



OUR ZOO, OUR FUTURE

Introduction

The Milwaukee County Zoo is where our wild world thrives—and where our community comes alive.

It's where children gasp as bonobos look them in the eye, then laugh as it scampers up a tree—and where their grown-ups enjoy quality family time outdoors while learning how to care for our planet in their own neighborhood.

It's where experience-based learning makes science feel like a play day—and where we develop animal care and conservation insights that reach to Belize, helping shape conservation programs and partnerships at a national scale.

It's where 1.3 million annual visitors share the joy and wonder of nature and a feeling of community, where families come together to experience the diversity of animals—including the more than 2,000 animals from around the world that make their home here, where 200,000 young learners find educational programs that spark discovery, understanding, and lasting memories.

And it's where the thriving communities we need for a brighter future—both human and wild—can come together in a way they could not anywhere else in Wisconsin.

At the Milwaukee County Zoo (MCZ) and its supporting partner, the Zoological Society of Milwaukee (ZSM), we are proud of our decades of service to communities across our region and northern Illinois. We are honored to play central roles in our state today, as one of Wisconsin's top 25 attractions (MCZ) and its largest membership program (ZSM). **And as we look to the future, we are ready to bring all our assets, our resources, and our communities together like never before—at a time when the world around us demands a bigger role from us.**

The need is clear. Urgent, overlapping crises—food, water, energy, and climate challenges; deeply entrenched injustice and inequitable access to the outdoors; biodiversity loss and environmental degradation—shape both our present and our future.

But Zoos like ours can address these issues in a tangible and integrated way—and we're determined to do so with the welcoming spirit and uplifting experiences that have always characterized the Milwaukee County Zoo and the Zoological Society of Milwaukee. Because *our* zoo can be a thriving public space for all the diverse communities who make our region great, can inspire and engage visitors of all ages, can cultivate empathy for and connection to the natural world, and can link fun family experiences to meaningful social change like none other. We can bring people together around the issues they care about most, while continuing to be a zoo for all by intentionally creating an inclusive culture that welcomes and celebrates the full diversity of our community, supporting Milwaukee County's commitment to racial equity.

With this strategic plan, we mark a new beginning for Milwaukee County’s zoo—and inaugurate a new way of thinking about the people, organizations, and communities who give it life. For the first time, MCZ and ZSM have committed to a shared mission, vision, and strategic plan—to acting not as two organizations, but as one integrated Zoo coalition for the years ahead. Extensive input from zoo wide participation, MCZ and ZSM staff members, as well as multiple Blue Ribbon Panels and engagement sessions with community leaders and outside experts, shaped every aspect of this plan. And we know we can only realize its potential together, as one Zoo coalition and one community.

This is our plan to get to a world where people, wildlife, and wild places thrive—by supporting and sustaining thriving communities that bring people, wildlife, and wild places together, beginning right here in Milwaukee County and at our zoo. We invite you to dig in and join us.

Amos Morris
Executive Zoo Director
Milwaukee County Zoo

Jodi Gibson
President and CEO
Zoological Society of Milwaukee

Mission, Vision, and Values

VISION

A world where wildlife and people thrive.

MISSION

Inspire people to conserve wildlife and wild places.

VALUES

Inclusion. We strive to create and reinforce a sense of belonging within our culture and operations. We value individuals for their unique perspectives, capabilities, and contributions. We welcome them to fully and authentically participate.

Innovation. We bravely pursue and are willing to try new ideas. Even mistakes help us learn and grow.

Collaboration. We build strong relationships that seek out different perspectives and work together to maximize our collective impact.

Empathy. We demonstrate the ability to understand the diverse experiences and perspectives of our animals, our team, our communities, and our planet. We foster understanding in our communities to promote conservation action.

Fun. We embed fun in the work that we do. It creates an enriching and memorable experience for guests and employees alike.

Respect. We are committed to caring for our animals, guests, and each other with compassion, consideration, and kindness.

Accountability. We create a culture of transparency and integrity. We hold ourselves to the highest standard. We accept responsibility for our actions and intentionally strive to improve.

Our Road Map

Over the next five to ten years, Milwaukee County Zoo and the Zoological Society of Milwaukee will align all our resources and activities around one overarching goal: to build, cultivate, and sustain thriving communities that bring people, wildlife, and wild places together—at our Zoo, across Wisconsin, and with partners around the world. We will:

- Create even more inclusive, joyful, and immersive experiences to spread empathy for wildlife and love of wild places to new generations of zoogoers;
- Become a hub for community conservation efforts, bringing forward our research through learning-based activities that make the work of conservation science fun for millions of guests and inspire them to apply what they experience in their own homes and communities; and
- Step forward as an innovator and leader in 21st-century animal care and conservation—for Wisconsin and far beyond.

