



# GOOD PARTNERS MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS

THE NORTH AMERICAN REGIONAL CONSERVATION CONSORTIUM CONCEPT

BY RUTH ALLARD AND LISA DABEK, PH.D.

Looking for an opportunity to demonstrate your institution's commitment to local conservation? The American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) Field Conservation Committee's (FCC) new approach to cooperative conservation was created with you in mind. Building on the success of the Butterfly Conservation Initiative and the Memorandum of Understanding between the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) and AZA, the FCC is focusing on developing and strengthening partnerships among AZA members, USFWS regional offices, and other organizations working on field conservation, recovery, education, and outreach throughout North America. Canadian institutions are getting involved as well, helping to expand the reach of this FCC initiative.

The FCC has dubbed this idea the Regional Conservation Consortium (RCC) to underscore the collaborative nature of the partnerships they are hoping will develop. RCC efforts are not intended to focus on any one type of project or taxon; there are limitless opportunities for AZA members and local partners committed to conservation, research, and education to develop projects that would warrant RCC development and support.

### FCC AND THE RCC: TURNING ATTENTION TO LOCAL CONSERVATION

The FCC's vision is that AZA zoos and aquariums should have a significant collective impact on the conservation of wildlife. The FCC's mission is to assist all AZA institutions to engage in effective and sustained wildlife and habitat conservation. FCC's focus has been on *in-situ* projects located in biodiversity hotspots around the globe. While international field conservation remains a priority, it is time to challenge AZA members to work more closely with partners in their own communities to contribute to conservation locally.

**STRUCTURE AND LEADERSHIP:** Members of the RCCs are zoos and aquariums that are found within the USFWS regions, and Canadian institutions working in adjoining ecosystems. For those regions that cover multiple states/provinces with many zoos and aquariums and many distinct ecoregions, the FCC recommends working in subgroups. These subgroups may be based on biogeography or other reasonable divisions. Participating zoos and aquariums take the lead in bringing together USFWS, Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC), state/provincial wildlife agency personnel, local governing officials, IUCN-SSC Specialist Groups, university researchers, Society of Conservation Biology local chapters, and conservation organizations. These efforts can tie in with relevant Taxon Advisory Groups (TAGs), Species Survival Plans (SSPs), and other AZA programs.

Several FCC members are focusing on RCC development in their regions, including:

- ◆ Pacific Northwest – Tony Vecchio, Oregon Zoo; Lisa Dabek, Woodland Park Zoo
- ◆ Northeast/USFWS Region 5 – Margo McKnight, Wildlands Project
- ◆ Great Lakes/Midwest – Peter Tolson, The Toledo Zoo; Elizabeth Lonsdorf, Lincoln Park Zoo
- ◆ Florida – Anne Savage, Disney's Animal Kingdom
- ◆ Southeast - Vacant
- ◆ Southwest (southern California and Arizona, Texas)/ USFWS Regions 2 and 6 – Bill Konstant, Houston Zoo; Rick Hudson, Fort Worth Zoo; Margo McKnight, Allison Alberts, San Diego Zoo

The RCC "regions" do not follow a uniform definition. Participants are encouraged to develop RCC working groups based on shared ecosystems, species of conservation concern, governance, or other unifying themes.

**POTENTIAL OUTCOMES:** The FCC hoped that each RCC would assemble and assess conservation priorities for the region/area. The group would develop a region/area-wide RCC Action Plan that would:

- ◆ Outline priorities for the region/area;
- ◆ Clearly define projects/programs that are in place that would benefit from additional support (financial, technical expertise, operating supplies, etc); and
- ◆ Propose new initiatives that would be driven by RCC members.

Each RCC working group will develop criteria for projects to be included in their action plan. Action plan projects will eventually be listed in a searchable database, allowing zoos and aquariums to advertise and obtain sponsorship for specific projects. Zoos and aquariums and their partners can be involved at many levels, including wildlife monitoring, habitat restoration, captive breeding, wildlife rehabilitation, education and outreach, fundraising and more.

### MODEL EFFORTS

The RCC concept grew out of discussions about successful models for regional conservation action. A group of AZA zoos and aquariums in the Pacific Northwest began discussing plans for regional conservation project collaboration in 2004, and that group has evolved to become the first full-fledged RCC and a model for those that follow.

