



Trumpeter Swan. Photo by Dale McDonald

Trumpeting Waterfowl Conservation: Protecting the Keepers of Nature's Waterways

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Introduction

Conservation. By definition, it is the careful preservation and protection of something. It has been the buzz word in our industry lately. But why now? Conservation in zoos is nothing new. Participation in various programs has been ongoing for decades. Only recently has it come to light how important it is to get the message out to visitors about our efforts and the collective impact zoos and aquariums have on protecting wildlife. This core theme generates many questions. What programs should your institution support? Where will conservation dollars have the most influence? What will resonate most with visitors? The

answers will vary from institution to institution based on various factors such as size, collection, resources and Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) Saving Animals from Extinction (SAFE) programs.

According to Dan Ashe, President and CEO of AZA and former Director of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), "beyond an unquestionable reputation for animal care, commitment to conservation of animals in nature and demonstrated success in saving animals from extinction will be the factors elevating the merely good to the truly

great within the zoological community, and ensuring prosperity of and among 21st century aquariums and zoos."

Waterfowl conservation is also nothing new. Its necessity has been apparent since the early part of the 20th century. Due to habitat loss and previous unrestricted market hunting, many populations of waterfowl have been negatively affected and some nearly decimated. Government agencies and well known conservation entities such as Ducks Unlimited have been heavily involved in waterfowl conservation.

The USFWS recognized the importance of waterfowl and wetlands to North Americans and the need for international cooperation to help the recovery of shared resources. In response, the U.S. and Canadian governments developed a strategy to restore waterfowl populations through habitat protection, restoration, and enhancement. This strategy was documented as the North American Waterfowl Management Plan signed by the U.S. and Canada in 1986. Its vision of collaborative conservation is still relevant today. (North American Waterfowl Management Plan, 2016)

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Ducks Unlimited is the world's largest private, nonprofit waterfowl and wetlands conservation organization. Their mission is to conserve, restore, and manage wetlands and associated habitats for North America's waterfowl, which also benefit other wildlife and people. Their vision is to have wetlands sufficient to fill the skies with waterfowl today, tomorrow and forever. Since 1937, Ducks Unlimited has conserved more than 14 million acres of waterfowl habitat across North America and supporters have raised nearly 3.5 billion dollars for conservation. (Ducks Unlimited, 2017)

Zoos and aquariums also support waterfowl conservation. Their participation in 14 waterfowl Species Survival Plans (SSP) has made programs such as trumpeter swan restoration successful by bolstering a population that was nearly wiped out. There are many reasons why waterfowl conservation is important and significantly benefits your organization and staff when taking part in initiatives.

Connecting People to Their Environment with Waterfowl

First, waterfowl are a flagship indicator of healthy habitats and wetlands. As the SSP Coordinator and Studbook Keeper for trumpeter swans, I was lucky enough to participate in a trumpeter swan release in southern Iowa this past May. I was able to hear Dave Hoffman from the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) speak to the public and school groups about the swans before they were released. When he asked the collective group why they wanted to see swans in Iowa he received several different answers, but I will never forget his response back to the crowd. He said that the swans are symbols. They are symbols of healthy wetlands and clean water.

He also explained that healthy wetlands are important because they are nature's water filters. It was such a simple statement, but in my eyes, an extremely powerful one. It connected people not only to swans, but to their personal environment and the bigger picture. Conserving swans and their habitat also provides a cleaner environment for themselves, their children and grandchildren; making them proud of the place they call home. I have used this analogy since then many times to explain the importance of trumpeter swan conservation. Once you find that connection with people, it inspires them to take conservation action.

The Local Aspect of Waterfowl Conservation

Waterfowl conservation has a substantial local component. Many programs are based in North America and encompass an abundant number of species when it pertains to habitat restoration. Local species like the American wood duck and common merganser can act as ambassadors for their international counterparts by linking people to other waterfowl in peril around the world such as the white-winged wood duck and scaly-sided merganser.

Waterfowl housed in zoos take minimal resources and are easily raised and maintained. Zoos that exhibit waterfowl have the ability to tell the story of their challenges and comebacks along with the crucial role that zoos play in their conservation. The American wood duck is a good example of a local conservation success where zoos can easily exhibit a species while relating a positive message about reversing human impact on a bird that neared extinction in the early 1900's.