Key Commitments and Foundational Principles

In executing this strategic vision, we will remain true to our Zoo coalition’s identity and core beliefs even as we elevate ourselves within the larger community of zoos. Three Key Commitments will guide our activities and help translate our strategic vision into ideas and actions:

- **Care:** Enhancing wellbeing and pursuing the highest standards in veterinary care, husbandry, and zoo habitat design.
- **Connect:** Immersing people in nature and creating memorable, educational experiences that inspire empathy and environmental action.
- **Conserve:** Saving wildlife and wild places here and across the globe by leading and partnering on conservation projects.

As we pursue these commitments, our guide will be the richness, dynamism, and complexity that sustain natural ecosystems. Across every aspect of our work—and across commitments that are as deeply intertwined as our Zoo coalition, our communities, and our human and natural worlds—we will emphasize three foundational principles that inform all we do:

- **Culture:** Our culture is what shapes our Zoo coalition and brings the MCZ and ZSM together as one team. It’s defined by our shared passion for conserving wildlife and wild places, researching and implementing new approaches to animal care, fostering meaningful experiences for our guests, and inviting our community to have empathy for the animals that inhabit our world alongside us, both in our own neighborhoods and in other regions and countries. At the same time, our culture is defined by each of us as individuals—hundreds of employees and experts, specialists in animal care, education, facilities, marketing, and volunteers—and what we bring to work every day. We believe that our Zoo coalition, our animals, and our community stand to benefit when our people are fulfilled in their day-to-day roles and have the opportunity to continue growing and developing as professionals and contributors to our mission, vision, and values. We affirm each of our team member’s identities, and believe that diversity, equity, access, and inclusion (DEAI) is integral to our work in care and conservation.

- **Community Impact.** The shared sense of purpose, pride, and fun that we bring to our work extends beyond our grounds. By providing for the animals under our care, pursuing groundbreaking conservation work and research, and inspiring millions of zoogoers to harness the potential of conservation practices in their own neighborhoods, we are firmly embedded in the fabric of this community—part of a local and regional network that together helps shape and tell the Milwaukee County’s story. But our story spans the nation and world, too, and our opportunity is to help our community—the people of Milwaukee County and Wisconsin—perceive the many ways in which they fit into an even wider narrative: a global community of conservationists.
- **Financial Strength and Stewardship.** Together with our people and our community, we believe in the immeasurable value of animals and natural habitats everywhere. Our work is profound, but achieving results requires significant financial resources to make an impact. Much the same as our stewardship of our region’s, our nation’s, and our planet’s natural gifts, in enacting our mission and vision we are committed to sound financial stewardship and the effective use of funds made available to us—earned or contributed, public or private. Alongside careful and thoughtful financial planning and execution, we are likewise devoted to inviting others to join us in making our vision a reality—current and future generations of supporters and donors who share our belief in the importance of investing in animal care and conservation.

Care

ENHANCING WELLBEING AND PURSUING THE HIGHEST STANDARDS IN VETERINARY CARE, HUSBANDRY, AND ZOO HABITAT DESIGN

Everything we do to live our mission—and everything we hope to do in the future—begins with our animals and the care we provide them.

As the stewards of a 130-plus-year-old zoo with more than 2,000 animals representing more than 300 species from around the globe, we take seriously our service to animals and responsibility to provide optimal, individualized care to each animal at our zoo—all they require and deserve to meet their physical, mental, and social needs.

But we also know that “care” means so much more—and our vision for the future requires embracing all that it encompasses.

Care is about the attention we pay to every detail and the way we throw ourselves into providing the best for each animal: our expertise and practices today, as well as our commitment to continuously learning, innovating, and evolving; our facilities and zoo habitats as well as our staff, systems, and operational processes; our technological investments, as well as our consideration for the wellbeing and perspective of each animal at the zoo.

Care is how we open the door to conservation—not only providing lively, memorable experiences that cultivate empathy, but also living out what it means to care for our planet.

And care is about the passion we share for our wildlife, our wild places, and our work—and all the ways we can share that passion with our community, inviting everyone deeper into our animals’ stories and needs, as well as the realities of their species in the wild.

