

Testimony

of

**DAN ASHE  
PRESIDENT & CEO  
ASSOCIATION OF ZOOS AND AQUARIUMS**

before the

**COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS**

**U.S. SENATE**

on

**Oversight: Modernization of the Endangered Species Act**

February 15, 2017

Thank you Chairman Barrasso and Ranking Member Carper for the opportunity to testify before the Committee today about the Endangered Species Act.

My name is Dan Ashe, and I am the President and CEO of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Founded in 1924, the AZA is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, education, science, and recreation. AZA's 232 accredited aquariums, nature centers, science centers and zoos annually see more than 186 million visitors, collectively generate more than \$17 billion in annual economic activity, and support more than 175,000 jobs across the country. Over the last five years, AZA-accredited facilities supported more than 1,000 field conservation and research projects, contributing over \$186,000,000 in 2015 in more than 100 countries. In the last 10 years, accredited zoos and aquariums formally trained more than 400,000 teachers, supporting science curricula with effective teaching materials and hands-on opportunities.

At the heart of the AZA's mission is its accreditation process, which assures that only those zoos and aquariums that meet the highest standards can become members of the AZA. The rigorous, unbiased, and lengthy AZA accreditation process includes self-evaluation, on-site inspection, and peer review. The standards are continuously evolving and getting stronger as we learn more about the needs of the animals in our care. Accreditation is mandatory for all AZA aquariums and zoos. Once earned, it confers best-in-class status, an important message for local, state, and federal government and the visiting public.

AZA and its members bring a different perspective to this discussion. We are a partner and participant in species conservation. We work with the government to save species. And we are also a regulated party and depend on an effective and efficient regulatory structure within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

As a partner in species conservation, we work in concert with Congress, the federal agencies, conservation organizations, state governments, the private sector, and the general public to conserve our wildlife heritage. In particular, AZA and its member facilities have long-standing partnerships with the USFWS, NOAA, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Our collaborative efforts have focused on:

- Engaging in endangered species recovery and reintroduction;
- Supporting multinational species conservation funds and state wildlife grants; and
- Collaborating on partnership opportunities involving wildlife refuges, migratory birds, freshwater and saltwater fisheries, national marine sanctuaries, illegal wildlife trade, amphibians, and invasive species.

The AZA and its members take the issue of wildlife conservation very seriously and wholeheartedly support the Endangered Species Act, which has prevented hundreds of listed species from going extinct. Simply put, the ESA, which is recognized globally as a model for species preservation, is working. It has prevented the extinction of 99% of the species it protects

since its inception in 1973. However, we know that the challenges facing our planet in the 21st century are as complex as they are urgent. Scientists estimate that the total number of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish has declined by more than 50% since 1970, and many believe that we are living amidst the planet's sixth mass extinction. Climate change threatens to accelerate this crisis. Without critical intervention today, we are facing the very real possibility of losing some of our planet's most magnificent creatures such as cheetahs, elephants, gorillas, sea turtles, and sharks.

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums have a unique responsibility to help others understand this crisis. It is our obligation - to these animals and to all life on earth - to take bold action now to protect our planet's biodiversity.

One achievement that has gone unnoticed by most people is that zoos and aquariums have played a significant role in bringing over 25 species back from the brink of extinction.

The California condor, officially labeled as extinct in the wild in 1987, has been bred in human care and is being reintroduced in the wild by a coalition of groups including San Diego Zoo Global, The Peregrine Fund, the Los Angeles Zoo, the Oregon Zoo, and the Ventana Wildlife Society. In 1982, with only twenty-two condors left in the wild, San Diego Zoo Global began the first breeding program for California condors. The program also involved the USFWS, California Department of Fish and Game, the National Audubon Society, and the Los Angeles Zoo. Within twenty years the population of California condors grew to almost 200. The zoological breeding programs now release 20 to 40 condors annually, and according to USFWS officials, the California condor population has reached a total of 435 birds, 268 of which are living in the wild in California, Arizona, Utah, and Baja California, Mexico.

Another success story is the black-footed ferret. Just last year, thirty-five years after the species was rediscovered after having been believed to be extinct, a historic reintroduction took place, marking another positive step toward recovery for the black-footed ferret, one of North America's most endangered mammals.

On July 26, 2016, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, in partnership with the USFWS and the owners of two ranches, released 35 black-footed ferrets to honor the special anniversary. The release occurred near Meeteetse, Wyoming on the Lazy BV, Pitchfork, and Hogg Ranches, where the species was first rediscovered, and was also supported in part by the AZA and four of its accredited facilities: the Phoenix Zoo, Louisville Zoo, Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, and Santa Barbara Zoo. The zoological facilities contributed funds to support the necessary dusting of the prairie dog colonies with the insecticide deltamethrin (Delta Dust) to address the presence of sylvatic plague, a flea-borne disease that has decimated the prairie dog population.