The trumpeter swan is another species that is on the rebound thanks to restoration programs across the country. With the help of zoos in collaboration with government agencies and groups like The Trumpeter Swan Society, the population of trumpeter swans has reached sustainable numbers. Due to strong involvement since the 1980's, zoos have contributed not only funding, but have hatched and raised trumpeter swan cygnets for release into the wild. Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, in conjunction with the Ohio DNR and The Wilds, was an integral part of an initiative that collected a total of 150 trumpeter swan eggs from Alaska in the late 1990's and released them into Ohio. (Hathaway, 2006) Due to these efforts, there is now a stable population of around 300 swans in Ohio. (Trumpeter Swan, 2012)

Currently, zoos are still actively participating in trumpeter swan restoration by providing cygnets and eggs to various programs across the country. As they are a North American species and waterfowl in general are easy to



The trumpeter swan exhibit at Columbus Zoo and Aquarium with a graphic depicting their natural history and zoo conservation initiatives.



Iowa DNR Wildlife Research Technician, Dave Hoffman, teaching a school group about trumpeter swans and conservation before they were released into southern Iowa in May 2017.



Ready for release! Trumpeter swan cygnets getting ready to be released into Southern Iowa. Zoos have been heavily involved in trumpeter swan conservation for several decades.



Megan Walsh, an animal keeper from the Northeastern Wisconsin (NEW) Zoo and Adventure Park, taking care of their pair of trumpeter swans on exhibit. Despite only having 9 full time keepers, the NEW Zoo has actively participated in trumpeter swan restoration initiatives for many years. Photo by NEW Zoo and Adventure Park

Staff from 5 different zoos coming together and getting the opportunity to be directly involved in Iowa DNR's trumpeter swan restoration program. Zoos contributed a total of 14 cygnets to the program in 2016-17. Photos by of Holly Welch



to the release site and send multiple staff members. This type of participation, especially for smaller facilities, cannot always happen with international conservation due to limited budgets and resources. An experience like this gives staff a firsthand connection with conservation as well as the opportunity to practice what they preach.

Incorporating AAZK into Waterfowl Conservation

Finally, being involved with the American Association of Zoo Keepers (AAZK) is yet another outlet to advocate for waterfowl conservation. Regardless of the size of your AAZK chapter, supporting waterfowl initiatives is a great way to get your community involved in conservation. For example, the Greater Cleveland Chapter of AAZK held a Wine and Canvas painting fundraiser at a local brewery to raise funds for The Trumpeter Swan Society in February 2017. It was found that many of the attendees including the artist herself had no idea trumpeter swans were native to the area or knew anything about their history. Not only did the chapter raise money, but they were able to bring awareness to an iconic species.

Conclusion

Zoos are tasked with the enormous challenge of prioritizing conservation endeavors. Waterfowl conservation has benefited from the support of many organizations primarily through land preservation and restoration programs. Waterfowl are the perfect segue into teaching the significance of protecting fragile ecosystems that people and animals need. Dave Hoffman from the Iowa DNR summed up Iowa's successful conservation strategy as being able to engage, connect and empower the public into protecting and restoring wildlife and their habitat. This strategy also applies to keepers as we are on the front lines as the

experts to visitors who want to learn about animals in our care and how they can help them in the wild.

Being part of the Trumpeter Swan SSP has been one of the most fulfilling aspects of my 15 year career as a keeper. It has been extremely rewarding to help zoos come together in collaboration to not only house a genetically sustainable population under human care, but to assist in the restoration of the wild population. One of highlights of this position has been sharing the conservation work of zoos and getting visitors and staff alike excited and invested in a species that acts as a representative for wetlands and all waterfowl. This association can help people forge the way into conservation action.

Whether it is manpower needed to restore critical habitat, participating in reintroduction programs and SSP's, or hosting a fundraiser to support an established organization, your facility or chapter can make a large impact on waterfowl conservation and preserving the lands vital for their survival.

References

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Photos taken by author unless otherwise noted.

transport, relocating the swans to release sites is usually very cost effective. Even though the restoration of the trumpeter swan is considered a success, they still only inhabit about 1/3 of their historic range and are susceptible to obstacles such as lead poisoning, power line collisions, continued habitat loss and climate change. The story of the trumpeter swan can easily be related to other waterfowl as they often face the same issues in the wild.

Since many programs are local or regional, it is also logistically easier for staff to get directly involved in waterfowl habitat restoration and reintroduction programs. This year alone, 5 zoos came together in Iowa to release trumpeter swans raised at their zoos or contributed fertile eggs to the program. Due to the close proximity of the release, most of the zoos participating were able to drive



A wine and canvas fundraiser hosted by Greater Cleveland Chapter AAZK, which benefited The Trumpeter Swan Society and raised awareness about local waterfowl and conservation. Photo by Mike Negron.