When we enhance animal wellbeing, we enhance everything our zoo does for wildlife, for wild places, *and* for people. And in the coming years, we will bring the work of animal care to a higher level and into the open for our guests like never before. We will:

- **Continuously innovate to define what the next generation of animal care can be**, leading the way in establishing and implementing practices, processes, and systems that enhance animal wellbeing.
 - Undertake a Zoo coalition-wide initiative to define the operational aspects of animal care most in need of change and/or updating.
 - Make ongoing and strategic investments in staff development, capital needs, and technology to deliver exemplary veterinary care, enhance animal wellbeing, and align the Zoo coalition with both current and future best practices.
 - Cultivate staff skills to build trusting relationships with our animals and stay on the forefront of animal care.
 - Establish the Zoo coalition as an innovator in the zoo community through ongoing professional training, state-of-the art equipment, and storytelling and sharing with our peers.
- **Elevate zoo habitats (exterior and interior)** to support the wellbeing of animals under the Zoo coalition’s care 24 hours a day.
- **Invite our community into the work of animal care in all its complexity**, using increased and intentional transparency while centering the perspectives and experiences of wildlife.
 - Make informed choices to design zoo habitats that meet animal needs and help connect people and animals.
 - Provide more opportunities for lively and meaningful guest engagement, increasing and enhancing interactions between guests and staff, programs and activities, and marketing and communications efforts that share the animal care work we do, as well as the insights and implications it provides.
 - Evaluate guests’ perceptions of animal care as a determining factor in their enjoyment of their experience and update or modify plans accordingly.

Connect

IMMERSING PEOPLE IN NATURE AND CREATE MEMORABLE, EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES THAT INSPIRE EMPATHY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION

When you come to the zoo, you come for an experience you won’t forget. Whether it’s a peaceful ride on the train to create memories with your family, the raucous laughter of a class field trip or Zoo Camp as they watch a penguin waddle for the first time, or up-close, hands-on tours and educational experiences for learners of all ages, every guest has countless opportunities to relax, marvel, have fun, and learn about the natural world.

These are experiences we want everyone in our community to have. And they're the beginning of the larger impact we hope to create—because when we provide an unforgettable and educational experience, we also forge a connection that lasts: to our animals, to our community, to nature, and to conservation.

As we look to our future, we know that to deepen the zoo's role in local education and in local and global conservation, we must enhance the entire continuum of visitor and learner experiences—both in and beyond our zoo. Our goal is to draw in our diverse community—both new and longtime visitors—with lively and appealing experiences, to bring people closer to nature and eye-to-eye with spectacular animals, and to make science education, conservation, and environmental action not only more accessible, but a joyful undertaking in which we all share.

Ultimately, creating deeper connections with wildlife and wild places is how we give every community member an even better experience—and how we inspire a deeper commitment to learning and to conservation. In the coming years, we will:

- **Deliver educational experiences that inspire and empower all members of our community** to take conservation action.
 - Provide interactive, innovative, and engaging learning opportunities with our community, fostering empathy for animals and an emotional connection to the natural world.
 - Enable guests and program participants to see themselves as conservationists and feel empowered to take conservation action.
- **Engage the community more deeply and directly with the Zoo coalition's care and conservation work** across its many communications vehicles.
 - Leverage the Zoo coalition's master interpretive plan to ensure unified messaging among staff throughout the Zoo coalition.
 - Create a unified communications strategy centered on the value and impact of the Zoo coalition's care and conservation work locally, nationally, and globally.
- **Create more meaningful and personal experiences** for everyone in our community that build on generations of memories while highlighting the continuum of care and conservation work the Zoo coalition now performs.
 - Embrace our park-like atmosphere and increase opportunities for guests to enjoy the park and experience nature alongside family, friends, and neighbors.
 - Assess opportunities to expand and learn from interactive experiences such as Wild Connections.
 - Implement processes to evaluate the impact of expanded efforts on attendance, membership, and revenue.
- **Make the Zoo coalition a more accessible place and partner for all our neighbors**, with a focus on new and more diverse audiences, through community partnerships, programs, and initiatives that invite our many stakeholders to feel welcome and included in all aspects of our care and conservation work.

Conserve

SAVING WILDLIFE AND WILD PLACES HERE AND ACROSS THE GLOBE BY LEADING AND PARTNERING ON CONSERVATION PROJECTS

Conservation happens everywhere and takes many different forms. The scale, complexity, and dynamism of the field requires that we, as a Zoo coalition, define a clear and adaptable approach to identifying and developing the conservation projects—whether local, global, or straddling both—in which we will invest.

