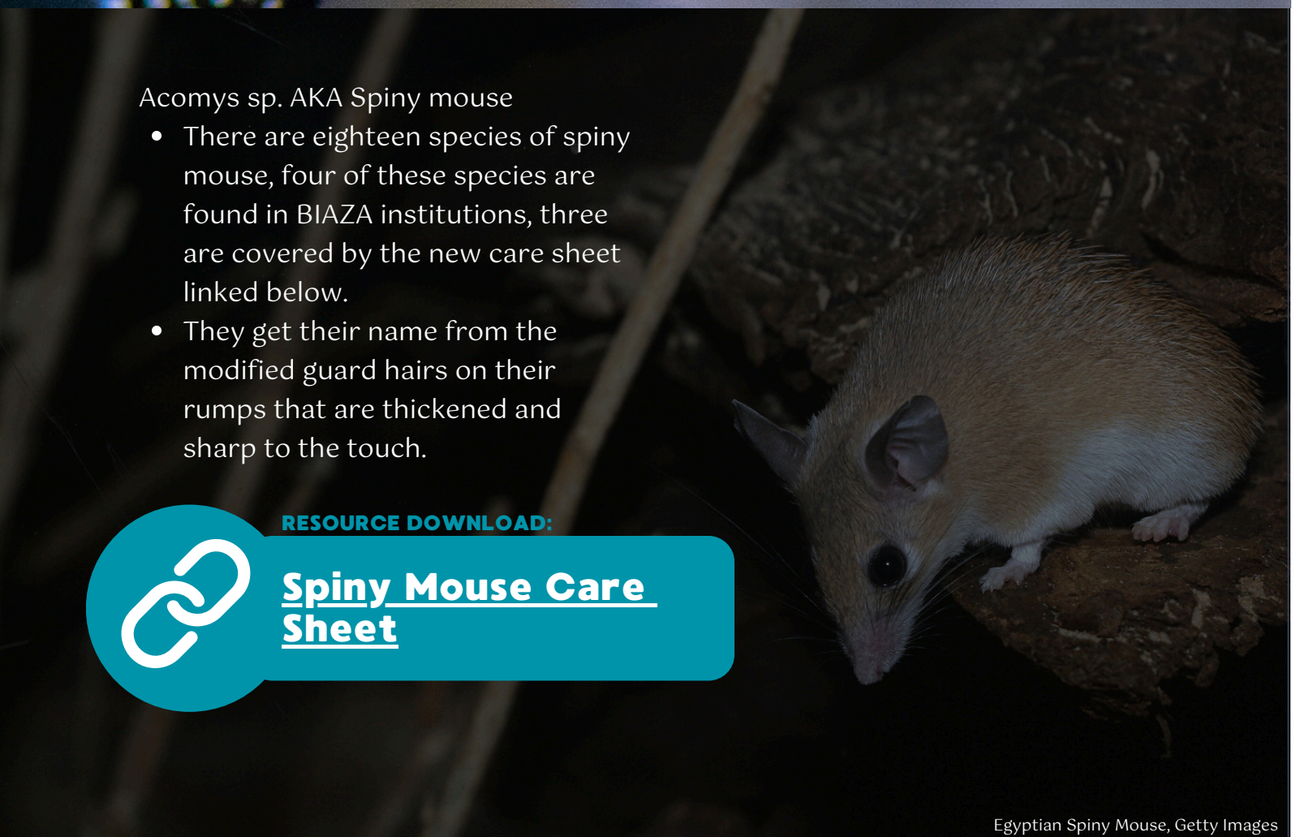
NEW CARE SHEETS

The BIAZA community produces dozens of animal care sheets every year. You can find them in the resources section in the members area of the BIAZA website.

RESOURCE DOWNLOAD:

Banggai Cardinalfish Care Sheet

Chester Zoo



Acomys sp. AKA Spiny mouse

- There are eighteen species of spiny mouse, four of these species are found in BIAZA institutions, three are covered by the new care sheet linked below.
- They get their name from the modified guard hairs on their rumps that are thickened and sharp to the touch.