**PACIFIC NORTHWEST:** The directors of AZA facilities in the Pacific Northwest created the Zoo & Aquarium Alliance, whose mission is to promote collaboration among Pacific Northwest institutions in order to engage in action that sustains ecosystems. The Alliance (comprising 10 institutions in Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and British Columbia) aspires to: 1) Make a large-scale impact on the entire Northwest region by targeting a number of different audiences; 2) Reach individuals of all ages and affiliations; 3) Communicate information to the public that is easily understood; 4) Unify the messages delivered to zoo and aquarium visitors across the entire Northwest region, encouraging visitors to take the next step toward conservation.

Projects undertaken by the Alliance have the following suggested goals: Involve citizens, ensure measurable outcomes/benefits, disseminate information throughout the region, align with state biodiversity plans, and form long-term partnerships with others.

The main Alliance focus areas will be:

- ◆ *Resource Conservation at Our Institutions*
- ◆ *Wildlife in Our Homes, in Our Backyards, in Our Region*
- ◆ *Pet Smart* – Educate visitors about appropriate pets for the home and those that should remain in the wild.
- ◆ *Backyard Habitat* – Share how to make backyards a good habitat for native wildlife.
- ◆ *Northwest Species Recovery* – long-term regional native species protection in coordination with state recovery plans.

**THE "WILD WEST":** During initial RCC discussions, FCC members from California, Arizona, and Texas felt it advantageous to join forces to form a mega-RCC, dubbed the "Wild West." This group would welcome any institutions facing similar conservation challenges,

including but not limited to shared species of conservation concern. This group is flexible, and has begun doing some state-specific regional conservation work. Texas may become its own RCC, and southern California may as well.

Many Texas zoos and aquariums have a long-standing commitment to local conservation projects. Houston Zoo's Lone Star State Wildlife Initiative focuses the Zoo's conservation work with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TX PWD) to establish conservation priorities for native species and threatened habitats, collaborates with regional authorities of the USFWS, has entered into a new partnership with NASA, and now participates in field research programs with several academic institutions within the state.

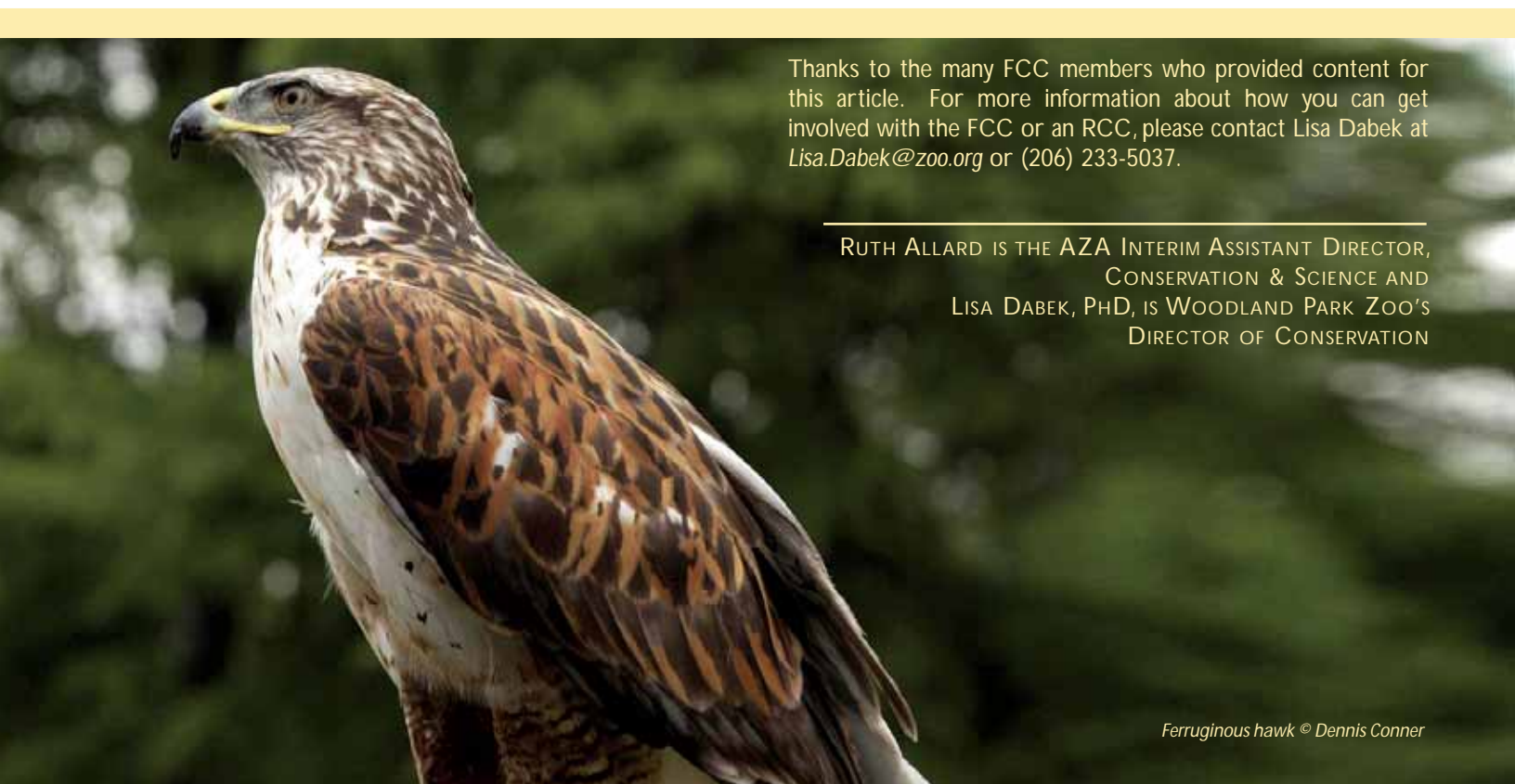
In July 2005, the Houston, Dallas, Cameron Park, Ellen Trout, Abilene, Gladys Porter zoos and the Texas State Aquarium all provided an answer to the ultimate question raised in partnership development discussions: *What do you bring to the table?* These institutions brought the table itself by hosting public hearings on the state's Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy, convened by the TX PWD. AZA facilities provided neutral meeting space for a series of pivotal discussions on the future of wildlife protection in Texas, and in so doing, may have laid the groundwork for a Texas RCC.