As we consider our future, “Pat Gives Back: Belize Conservation” will serve as the guide and model in which we take inspiration. For nearly two decades, Pat Gives Back has shown how the understanding and care that begins with individual animals at our zoo can extend to their cousins in the wild, to the ecosystems they inhabit, and to broad conservation efforts that benefit both human and wild communities. It has enabled our Zoo coalition to support, sustain, and expand capacity-building initiatives among our Belize-based partners; conservation of and research into imperiled Belizean wildlife and wild places; and educational and community programs that help spread the word about the importance of conservation, both in Belize and at home.

Through Pat Gives Back, we have taken a multi-faceted approach that has enabled us to transfer what we learn in a zoological setting to the wild and to other zoos. In particular, we have developed expertise in restoring and caring for imperiled species, mitigating the conflicts that occur when human society and natural habitats come into contact, and training zoo professionals in other settings in the conservation methods needed to achieve success.

We have also acquired a nuanced appreciation of the demands that designing and implementing successful conservation projects places on our people, and of the importance of securing funding to support both our ambitions and the infrastructure needed to have a true and lasting impact.

In refining and expanding our conservation work, we will be guided by what is best for our community, broadly sharing what we learn about conservation with our guests and educational program participants. In doing so, we will strengthen our position as the leading practitioner of conservation in Wisconsin, and as the bridge between the conservation work we can all take part in here Milwaukee County and conservation as it’s practiced around the world. Within one to three years, we will:

- **Identify three to five signature initiatives where we can make a unique and meaningful impact**, focusing on those that align with the Zoo coalition’s experience and expertise and include features such as the transfer of knowledge learned in a zoological setting to the wild, a focus on imperiled species, peaceful solutions that enable increased harmony between humans, wildlife, and wild places, and ensuring our staff acquire hands-on experience as educators of the public and partners to other organizations.
 - Form an internal group to design a process whereby team members submit proposals for conservation projects and/or investments targeting local, regional, and global species.
 - Implement a process to reevaluate the Zoo coalition’s conservation strategy and assess its financial impact every five to ten years.
 - As conservation investments are identified, initiate internal discussions around allocating sufficient staff time and resources to ensure maximum impact and innovation.

- Reserve funds dedicated to smaller zookeeper- and staff-initiated projects (both current and new) that provide hands-on conservation experiences, strengthen employee engagement, and support our overarching goals—and that new ideas and nimble innovation to come forward.
- **Lead by example as we live our conservation values at the Zoo**, routinely evaluating our operations to ensure that we are prioritizing sustainability and reduced resource consumption. Future innovations and improvements will add to preexisting initiatives we have implemented to manage our water, electricity, and waste and to care for the wildlife and wild places that thrive on our grounds by nurturing natural habitats for pollinators, managing our lake, and more.
- **Use animal husbandry to support research and conservation**, advancing questions about animal biology, behavior, reproduction, and populations that can inform efforts to protect them—and the ecosystems they depend on—in the wild.
- **Elevate conservation as a central piece of the Zoo coalition’s DNA**, integrating it into educational programs and community-based activities while also continually seeking opportunities to communicate with and engage both internal and external stakeholders through effective storytelling.
- **Reach and inspire audiences and activate conservation work across the state**, leaning into our unique position and role while further credentialing the Zoo coalition as the leading conservation organization in Wisconsin.
 - Expand conservation work benefiting local and regional species of concern.

Conclusion

From neighborhoods in Milwaukee County to Belize and beyond, the next five to ten years are our opportunity to enact our mission, vision, and values to the fullest. Our empathetic animal care will begin and end with respect for the animals who call our zoo home. Our conservation and research will position us as a leader at the forefront of 21st-century innovation. Our powerful storytelling and curated experiences, both fun and educational, will inspire new and diverse generations of zoogoers to explore how their own lives intersect and engage with wildlife and wild places. And of course the hard work and passion of our team members will make everything we do possible.

Each of us—zoo professionals, volunteers, and community members—has a role to play in implementing this strategic plan and holding our Zoo coalition accountable to our three Key Commitments. As we Care for our animals, Conserve wildlife and wild places, and Connect with our community, we will remain fully aligned as one team, one Zoo coalition: the Milwaukee County Zoo and the Zoological Society of Milwaukee.

We invite you to join us in shaping our community’s understanding of how we—as a county, a state, and a region—can support and sustain wildlife and wild places everywhere.