Saving species

Baton Rouge Zoo breeding endangered animals for re-introduction to the wild

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Newspaper stories tell of the plight of the spotted owl in the Northwest that is in danger of becoming extinct because licenses are cutting down the trees the owls live in.

Then journalists interview the loggers whose livelihoods depend on cutting down trees, many of which are on public land. Some of these men may regard the passing of a species of owl, but what's important on their minds is earning a living.

Fishermen affect by legislation requiring them to use nets that prevent sea turtles from getting caught. The coastal users are devoted to helping animals retain their place on earth. Fishermen say they make all those more difficult for them.

Tuna fishermen resist being told to respect and protect an animal that provides them with revenue that regard as their protector.

Logging operations may seem isolated and unrelated but are related to the Baton Rouge Zoo, but in the overall global picture, said Dr. John L. Lamb and education director Betty Schroeder. The United States banning regulations regarding endangered species are both indigenous and endemic (indigeneous to other countries). The United States banning regulations regarding endangered species are both indigenous and endemic (indigeneous to other countries).

The Baton Rouge Zoo is participating in three such projects and has as habitats of other animals undergoing reintroduction to compatible habitats, though not necessarily the habitats from which the species were from.

A long time ago, the Arabian oryx was our largest species, Schroeder said. "The Arabian oryx was our largest species. Our population at the Baton Rouge Zoo is growing — and growing. That's a really exciting project, especially when you consider the history of the oyster and what happened to them. They have beautiful white markings and long humps that go straight back. We have already sent several animals to be re-introduced to the Arabian peninsula. Two herds were doing very well, one with more than 100 individuals, the other with 80."

The Arabian oryx is a story," Lam said. "It's had a natural problem, and it's being saved. It's a thorny desert antelope species whose numbers were very large. Then came man with his guns and automatic weapons, and man became the only predator the Arabian oryx knew.

The first project at the Arboretum began in the 1960s when people in the United States were being asked to help save the species from the Sahara Desert. Some of the animals were taken to the Phoenix Zoo in 1962, where they thrived.

Other herds of oryx remained in the

care of the rulers of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, Lam said. Through the cooperative efforts of the zoo and the sheikhs, 80 Arabian oryx are now in zoos worldwide. The animals in the Phoenix Zoo came from the London Zoo, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, as well as three animals captured in the desert. Lam said.

"By 1971 the oryx was extinct in its natural habitat and would therefore have been totally extinct if not for that intervention," Schroeder said.

"Ideally, breeders need 100 unrelated animals to establish a breeding program, but you sometimes don't have a choice," Schroeder said.

"The Species Survival Plan, administered by the AZA (American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums), has a species coordinator who looks at the whole captive population and determines breeding plans based on the gene pool. We have 300 Arabian oryx in our American program," Lam said.

Two Arabian oryx born in the local zoo were sent to the San Diego Wild Animal Park, where they will be held until the paper work is complete for sending them on to the Middle East. Lam said. "We have six other Arabian oryx to go. We breed the animals in (Species Survival Plan) want to be bred and give them the best care we can. They are sent to a breeding facility for breeding."

"They are shipped for planes or boats. Sanctions have been established in Richland, Italy, Guam, Jordan, and in Saudi Arabia. The oyster from Baton Rouge will get old in one of those areas."

"When they arrive at the sanctuary, they will be let out, fed at first, then they will find the habitat and will be able to find for themselves. They won't want to fall into the hands of bandits," Lam said. "I don't think any of the animals we are working with go to the Gulf War, other than the shipping of animals."

It was an Arabian oryx that was born here during Hurricane Andrew and was named appropriately, Arroyo. There's a good chance of success in increasing the numbers of these booted animals and re-introducing them to their natural habitat. However, not one American species has not been so fortunate. Schroeder said.

"The California condor is a lost cause because we started with 15 individuals, most of which were related. In-breeding causes all kinds of problems. The good thing is that brought the problem of endangered animals to the fronton, made us aware of the problems," Schroeder said.

The Guam snail is another species being bred at the Baton Rouge Zoo. This is being re-introduced to the wild. But instead of on the island of Guam, the small, shy, flightless birds are being sent to the island of Rota, 90 miles from Guam. The bird had been found on only the island of Guam, Lam said. The bird is endangered at the end of World War II when a hurricane was introduced to the island. Species are usually isolated from mainland problems."

"This is a very important thing to do, and the species is a very important thing to do. This is a very important thing to do."

"One of the features to pay on was the Guam snail is its eyes. The snail must have been in Guam since 1898. Other snails are in trouble too, too. The Guam snail population plan..."
mated from 80,000 in 1970 to 100 in 1983.

"It's not hard to breed Guam rails in captivity," Lamb said. "We have one adult pair and six offspring at the zoo now. We have sent at least a dozen birds to be released on the island of Rota. There are no brown tree snakes on Rota!"

