

# AN EPIDEMIC

## AZA-ACCREDITED FACILITIES ADDRESS WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

Wildlife trafficking draws countless comparisons to the drug trafficking trade. Without a doubt, there are many parallels. Rich Bergl, director of conservation, education, and science at North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro, N.C., believes focusing on the one key difference is critical.

“Unlike the drug trade, with the wildlife trade the harm happens at beginning of the supply chain. Once an animal is killed and its parts enter the trade, you’re fighting a losing battle because the thing you’re trying to stop has already happened. Effective anti-poaching initiatives are crucial,” he said.

North Carolina Zoo played a lead role in developing Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tool (SMART)—a suite of technologies that enable people managing protected areas to collect, analyze, and use data. Thanks to SMART, rangers on the front lines of conservation can report on animal sightings, activities, threats, and other relevant information, which is then analyzed by an automated database. Over 800 sites across more than 60 countries currently use SMART technology to inform future patrols and efforts.

“It’s so important to think about the wildlife trade from the start to

the end, not some arbitrary point in the middle. We need to consider every step along the way from the point of poaching to the end user because they’re all inextricably linked,” said Bergl.

To further contribute to larger anti-poaching initiatives, staff from North Carolina Zoo work on-site in six African countries. They train staff, offer tech support, and outfit rangers with necessary items like laptops, mobile devices, backpacks, boots, and uniforms. They also work alongside partner organizations to get involved with local communities and offer educational programs and alternative sources of income to residents at risk of resorting to poaching.

This holistic approach to ending the wildlife trade extends back to North Carolina, where the Zoo has ramped up efforts to make their visitors aware of wildlife trafficking and the work they’re doing to combat it.

“For our visitors, dealing with wildlife poaching seems like an important issue but also one that’s very far away. People think of rhino horns or gorilla poaching, which doesn’t apply to them,” said Bergl. To bring people into the conservation discussion, the Zoo makes visitors feel like part of the solution.

BY HILLARY RICHARD





It can be empowering to give them the message that their visit to the Zoo has already helped with our efforts to tackle these problems,” he said.

There are additional chances for visitors to donate to the cause as well, like purchasing \$1 buttons at the gift shop or rounding up their concession bills.

Kerryn Morrison, vice president of Africa for the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wis., works closely with a number of Association of Zoos and Aquariums-accredited facilities and other international organizations to stop gray crowned and black crowned cranes from becoming domesticated pets and status symbols.

“It’s quite organized in terms of the people who take the chicks out of the wild and then the market chain of people who sell them into domestication,” she said. Tracking the cranes once they have been removed from the wild has proven to be a challenge.

To combat the trafficking, The International Crane Foundation is working with local communities to organize conservation agreements. Offering communities benefits (like jobs and education) in exchange for conservation actions has already helped interrupt the poaching chain in Uganda and resulted in more stable crane populations in the wild.

“When we did research on the crane trade a few years ago, it came out very clearly that it’s not the community that benefits from the crane trade—it’s just individuals,”

said Morrison. To instill a sense of ownership in crane areas, The Crane Foundation focuses on offering alternative livelihoods and improving the income level of communities as a whole. As a policy, they do not specifically target people involved in the trade because there are a number of social issues that arise from rewarding people who perform illegal activities and ignoring the rest of their communities.

“We have ‘crane custodians’—trained community volunteers who increase awareness of cranes and threats to wetlands. This empowers them to be able to talk to people in the trade and to link up with authorities as watchdogs,” said Morrison.

It took 30 years of conservation and reintroduction efforts to bring the Bali myna back from the brink of extinction in the wild.

“The Bali myna is the poster child for some of the challenges that have been going on with Asian bird species,” said Sunny Nelson, the curator of birds at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, Ill., which has the Bali myna studbook and the Species Survival Plan® coordinator. In addition to research efforts, the Lincoln Park Zoo collaborates on international bird conservation projects.

Nelson believes social pressure and understanding the social drivers behind status symbol pets will be the keys to preventing songbird poaching. In many cases she has seen, the punitive damages and legal repercussions aren’t enough to deter wealthy pet collectors.

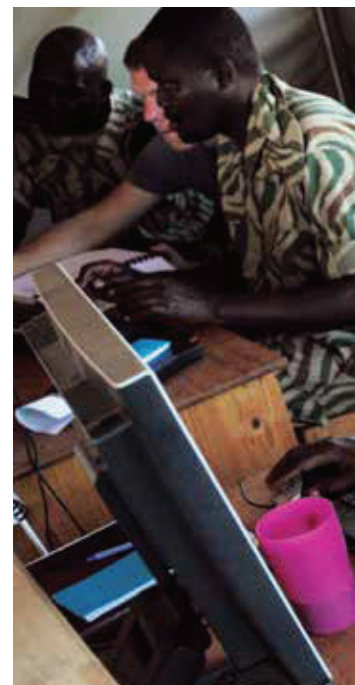
“Right now people trap song birds in the wild and sell them in



these Super Walmart-sized markets. It’s just decimating wild populations of birds. It’s overwhelming but as long as we continue to talk about it raise awareness hopefully we can make a difference,” she said.