Beginning in 1986, the Wyoming Game and Fish Department and USFWS founded a successful breeding program for black-footed ferrets. Breeding under managed care continues today, and the ferrets have been released throughout western North America. Black-footed ferrets currently reside at five AZA-accredited facilities: the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, Louisville Zoo, Phoenix Zoo, Smithsonian National Zoological Park, and Toronto Zoo. Additionally, between 2011 and 2015, 22 AZA-accredited facilities contributed approximately \$5.8 million to 32 field

conservation projects benefitting black-footed ferrets. These projects primarily focus on reintroduction, monitoring of reintroduced ferrets, and ecological studies focused on strengthening long-term sustainability of the population, such as those investigating the species' relationship with its prey, the black-tailed prairie dog.

The national Black-footed Ferret Recovery Implementation Team has released ferrets at 24 sites across North America. Current ferret numbers in the wild are encouraging, but more reintroduction sites are needed to fully recover the species so that it no longer requires federal protection.

Building on the success of existing conservation and species preservation efforts, AZA and its members launched SAFE: Saving Animals From Extinction® to provide urgent leadership and action to prevent mass animal extinctions. The actions we take to protect endangered species today will determine the kind of world we live in for many generations to come.

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums all share a deep commitment to the animals we care for and to conserving wildlife throughout the world. Now, through SAFE, we are challenging ourselves to create a collective movement strong enough to turn the tide against a massive wave of animal extinctions.

I would like to briefly mention one SAFE signature species, the vaquita porpoise. It is the most critically endangered cetacean in the world and can only be found in the northwestern corner of the Gulf of California in Mexico. This porpoise population is in rapid decline, with recent reports pegging the total population to 30 animals left. This is a direct result of the animals being caught accidentally in fishing gillnets which are used by drug cartels to catch totoaba, an endangered fish. Totoaba bladders, which command thousands of dollars in China, are trafficked through the United States to the market there.

What is important to note is that there is no zoo or aquarium in the world where you can see a vaquita porpoise. This amazing animal will likely only be known by our children and grandchildren in photographs. AZA members stepped up and have contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to projects specifically designed to help save the vaquita. This is an opportunity to help save a species. That is why AZA and its members are collaborating with U.S. and Mexican government agencies, including NOAA and the Mammal Marine Commission, NGOs in Mexico, and local communities in the Upper Gulf to do everything we can to keep the vaquita from going extinct.

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums also are uniquely positioned to educate the public and inspire them to take conservation actions both locally and globally. With our reach to more than 186 million visitors annually, our members have taken the lead on many critical issues affecting endangered species including one which Congress, the federal agencies, and many states have worked to advance: combating wildlife trafficking.

In 2013 the AZA and many of our members joined The Wildlife Conservation Society as a partner in the 96 Elephants Campaign – an effort focused on securing a U.S. moratorium on illegal ivory; bolstering protection of African elephants; and educating the public about the link

between ivory consumption and the elephant poaching crisis. Through the 96 Elephants campaign, millions of zoo and aquarium visitors took action to stop the demand for ivory here in the United States and around the world.

Last year the federal government finalized a rule to close the loopholes in the existing regulations that inadvertently enabled illegal ivory to be sold in the U.S. for decades. The rule established a near-complete ban on commercial ivory sales. Congress also passed and President Obama signed into law the “END Wildlife Trafficking Act,” which will help wildlife law enforcement personnel by providing them with additional tools and resources they need to apprehend, prosecute, and convict wildlife criminals. Meanwhile, AZA members have worked with their state partners to pass wildlife trafficking legislation in New York, New Jersey, California, Washington, Hawaii, and Oregon.

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums are connecting people with these iconic species and engaging them in conservation issues that these animals face in their natural ranges. However, none of us can save these species alone. This effort requires partnerships among NGOs, Congress, federal agencies, state governments, foreign governments, private sector stakeholders, and the public. AZA and its members view the USFWS, NOAA, and the USDA as exceptional partners in these efforts, and we are striving to be even better partners to them.

The public display of ESA-listed species is not an easy endeavor. Since most of our threatened and endangered animals are born in our aquariums and zoos, the frequent, timely and humane transport of these animals is critical to our conservation breeding and conservation education efforts. There are specific regulatory and permitting requirements that must be met in order to import, export, and in some cases, move animals across state lines. In the past few years, AZA zoos and aquariums have experienced increasing delays in getting these permits approved by the relevant federal agencies. These delays are not the result of neglect or disinterest on the part of the federal authorities but moreso are due to the lack of human resources required to process the voluminous number of ESA permits...most of which do not originate from the AZA community. We are currently looking at alternatives to streamlining the permit process for ESA-listed species for AZA institutions while maintaining the intent and integrity of the ESA permit process. We look forward to working with this Committee and the relevant federal agencies to improve this critical process.

Although we have made significant progress in saving endangered species, this work is far from done. Species protection and conservation requires long-term commitment by all of us. It is through the ongoing work related to species recovery plans that we will conserve these species for future generations. The AZA and its members fully support the Endangered Species Act, and we look forward to working with Congress to assure that the agencies responsible for carrying out the mandates of the Act receive the necessary funding, human resource capacity, and regulatory flexibility to succeed.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important matter, and I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.