



## The WAZA Conservation Strategy, Five Years Later.

**Photo:** Martha Hiatt bottle feeding a Pacific walrus calf. © Julie Larsen Maher/Wildlife Conservation Society.

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**In recognition of the fifth anniversary of the [WAZA Conservation Strategy, Committing to Conservation](#), and to address the question of whether we need another updated edition, let's attempt to evaluate its impact on our zoological community worldwide. Surveys reveal that our members consider it to have been a helpful resource for many WAZA institutions.**

The WAZA Conservation Strategy series (there have been three editions since 1993) was intended to complement and strengthen other conservation documents and initiatives. All three editions were living documents and a result of collaborative efforts involving hundreds of conservation colleagues. Each edition built upon the preceding edition, and evolved with the changing landscape of biodiversity conservation, especially within the scientific, business and political arenas.

The first WAZA Conservation Strategy was published 27 years ago and the world has changed exponentially since then. As a starting point, we have many more people on the planet, consuming

more natural resources at a much faster and unsustainable rate. Climate change is still not universally accepted outside of the scientific community, despite overwhelming evidence and catastrophic events becoming more pronounced each year. Social media has also played a considerable role in how information is shared, and support galvanised. Add to this a global pandemic and the recent preponderance of short-sighted political leaders, and we are left with a very complex and unpredictable future.

On the positive side, there are many more individual conservationists, conservation NGOs, private philanthropists, and zoo and aquarium-based conservation programmes than there were 27 years ago.

The very first WAZA Conservation Strategy (titled *The World Zoo Conservation Strategy*) was published in 1993 when WAZA was still called the International Union of Directors of Zoological Gardens (IUDZG). It was written under the guidance of the then

Conservation Breeding Specialist Group (CBSG) of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (SSC) and printed and published by the Brookfield Zoo. This original document was mostly a scientific “call to arms” that articulated a vision where everyone would work together to save nature and humanity. Its primary purpose was “to bring *ex situ* institutions into the mainstream of biodiversity conservation and sustainable development”. This was a ground-breaking declaration that WAZA zoos and aquariums were serious about conservation action outside of their gates.

The second Conservation Strategy was published in 2005 (*Building a Future for Wildlife*) and incorporated a separate resource manual to develop action plans to implement conservation strategies. The front cover showed a group of zoo-bred Przewalski’s horses being released into the Gobi National Park, Mongolia. It was written to appeal to a much broader and more general audience.

It also included summary recommendations at the end of each chapter. It was a powerful document that played a significant role in changing public perceptions of zoos and aquariums from being considered as primarily entertainment venues to centres of animal wellness and conservation. This edition backed up our conservation intent with active programmes and strategic plans to practice what we preached.

Finally, the third edition focused on the concept of full integration of a conservation mission at every level, rather than just maintaining a separate department of conservation. The title alone, “*Committing to Conservation*” reveals much of what the focus of this current edition strives to achieve. It adopted more of a cultural and business approach to implementing conservation initiatives. Realising that conservation action requires more than a ‘recipe book,’ we augmented scientific facts with behaviour change initiatives and battle-tested fundraising messages. We developed, *Seven Steps to Conservation Leadership*, a checklist for self-evaluating conservation programmes. It is a proactive document that was designed to help leaders evolve their leadership skills to become conservation ambassadors for their core mission.



**Photo:** Mar Alliance Belize, taken from the WAZA Conservation Strategy: *Committing to Conservation*.



**Photo:** Aquarium specialists provide assistance to a coral conservation project using their expertise in coral propagation.  
© Coral Restoration Foundation.



**Photo:** Local communities participate in reforestation efforts in Madagascar to preserve lemur habitat. © Conservation Fusion, Madagascar

## Personal Reflections and the Future

There is little doubt that these three Conservation Strategies were useful building blocks for developing zoo and aquarium-based conservation programmes. They also helped to strengthen our reputation as credible conservation organisations. It is gratifying to see that many survey participants used these strategies to develop and grow their conservation programmes.

### **The types of questions we should be asking now, are:**

- What is the best approach to take, to ensure we continue to inspire and equip our member institutions to allow them to make meaningful advances in conservation initiatives?
- Are periodic updates to our Conservation Strategies enough, or should we be thinking on a grander scale?

WAZA is the umbrella organisation that is best suited to leading a global transformation that could change the very definition and public perception of zoos and aquariums. However, one could claim that none of the actions we have taken have stemmed the tide of the bio-destruction occurring on our planet. Therefore, it could be said that it is not worth the time and effort of producing a fourth edition of the WAZA Conservation Strategy. However, I doubt that any of the members of the zoo and aquarium community would agree with this premise.

We may not be reversing the decline, but there is evidence that we are definitely slowing it down in some places. A recent study (Bolam et al. 2020) concluded that 15 mammal and bird species went extinct since 1993. However, a greater number (28-48 mammal and bird species) of extinctions were prevented by active conservation intervention during this same period, and zoos played a significant role in these victories for nature. So, we can never give up hope.

Moving forward, we don't need validation as much as trust and collaboration. Where would our institutions be if the WAZA Conservation Strategy had never been published? This is like pondering what the world would be like if you were never born. Since we do not have a Guardian Angel to take us back in time, we can only hypothesise about this 'what if' scenario.

My preference is to thoughtfully consider the potential outcomes if zoos and aquariums took bigger risks, focused on the greater good and solidified their connections to the natural world in ways that really make a difference for people and wildlife. We can do this by transporting guests virtually to the front lines of conservation. If humans are less likely to be travelling around the globe, then let's bring the world to them. Our zoos and aquariums can powerfully demonstrate how saving wildlife and habitats is improving the lives of millions of people. Utilising our animal residents as Conservation Ambassadors to touch hearts and minds should be the catalyst for this change.

The suggestion to increase our conservation commitments while many institutions are currently fighting to survive the aftershocks of a global pandemic may sound a bit unrealistic. However, the pandemic has awoken an increased appreciation and utilisation of nature and the great outdoors as indoor venues and activities have been restricted or closed altogether. Perhaps we could amplify this unintentional outcome to address the pandemic-like nature deficit disorder inflicting so many in our society today?

The next edition of the WAZA Conservation Strategy should plot a path to recovery that leverages positive, proactive, strategies focusing on networking and mentorship programmes that enhance personal connections to people, animals and nature. Building on the increased awareness of the importance of the natural world as people have relied on it more heavily for their recreational, social and mental health needs, now is perhaps the perfect time to encourage action, nurture goodwill and feed optimism about how we can build a better future for ourselves and our children by safeguarding the future of our planet.

Instead of an updated set of documents or manuals, perhaps we need more of a rallying cry – a call to action that promotes a renewed sense of purpose and a shared mindset to work together more effectively. A 'One-Team Approach' is the most powerful change agent we have in our human arsenal. In the end, it always comes down to leadership and culture if you want to advance from good to great. Imagine how much more could be accomplished if we put aside minor squabbles (and inflated egos) and focused on the big picture and started now, because later is too late.

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Photo: All three editions of the WAZA Conservation Strategies.