There are a surprising number of ways to interrupt the illegal wildlife trade locally within the United States. Most people see wildlife trafficking as a foreign issue, but the reality is that traffickers often move animals and animal products through random spots in the country to avoid suspicion.

“Every state in our nation has these products coming in and out of them,” said Kerston Swartz, senior public affairs and advocacy manager at Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, Wash. Swartz and her colleagues



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work closely with government agencies like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to help combat trafficking.

The Woodland Park Zoo has worked with a variety of partners to get legislation passed, conduct public outreach, host events, participate in panels, and apply for grants and funding. They have had enormous success working with agencies like Customs and Border Patrol and USFWS, both of which require animal expertise and extra manpower.

“The state governments and federal governments want to stop trafficking. They are all in. They look at zoos and aquariums as channels for helping them do that. Apply for a grant and do some of this work. The government is just waiting for us to knock on their doors,” said Swartz.

The Los Angeles Zoo in Los Angeles, Calif., works closely with law enforcement on wildlife confiscations and seizures. Los Angeles is a major port of entry and exit. In addition to lacking the staff to check every single package, officials understandably lack the knowledge to verify whether wildlife matches up with their corresponding permits or whether an endangered species has been smuggled alongside similar looking creatures.

“We’re a conservation and education facility, so when we can help law enforcement in any way we’re always going to try,” said Ian Recchio, curator of reptiles and amphibians at the Los Angeles Zoo. Recchio is often

called upon to help identify species and triage wounded amphibians.

“Smugglers know they’re going to lose a certain percentage of these animals so they don’t ship them properly. It’s the shotgun effect. A lot of times when the animals are seized they come in horrible health. We figure out who needs immediate vet care and identify which ones we can save,” he said. In addition to injuries and illnesses, animals collected from the wild arrive with invisible ailments like parasites.

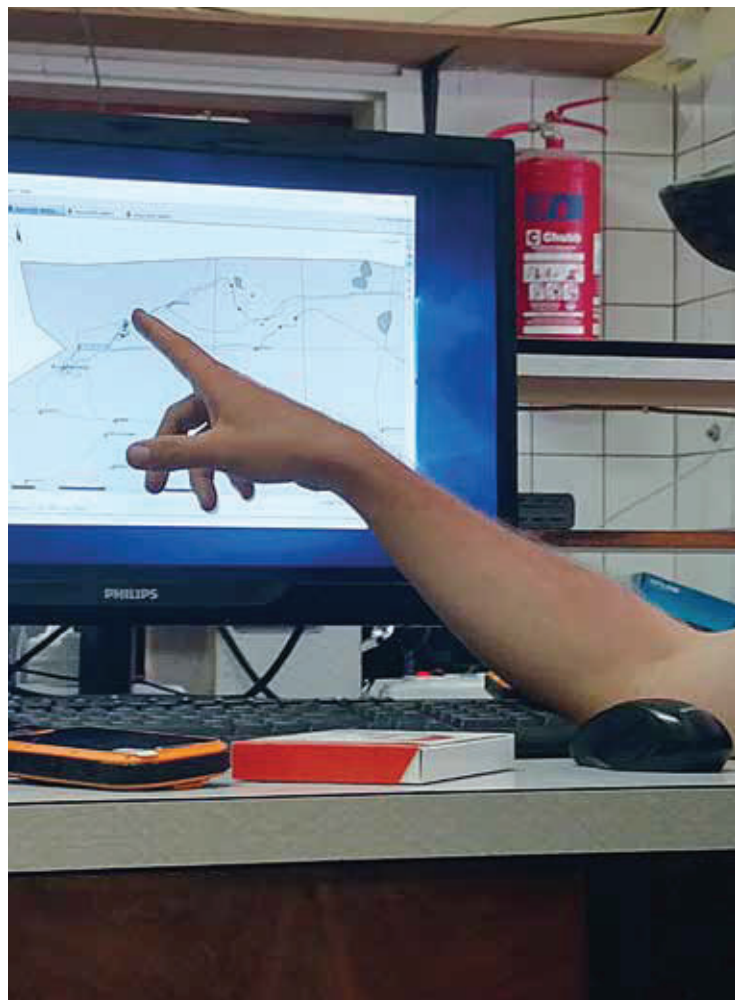
Recchio also helps place confiscated wildlife in facilities around the country using his professional connections and tools like AZA listservs and email blasts. He sees it as turning a huge negative into a positive, since these animals can usually fit into a managed conservation and breeding program.

Poaching and wildlife trafficking are astoundingly large, complicated issues with no clear solution. However, everyone agrees that this means there are plenty of opportunities to help.

“I think that zoos and aquariums are the catalysts for change here. Nobody can make the connection to the public or to lawmakers like we can,” said Swartz. “Additionally, we have ability to mobilize thousands of people behind this work. We are holding important cards that can help fix this.”

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Hillary Richard is a writer based in Bloomfield, N.J.



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