Where Do Zoos Get Their Animals?

With all the excitement surrounding the debut of our new lion cubs, anteater, and other arrivals, you may ask yourself, where does the Zoo get all of those cool animals? That is actually a very complicated process that involves the cooperation of many trained and talented people and zoos from all over North America. Much like your quest for a new family pet, zoos must ask a lot of questions before adding new animals to their collection. What are the needs of that animal? Can we meet its dietary, housing, and space requirements? Do we have properly trained staff to manage their care? Can we afford the expensive upkeep?

Zoos formulate a collection plan that includes such things as what animals they currently have, what future animals are they planning for, and how will it all be managed. Zoos cannot go to the local animal shelter or purchase an animal online, and most zoo animals do not come from the wild. Catching wild animals is just too stressful for the animal, too expensive for the Zoo, and can result in injury on both sides. We do not want to deplete wild populations, and our ultimate goal is to conserve animals in their natural habitats. Wild caught animals are a medical mystery. They may have diseases that could adversely affect the other animals, and since their health and genetic background is unknown, breeding them becomes very risky.

There are some exceptions when it comes to wild caught animals. Zoos place an emphasis on preserving endangered species. If an entire species' population becomes so low that it cannot sustain itself in the wild, then there is a concerted effort to capture that population and bring it into a managed breeding situation within zoos. Prime examples of this include the California condor and the black-footed ferret. When it became clear that we would lose these creatures in the wild for good, the remaining populations were brought into zoos to be sheltered from predators, disease, and habitat destruction. The managed breeding of these
animals was imperative to make sure enough genetic variability was maintained in order for the population to survive as whole. As those populations began to rebound, healthy individuals were released back into the wild. These programs, and others like them, continue on a regular basis and could not happen without the financial support, research, and manpower provided by many zoos around the world.

Most zoo animals come from captive breeding programs. That means that decisions have to be made about who breeds and when in order to maintain genetic diversity and space. Zoos across the nation cooperate with one another in Species Survival Plans (SSP) and other captive breeding programs to keep populations healthy. An example of this is our male African lion, Razi. He was sent to us from the Denver Zoo because the lion SSP recommended he breed with our two females, Classie and Amali. Clearly, that was a successful venture resulting in three wonderful cubs. It also illustrates that just because we want an animal to mate, they have the ultimate say in that matter. Our older lioness, Classie, has not shown any interest in mating with Razi, and that’s just fine!

If a zoo wants to add a new animal, calls will be made to other zoos that may need to make room for breeding or may have too many individuals in their collection. We recently brought in three new emperor scorpions that were donated to us by the Topeka Zoo, because they had babies, and we wanted a new scorpion exhibit.

These types of exchanges vary in complexity depending on location and type of species involved. There are always permits and other paperwork to be completed for various regulating agencies such as US Fish and Wildlife and the USDA, as well as health inspections, and quarantine periods; however, transportation can be one of the most cost-prohibitive and difficult components of the transaction. You can’t just put a giraffe in a horse trailer and drive it across country, and the “pet” carriers are very different for a tiger than they are for your housecat. There
are specialized trucking companies when needed, and some animals actually do fly FedEx!

The next time you decide to adopt a new family pet, remember to ask yourself those important questions we weigh at the Zoo. Is it the right fit for you and your family, and are you ready for all the demands and requirements necessary to care for that animal the rest of its life? A lot of hard work, dedication, and planning goes into bringing animals to the Zoo for everyone to experience, learn more about, and appreciate their value in the world. As a result, there are great many rewards in a visit to the Zoo!