RESOURCE DOWNLOAD:

Spiny Mouse Care Sheet

Egyptian Spiny Mouse, Getty Images

ABOUT THE WORKING GROUPS

The BIAZA Aquarium Working Group (AWG)

One of the BIAZA Working Groups sitting under the BIAZA Species Advisory Committee (SAC), dedicated to the continual development of aquarium species welfare.

The network of expertise culminates in the annual National Aquarists Conference (NAC). Or alternatively for 2024, in the form of the Ectotherms Conference at Drayton Manor Zoo - which brought together multi-taxa expertise with combined organisation from the Reptile and Amphibian Working Group (RAWG) and the Terrestrial Invertebrate Working Group (TIWG) alongside AWG.

The BIAZA Small Mammal Subgroup (SMSG)

One of the BIAZA Working Groups sitting under the BIAZA Species Advisory Committee (SAC), as one of the six teams which creates the wider Mammal Working Group (MWG).

This group of supports the ongoing education of small mammal keepers such as via care sheets, workshops, highlighting research priorities, collating enrichment resources, conservation awareness, and more.

The SMSG creates an annual newsletter, which can be found here.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Want to contribute and create a care sheet? Start here:

RESOURCE DOWNLOAD:

Hints and tips for writing a good BIAZA care sheet

RESOURCE DOWNLOAD:

NEW BIAZA Husbandry Care Sheet template

INTERESTED IN ADVERTISING IN BIAZA BROWSE?

BIAZA corporate members can receive advertising space in future issues.

To enquire, get in touch via admin@biaza.org.uk

navigate

EMBRACING THE NEW NORMAL TO ATTRACT VISITORS

Olly Reed from Navigate, BIAZA's marketing partner, takes a look at visitor attraction trends over the year and how zoos and aquariums might attract visitors in the dynamic market place.

The last few years have been very demanding. Visitor patterns and decision making have changed. So what can zoos and aquariums do to boost visitor numbers and revenue?

Adapting to Last-Minute Decision Makers - Whether due to the cost of living crisis or uncertain weather, people waited until the last minute to decide if they were going to take a trip this year. For zoos and aquariums digital agility is crucial: embracing digital advertising and flexible campaigns, reactive messaging, offering incentives to book immediately and making the online booking process seamless. Complex checkouts deter conversions. If your checkout involves too many steps or isn't user-friendly, it's time to re-evaluate.

Google Ad Grants – Charities have an opportunity to benefit from Google Ads Grants, which Google provides up to $10,000 monthly in free advertising to promote charitable purposes. But it can be a powerful resource for driving bookings, particularly from those last-minute decision-makers looking for activities nearby. There are specific parameters about how it can be utilised and be aware that you can severely damage accounts without active management and being responsive to email requests from Google so ensure skilled management is in place.

