

What Zoos Do

U.S. Zoos work to preserve animals around the world through conservation, research, and education.

By Amy Miller

Chimpanzees swing from trees at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago. Cheetahs pace and nap at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. Giant pandas eat pounds and pounds of bamboo shoots at the San Diego Zoo.

All these animals have one thing in common. They are all in danger of disappearing in their natural habitat, and zoos are trying to help save them.

Zoos across the country are changing these days. They aren't just places to see wild animals in cages anymore. Zoos are working harder than ever to save endangered animals around the world.

Sometimes, zoos' efforts take scientists around the world. For example, the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), which is headquartered at the Bronx Zoo in New York City, is working with local officials in Malaysia to stop people from hunting exotic birds to sell their feathers.

"We have to learn how to live in harmony with the animals around us and how to just think a little bit more before we do certain things," said Sara S. Marinello, of the WCS.

The San Diego Zoo just opened the Conservation and Research for Endangered Species Center. The \$22 million center gives scientists cutting-edge instruments and plenty of room to do their work.

The California zoo is famous for its work helping to save China's giant panda. Three panda cubs have been born at the zoo already. The San Diego Zoo now has the largest population of giant pandas outside mainland China.

But the zoo has many other projects few people hear about. Scientists with the zoo are working to save iguanas in the Turks and Caicos Islands in the North Atlantic Ocean. They study African wild dogs in Zambia and forest birds in Hawaii.



A 5-week-old male clouded leopard cub shows his discomfort at being held by Kathleen Deckard, a veterinary student (left), while Dr. Pam Dennis, a resident of the Wildlife and Zoological Medicine program at the University of Florida, takes the cub's temperature during his first vet visit at the Central Florida Zoological Park in Sanford, Florida. (Photo: Daytona Beach News-Journal, Kelly Jordan/AP Wide World)

Farmers in Africa think the spotted cheetah is an annoying pest. So they trap and kill them. Now cheetahs are in danger of disappearing forever. The National Zoo in Washington, D.C. is trying to change that through the Cheetah Conservation Fund in Namibia, Africa. Scientists there are showing farmers that they don't have to kill cheetahs to keep them off their farms.

Scientists at the Houston Zoo are working with people in Venezuela to save the tapir, an animal related to the rhinoceros that looks a lot like a pig. But it's hunted for its thick hides and it's losing its habitat in South American's forests to development.

"We are part of the web of life," said Marinello. "We forget that sometimes. But we are animals and our earth is supporting us and it's all connected. It's a balancing act and we need to think about how we can sustain the planet to take care of us and all of the plants and animals that are on it."