

Zoo To You Article

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Topic: Where do zoo animals come from?

“Where’d that animal come from?” is a question often asked by guests at the zoo. Usually, the answer is that the individual was born at the zoo or came from another zoo. While each animal will have a connection to the wild through their ancestors, zoos don’t often take animals from the wild these days. On the occasion when that does happen, regulatory agencies must be shown that it isn’t harmful to the wild population. At times zoos are called upon by such agencies to rescue wild orphans. Such was the case with our female mountain lions. Other times an animal may come out of the wild due to injuries that prevent it from thriving in the wild, like our bald eagle.

When it comes to breeding a species in the zoo, zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) work together, often along with other like-minded facilities, to plan which individuals of a species will breed in order to maintain the genetic health of the population. The plan also involves considering how much space is available for that species among the facilities involved. Each animal produced needs to have a proper home.

Such efforts take multiple facilities because one zoo doesn’t have room for every species or even every member of a species. Having multiple facilities involved also protects the species from being wiped out by a disaster that might hit one specific location. Each zoo plays a role which can change through the years, whether it is as a breeding institution or providing a home for individuals that aren’t selected to breed at this time. Zoos have evolved from places that existed to show off exotic animals to facilities that focus on education and conservation, as well as providing quality care and welfare for the resident animals. Working toward self-sustaining populations is one part of that evolution.

At times zoos get calls from members of the public about an exotic pet the person has that they can no longer care for. Sometimes we’re able to assist and provide the animal a new home. The spurred tortoises and leopard gecko at Lee Richardson Zoo are examples of times when this has been possible, but most times it just doesn’t work. Even if the zoo houses a member of the same species, it doesn’t always mean that an individual who has been a pet can easily be added as part of the “family”. Sometimes it’s simply a space issue, other times it involves animal behavior also. Primates are a good example in this case. Primates raised as pets don’t always act like their wild counterparts because they

weren't raised like a typical monkey, chimp, etc.... When a member of the troop doesn't act right, it often leads to aggressive and possibly lethal encounters among the members of the group. So zoos often cannot accept such pets if they don't have space that facilitates the long drawn out introductions that would be necessary or the space that would be needed for two groups (one of past pets and the other wild) if the mix doesn't work. Zoos have a finite amount of space, and it's planned out how that space is used.

Other times zoos are called upon to rescue abandoned exotic pets if they can. The ball python, found in a local street gutter, and bearded dragon, found in a nearby crop field on a winter day, who now reside at Lee Richardson Zoo are examples of this. Please be sure to research any pet you're thinking about getting. It's a lifelong commitment.

As part of our commitment to wildlife, zoos also work together to conserve wild animals and the wild places they live through various projects including in-situ projects (projects that occur in the wild). These projects range from helping train dogs to detect smuggled rhino horn, to planting areas that support pollinators (butterflies, bees, etc...), to supporting wildlife wardens at a sanctuary in Belize (jaguar territory).

Whether it's planned breeding at the zoo, providing a home to wild orphans, or participating in conservation efforts to aid a species in the wild or conserve the wild places where they live, your support is the reason Lee Richardson Zoo can embark upon these worthy endeavors. It's also why we can share them through educational programming and engaging experiences that inspire appreciation and understanding of our amazing natural world. Visit our website (www.leerichardsonzoo.org) or Facebook page for more information on zoo happenings and upcoming events.