San Diego Zoo's Conservation and Research for Endangered Species (CRES) Native Seed Gene Bank made considerable progress this year in building a collection of live seed germplasm for San Diego County native plant species. Efforts have been aided by a collection agreement with the USFWS, allowing seed collection on national wildlife refuges in southern California. To further conservation and recovery of listed threatened and endangered plant species, CRES will soon enter into an MOU with the California Department of Fish and Game and secure federal permission to serve as a seed repository for listed taxa. In November, CRES convened an inaugural gathering of conservation and land planning agencies, land trusts, native plant societies, and environmental consulting firms to discuss the role of the regional seed-banking pro-

gram for native plant conservation. CRES biologists also have a long-standing commitment to conservation partnerships in Hawaii, which may form the foundation for another RCC Action Plan.

**THE GREAT LAKES REGION:** Much of the collaborative work in this area centers on endangered and threatened species recovery and habitat restoration. The Cleveland Metroparks Zoo is working with the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, the Cleveland Botanical Garden, and The Toledo Zoo to explore the restoration of a sand barrens site in Northeast Ohio. A second partnership involves the Detroit Zoo, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MIDNR), the USFWS, and The Toledo Zoo to reintroduce the Karner blue butterfly to the Petersburg State Game Area in Michigan. The Mitchell's Satyr Working Group includes the USFWS, the MIDNR, the Michigan Natural Features Inventory, the Detroit Zoo, the John Ball Zoo, and The Toledo Zoo. The Detroit Zoo works with the USFWS, Brookfield Zoo, Indianapolis Zoo, John Ball Zoo, Milwaukee County Zoo, and The Toledo Zoo to continue salvage rearing of the Lake Michigan population of the piping plover. Cleveland Metroparks Zoo works with the Cincinnati Zoo, the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, and the Wilds on Blanding's turtle conservation. A Great Lakes Restoration Meeting organized by Stuart Strahl of Brookfield Zoo was held in November at the John Ball Zoo, drawing representatives from approximately 40 zoos and the National Wildlife Federation to discuss involving the Midwest zoos in education and conservation efforts for the Great Lakes.

**EFFORTS ELSEWHERE:** Programs in other regions are also beginning to coalesce. In Florida, multiple zoos are working together on a statewide butterfly monitoring network and other regional activities. The North Carolina Zoo is an active partner in many state-focused conservation efforts. Saint Louis Zoo's WildCare Institute has focused two of its flagship projects on U.S. species, the hellbender and the American burying beetle. As the RCC concept continues to take shape, these programs and others like them are likely to provide the foundation for more extensive cooperative efforts.



Thanks to the many FCC members who provided content for this article. For more information about how you can get involved with the FCC or an RCC, please contact Lisa Dabek at [Lisa.Dabek@zoo.org](mailto:Lisa.Dabek@zoo.org) or (206) 233-5037.

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