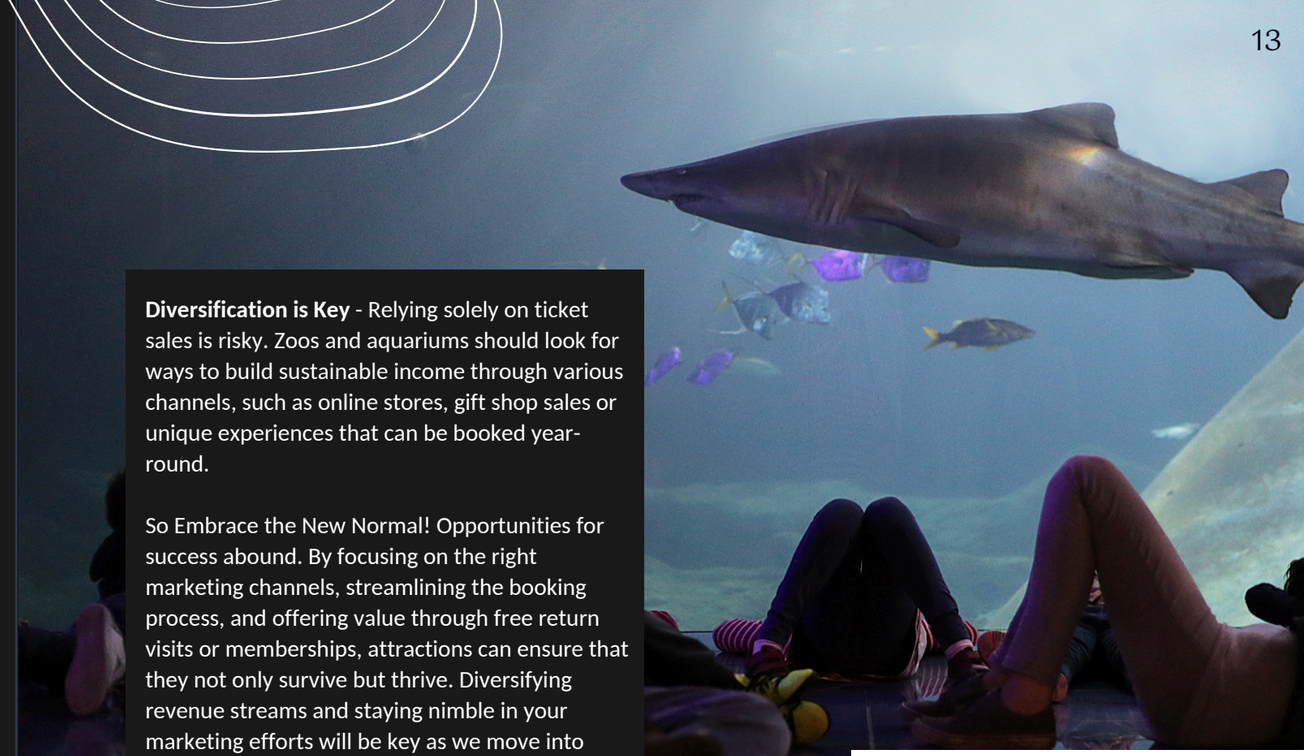
The Right Marketing Channels - there's a temptation to spread marketing efforts across as many platforms as possible. However, two of the most successful platforms for attracting new visitors are paid search (Google) and Meta (Facebook/Instagram) advertising. Paid search is particularly valuable for attracting visitors who are already searching for your type of attraction, while Meta's social platforms are excellent for storytelling and capturing new audiences' attention. That said, email marketing remains one of the most impactful tools available.

Return Visits and Membership Programs- A standout trend we observed this year was the success of attractions offering free return visits or robust membership programs, as families feel the pinch of rising costs. For zoos and aquariums, this means thinking creatively about structuring offers or policies that entice multiple visits.

Pop Culture - Attractions that tapped into pop culture and viral trends were among the biggest winners this year. Events like the V&A's Taylor Swift exhibition or the Design Museum's collaboration with Barbie brought in record-breaking visitor numbers. Zoos and aquariums can host themed events or partnering with popular franchises.

Diversification is Key - Relying solely on ticket sales is risky. Zoos and aquariums should look for ways to build sustainable income through various channels, such as online stores, gift shop sales or unique experiences that can be booked year-round.

So Embrace the New Normal! Opportunities for success abound. By focusing on the right marketing channels, streamlining the booking process, and offering value through free return visits or memberships, attractions can ensure that they not only survive but thrive. Diversifying revenue streams and staying nimble in your marketing efforts will be key as we move into 2025.



National Marine Aquarium (Sleeping with Sharks Event) Olly Reed

BIAZA Events Page: biaza.org.uk/events

WHAT'S ON: Q1 2025

Follow the links to find out more

BIAZA Viverrid Workshop
23-24 January
Dudley Zoo and Castle

BIAZA Awards 2025 submission period
Deadline: 23 February

International Women's Day
8 March
BIAZA will announce the Woman of the Year 2025. **There's still time to nominate someone before 31 December**

World Serval Day
18 March

Online paper writing workshop for zookeepers
19 March

BIAZA Members Meeting
19 March
Watatunga Wildlife Reserve

BIAZA Rodent Workshop
28 March
Chester Zoo

BIAZA World Autism Acceptance Campaign
31 March - 6 April
Prepare events with resources on our website