

Dan Ashe
President and CEO
Association of Zoos and Aquariums
Testimony for House Committee on Appropriations
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies
May 10, 2024

Thank you Chairman Simpson and Ranking Member Pingree for the opportunity to submit testimony about the priorities of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums for Fiscal Year 2025. 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 ensuring that our more than 250 accredited zoos and aquariums reflect the global standard of excellence in animal care and welfare, conservation, education, science, and guest experience. AZA's member facilities are examples of how economic and environmental prosperity can work hand-in-hand. Our members welcome nearly 200 million visitors annually, generating more than \$22 billion in economic activity, and supporting more than 198,000 jobs across the country. They also contribute well over \$250 million in direct support for field conservation each year. They support work in 119 countries benefiting more than 998 species and subspecies, of which 232 are listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

At the heart of AZA is its mandatory accreditation requirement, which assures that only those zoos and aquariums – like Zoo Boise – that are committed to meeting the world’s highest standards can become members. The independent and objective AZA accreditation process includes self-evaluation, rigorous on-site inspection, and critical peer review. Our standards are publicly available and are continuously evolving and improving as we learn more about the needs of the animals in our care. Once earned, AZA accreditation confers best-in-class status, an important message for local, state, and federal governments and the visiting public. All AZA members are accredited every five years, ensuring that AZA members continue to grow as standards improve. AZA accreditation is the global gold standard for modern zoological facilities.

AZA and its members are leaders, partners, and participants 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. AZA’s Wildlife Trafficking Alliance is a coalition of private companies, non-profit organizations, and AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums working closely with U.S. government agencies to combat wildlife trafficking worldwide. AZA and its member facilities have long-standing partnerships with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Our collaborative efforts have focused on:

- Engaging in endangered species recovery and reintroduction, including some of the most successful and heralded recovery efforts, such as California condor, black-footed ferret, Florida manatee, and southern sea otter;
- Carrying out rescue, rehabilitation, and confiscation of tens of thousands of animals in

collaboration with federal and state agencies, including USFWS, to the benefit of many threatened and endangered species;

- Supporting conservation domestically and internationally through multinational species conservation funds and state wildlife grants; and
- Partnering with USFWS, the National Park Service and others on migratory birds, freshwater and saltwater fisheries, national marine sanctuaries, illegal wildlife trade, amphibians, and invasive species.

I am submitting testimony in support of the following key programs funded through the annual Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies appropriations bill.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Budget

The 198,000 jobs and \$22 billion in economic contributions, as well as the vital conservation work supported by AZA-accredited facilities depends on adequate USFWS staff levels. During the past several years, lengthy permitting delays have become the rule, rather than the exception. Often, these delays put the welfare of animals and crucial conservation projects at jeopardy. They are a serious hinderance to AZA's science-based conservation breeding programs that require animals to be moved in an efficient, humane, and timely manner. This is particularly acute and serious within the International Affairs program (Management and Scientific Authorities). AZA members are keenly interested in expanding their critical work in support of rescue, rehabilitation, and reintroduction of threatened and endangered species, care and placement of live confiscated wildlife seized at ports and borders, and on scientific and conservation research on species like polar bears in AZA facilities. The success of these important initiatives depends on much improved permitting from USFWS.

For this reason, we request \$31 million in Fiscal Year 2025 for the International Affairs program at USFWS. We also ask that the Subcommittee include specific direction for the Management and Scientific Authority to enter into a Memorandum of Agreement, and hire and support a dedicated and qualified employee to facilitate zoo and aquarium permitting.

We also request \$110.8 million in Fiscal Year 2025 for the Office of Law Enforcement. As we battle the global epidemic of wildlife trafficking, and as the USFWS continues to improve detection and interruption of trafficking routes and syndicates, confiscated animals are the casualties. They are the unfortunate refugees from this crisis and need to be placed, and often held for lengthy periods, as evidence. Their care often requires very specialized and expensive expertise.

Increasingly, USFWS looks to AZA and its members for this assistance. In response to this need, AZA has partnered with USFWS to launch the Wildlife Confiscations Network, a new conservation initiative to create a coalition of reputable and trusted animal care facilities with capacity to provide immediate medical care and housing for wildlife that are trafficked through U.S. ports of entry. The Wildlife Confiscations Network currently operates as a pilot project in Southern California. Expanding the Wildlife Confiscations Network nationwide will allow

wildlife law enforcement across the country to concentrate on their core functions: the investigation and prosecution of criminals.

Endangered Species Recovery and Recovery Challenge Grants

We express our gratitude for the Subcommittee's continued support for endangered species through the Recovery account and working with our partners at USFWS to create the Endangered Species Recovery Challenge Grant program in Fiscal Year 2018. This program recognizes the critically important role of nonprofit partners to the Service's endangered species recovery efforts, and it is a mechanism, through merit-based matching grants, to provide funding in a more commensurate manner to support and enhance these efforts. Recovery Challenge Grants are limited to nonprofit organizations implementing the highest priority recovery actions identified in recovery plans, such as for genetically sound breeding, rearing, and reintroduction programs.

We urge you to continue to provide robust funding for endangered species recovery and prioritize longstanding recovery efforts in which existing resources and partner expertise can be most effectively leveraged. Specifically, we are requesting an increase in funding for the Recovery Challenge Grant program to at least \$12 million in Fiscal Year 2025. This funding will power recovery partnerships and inspire their work to better recover critically endangered species.

Additionally, we urge you to provide at least level funding of \$2.3 million in Fiscal Year 2025 for the John H. Prescott Marine Mammal Rescue and Response Grant Program. With increasing numbers of marine mammal strandings, the Prescott Program provides competitive grants to support the rescue and rehabilitation of marine mammals.

Multinational Species Conservation Funds

AZA supports the inclusion of \$30 million for the Multinational Species Conservation Funds (MSCF) administered by USFWS. These programs support public-private partnerships that conserve wild tigers, Asian and African elephants, rhinos, great apes, freshwater turtles, tortoises, and marine turtles in their native habitats. Through the MSCF programs, the United States supplements the efforts of developing countries that are struggling to balance the needs of their human populations and endemic wildlife. These programs help to sustain wildlife populations, address threats such as poaching and illegal trade, reduce human-wildlife conflict, and protect essential habitat. USFWS is seen as a global conservation leader in large part due to its commitment to international conservation efforts. This federal program supports AZA-accredited facilities in their field conservation efforts and partnerships with USFWS.

Endangered Species Act

AZA and its members enthusiastically support the ESA, which has saved hundreds of listed species from extinction. Like AZA accreditation, the ESA is the global "gold standard." It reflects our national commitment to species and ecosystem conservation, and it is working. Since its inception in 1973, it has prevented the extinction of 99% of the species it protects. 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, including me, that we are living amidst the planet's sixth mass extinction. Climate change is accelerating 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 lions, cheetahs, elephants, gorillas, sea turtles, and sharks.

AZA-accredited facilities have a unique opportunity and 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, including California condor, Florida manatee, and black-footed ferret, back from the brink of extinction.

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 support the ESA, and we encourage you to assure that the agencies responsible for carrying out the mandates of the Act receive the necessary funding and human resource capacity to succeed.

AZA and its members look forward to continuing to work with this Subcommittee and Congress to assure that as a nation we are devoting the necessary resources to conserve wildlife at home and globally.

Thank you.