

Zoos step in to help save wild animals around the world

By McClatchy Foreign Staff, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.19.14

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Zebras stand in their enclosure at Zoo Wuppertal in Germany, July 12, 2012. AP Photo/Frank Augstein

GORONGOSA NATIONAL PARK, Mozambique — Every year, more than 180 million people visit zoos and aquariums in the United States. That's more people than go to major league baseball, football, hockey and basketball combined.

Those 180 million people are not just seeing animals at the zoo. They are also helping to save wild animals around the world — from zebras in Mozambique to condors in California.

Zoo Boise, in Idaho's capital city, led the way. It started a program in 2007 to raise money to help protect wild animals. Each visitor to the zoo now pays a small fee — 50 cents. The money adds up, and some of it is helping to protect zebras in Mozambique, in southeastern Africa.

Where Have All The Zebras Gone?

A 15-year civil war in Mozambique caused a lot of damage in Gorongosa National Park. At one time, there were thousands of zebras in the park. In 2012, only 10 were left.

The money from Zoo Boise helped to buy 15 more zebras. They now live in a protected area of the park.

The zebras in Mozambique, supported by zoo visitors 10,000 miles away, are an example of a new idea: zoos helping to protect animals in the wild.

“I’ve been working at the zoo for a long time, so I see zebras every day,” said Steve Burns, who runs Zoo Boise. “But those zebras were special.”

Visitors to Zoo Boise raised \$1.2 million from 2007 to 2013. The money has been used to help wild animals far and wide: from squirrels in Idaho to zebras and lions in Mozambique.

Come Back And Help Some More

Other zoos have begun similar programs. Altogether, zoos and aquariums in the United States raise \$160 million a year to help protect wild animals around the world.

“Most people have busy lives and they don’t know how to help. We’ve made it easy for them,” Burns says. “All they have to do is come to the zoo and do things they would want to do anyway, and when they walk out the door, they’re conservationists. They helped. And if you want to do more, come back again.”

The connection between Idaho and Mozambique began with David Carr, a rich man who is using his money to help people — he is a philanthropist.

Carr is originally from Idaho. He made a lot of money in the tech industry, running Internet and phone companies. Then he started using his money to help people in Idaho. He supported a human rights education center and helped start the Museum of Idaho.

Then Carr started looking for another project. He decided to help protect wild animals and wild places. He became a conservationist.

Rebuilding After War

Carr visited Mozambique in 2004. He went to Gorongosa National Park and saw the damage from the war. Many animals had been killed for food. Others were killed by people who needed money.

Still, the land was beautiful.

“I thought, ‘Wow, if we restore the park, we restore nature,’” Carr said. “We’re saving the treasure — the national symbol of this country.”

Carr supports the Gorongosa Restoration Project — a plan to fix the damage that war caused in the national park. He has promised to spend \$40 million over 20 years to support the project.

He also helped connect zoo visitors in Idaho with the zebras in Mozambique.

Burns, of Zoo Boise, said zoos and aquariums in the United States could become the biggest source of money for wildlife conservation in the world.

Bison Travel To New York

He mentioned one famous case of a zoo helping to save wild animals. The Bronx Zoo in New York City helped to save the American bison, or buffalo, in the early 1900s.

At that time, there were very few bison left in the United States. The director of the Bronx Zoo traveled to the West, and brought some bison back to New York.

At the zoo, the bison had a safe place to live and breed. Eventually, the zoo released some bison back into the wild. Now there are many in the American West.

“There wouldn’t be bison in this country if that had not happened,” Burns said.