Re-introduction efforts have been hindered by a typhoon that devastated Guam last year, Lamb said. The storm destroyed four of the holding pens, but no birds died. The facility houses 95 Guam rails, including the one born at the Baton Rouge Zoo. "All the space to hold rails in the United States is filled up to capacity right now," Lamb said. The plan was to release 75-90 rails per year on Rota. In 1989, 22 rails were released on Rota, all with colored leg bands and eight with harness-mounted radio transmitters. "They are very secretive birds. Without transmitters, it's almost impossible to detect the birds."

There is no evidence, however, that any of the birds on Rota survived, Lamb said. "This is a guinea pig situation because birds have not been re-introduced very often."

The red wolves at the local zoo gave birth to pups this spring - a big event. Only 21 zoo in the country have red wolves which have been extinct in the wild in the southeastern United States since the 1830s. The re-introduction program for red wolves is being conducted on Horn Island, off the coast of Mississippi; Bull Island, S.C.; Smoky Mountains National Park; and the Alligator River area of North Carolina.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Department is working with the Species Survival Plan to reintroduce endangered species to the wild in this country. It is the zoo's "job" to reproduce those animals, based on the gene pool, Lamb said.

The golden lion tamarin is in residence at the Baton Rouge Zoo. A very active program to reintroduce this species of golden-haired primates to the rain forests of Brazil is much publicized in conservation magazines and television nature programs. The local residents have implants to prevent their breeding because their genes are already well represented in the breeding program.

"We are trying desperately to avoid the in-breeding problem," Schroeder explained. "The goal is to keep the gene pool clean to keep species strong for 100 years in the hope that maybe in 100 years the earth will be a safer place and that habitat areas will exist. We will have learned to take care of our earth in better ways and to recognize the importance of biological diversity."

"We're losing a species a day. People hear about the rain forest and say, 'So what? That has no significance for me.' But I look at it the other way. We are losing a species a day and it's not even on the recording."

As curator of education at the zoo, one of Schroeder's jobs is planning summer camps for children to heighten their awareness of the plight of endangered animals, as well as to a Congressman or the President, urging them to re-enact the Endangered Species Reauthorization Act.

"It is much harder to run a captive program for endangered species if they aren't protected by legislation," Lamb said. Legislation also provides funding of programs to study the animals in the wild and ways to increase their numbers. "We can do our part to provide animals for the reintroduction, but if there are no habitats for them to be returned to, then our efforts are doomed. The animals would exist only in captivity. And there aren't enough zoos to hold all the animals in danger of becoming extinct."

"There are more tigers in captivity than are in the wild. There are more than in the wild. They are implanted to prohibit them from breeding. Ethanasia is the only other option, and it has not come to that and, hopefully, we won't ever have to go to this extreme measure," Lamb said.

I am about Schroeder's observations about the rain forest's importance.

"Most of the diversity on this planet is in the rain forest, and that's where the effort should be. If you can't get the United States to recognize and protect the habitat, how can you expect a Third World country to do it?"

"Think globally and act locally - everything you do is going to affect something else. Start around your house - recycle. To make a change in this world, you have to educate people to see the consequences of their actions on the planet. Telling them won't work. You have to show them. Mankind's philosophy has been destroy and conquer."

In past centuries, explorers entered vast territories of virgin forests teaming with animal and plant life and thought nothing of killing 1,000 specimens of a species to take back to Europe. Columbus' log reveals he killed 1,000 turkeys for food and 200 for feathers. Ferdinand and Isabella. There seemed to be unlimited numbers of everything just waiting for man to take them.

In this century, animals have been killed for their fur, their ivory or for sport. That's why the numbers of many species like the big cats and the elephants are diminishing.

"They had the whole world before them - an endless supply of things," Lamb said. When the killing reaches the point that very few of a species is left, suddenly it becomes very important to reverse the tide.

"Fifty percent of all living things are found in the rain forest," Lamb said. "Half of the rain forest has already been cleared. Who knows what the ramifications will be greenhouse effect, erosion, disease? I have a feeling it goes much farther than that. When have you gone so far that it can't be fixed? What do we do? We may have already reached that point."

"In poor, underdeveloped countries with overpopulations, it's hard to tell people they can't kill an elephant when payment for the
Species

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Jo Anne Lamb’s disease (leprosy). “Who would have thought the lowly armadillo could be so valuable to medicine?”

Even more basic to humans is the oxygen they breathe. “Nearly all of earth’s oxygen is generated by plants. It’s not just the animals that are in jeopardy. They are a warning, the flag that goes up and says we are next. It’s a sickness. Chest pains are the symptoms of a heart attack. That’s the symptoms we’re seeing right now on the planet.”

Zoos have been transformed in the past 50 years from quaint exhibits of strange animals to guardians of the endangered animals. And few of today’s zoo animals were taken from the wild. “Ninety-eight percent of the animals you see in zoos are captive born. We are practicing what we preach. More people visit zoos than attend all sporting events combined — 150 million,” Lamb said, quoting figures from the AAZPA.

“I take a lot of things for granted as a curator. What it comes down to is respecting life. It’s why wars are fought and why there are so many problems. Man must have lost his desire to perpetuate his own species when he doesn’t recognize the importance of saving other species. What has happened to man’s drive that he would endanger his own species for short-term goals?”