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Off the Beaten Path The Wilds

FROM MUSSELS TO MANATEES

THE OWLS
Engaging Appalachian
Youth in Conservation

A MILESTONE IN
CHEETAH CONSERVATION



OFF THE



BEATEN PATH
DISCOVERING THE WILDS

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

“IT’S AN UNDISCOVERED GEM.”

“YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND IT
UNTIL YOU SEE IT.”

“IT’S A ONE-OF-A-KIND PLACE.”

The pride and passion are obvious in the ways that staff members talk about The Wilds, one of the largest wildlife conservation centers in North America. That it was created on 9,154 acres of barren, strip-mined land illustrates the level of vision, dedication, and hard work that went into the project originally and continues today.

The natural, open-range facility is located in rural Cumberland, Ohio, on land that was donated by the Ohio Coal Company, a subsidiary of the American Electric Power company. Originally conceived as a partnership among Ohio zoos, the Ohio Departments of Natural Resources and Development, and the private sector, The Wilds was incorporated in 1984 as The International Center for the Preservation of Wild Animals, Inc., dba The Wilds. It opened to the public for tours in 1994 and received Association of Zoos and Aquariums accreditation in 1996. Although it remains a separate entity, it has been managed by the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium in Powell, Ohio, since 2001.

“We had always supported the facility with grants, but when they had financial struggles we stepped up,” said Tom Stalf, president and chief executive officer of both the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium and The Wilds. “We took an organization that was on the verge of bankruptcy, and it is now a very strong nonprofit that will last for many, many years. Being able to help our team of dedicated staff at The Wilds makes me very proud.”

While maintaining its focus on research, breeding, and conservation activities, The Wilds has added visitor options that enable guests to experience this work in action.

“The Wilds was a mission-driven conservation organization that was open to the public, but in 2010 the teams at The Wilds and the Zoo agreed that in order to raise enough money to keep the facility running, we had to focus more on the guest experience,” said Stalf. “It was ‘no money, no mission,’ so we added safari tours, more overnight lodging experiences, and ziplining to entice a wider audience and provide for them the opportunity to get in touch with nature. We were very proud that we never once lowered our sights; conservation was always our top priority. The Wilds is part of our family. Going to The Wilds is a different experience than going to the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, and the most important thing we can do is impact our guests to inspire them to change their actions for the better.”





Breeding and Reintroduction

As one of five founding members of the Conservation Centers for Species Survival (C2S2), The Wilds consistently demonstrates the organization's commitment to secure populations of endangered species for assurance and reintroductions. The facility is home to more than 500 animals representing 28 species from across the world, 12 of which are endangered. This includes 74 Père David's deer, 59 Sichuan takin, 18 cheetahs and 17 white rhinoceroses, in addition to species such as Bactrian camels, Asiatic wild dogs, Masai giraffes, and Przewalski's wild horses.

The white rhino breeding program, one of The Wilds' success stories, has established it as the only known facility outside of Africa to have fourth- and fifth-generation white rhinos born in human care. The program received AZA's Edward H. Bean Award in 2017, which "recognizes propagation or management programs that contribute to the reproductive success of one or more species and/or subspecies." In December 2019, the facility celebrated the arrival of the 22nd white rhino calf to be born there.

Another point of pride involved participating in the reestablishment of a population of scimitar-horned oryx in Chad. The Environmental Agency of Abu Dhabi reached out and acquired animals from a number of facilities, including The Wilds. Dan Beetem, director of animal management, was invited to be a part of the Sahara Conservation Fund team for the on-site release in 2017.

In addition to helping the team radio collar the more than 40 animals, he witnessed their release. "I can't tell you how excited I was to see these animals that were extinct in the wild be reintroduced. To be able to see the three Wilds animals that were part of the 2016 release out in their native habitat was even more incredible," he said. "We are very lucky to have a chance to be connected to this work"

The Wilds also focuses on native wildlife with raise and release programs for eastern hellbenders and the American burying beetle.

"Hellbenders are a species that's quickly declining across its entire range because erosion and sedimentation are making it impossible for the larvae to survive," said Dr. Stephen Spear, director of wildlife ecology. "It's an example of a species that's in real trouble, so we're head starting them. We collect the eggs, hatch them here, and then we raise them for three to five years before we release them with microchip PIT [Passive Integrated Transponder] tags so we can recognize individuals in the future."

Additionally, he is using environmental DNA (eDNA) to identify existing hellbender populations and developing techniques to assess the health and reproduction of those populations. Researchers have also used eDNA on projects related to mudpuppies and an endangered freshwater mussel.

Dr. Jan Ramer, vice president at The Wilds, shared her excitement about the work that's being done with the American burying beetle.

"The American burying beetle was the first insect to be named as a federally protected endangered species. It is a carrion beetle, so a very important part of the forest restoration system. We have been breeding and releasing them at The Wilds for many years. Last summer, for the first time, we found that some had overwintered here—that was huge. We are really proud of this success."



American Burying Beetle Release

Photos: © Graham S. Jones, Columbus Zoo and Aquarium

American Burying Beetle



Hellbender

A Living Lab and Classroom

Jack Hanna, director emeritus of the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, is a staunch supporter of The Wilds.

“He tells a story about flying over the mined land with the people who were proposing the idea,” said Ramer. “He said it looked like a moonscape, and he wondered how it could possibly be transformed into a conservation center.”

Years later, changes to the land include 700 acres of prairies that have been created as a haven for pollinators and native plants; 15,000 native tree seedlings that have been planted to replace invasive species; and expansive grazed grasslands that have altered the habitat and resulted in an increase in grassland nesting birds.

Restoration ecology efforts remain a work in progress, and include a current project to establish a 75-acre Healthy Forest, Healthy Wildlife site.

“We’re removing invasive species, which is a huge task, planting native trees and understory shrubs, putting in a vernal pool that will attract wildlife and installing artificial roost poles for bats,” said Spear. “This is serving as a pilot test site to see if the techniques we use will be successful. It’s a common pattern on mined land that the soil is so bad, the plants take longer to grow. It will take a few years to see if the native species we planted have survived and grown. My background is in research, and it’s rare that you have an opportunity to do the research and see it translated to work on the ground. We’re able to have a hands-on, tangible conservation impact.”

The Wilds is perfectly set up for research, learning, and collaboration with partners, including AZA members and other nonprofits, universities, and government agencies at all levels. Beetem describes one of their first C2S2 partnerships.

“Because of the space and the number of animals in our care, our staff has experience supporting research projects. When Dr. Mandi Schook was doing onager work as a postdoc for the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, we could tie her sample collecting into our annual exams. She lived at The Wilds while she was doing the main part of her project, which resulted in the first wild equid foals ever produced by artificial insemination. We try to make those kinds of connections with folks from all over. We also see ourselves as a training ground for the next generation of conservationists.”

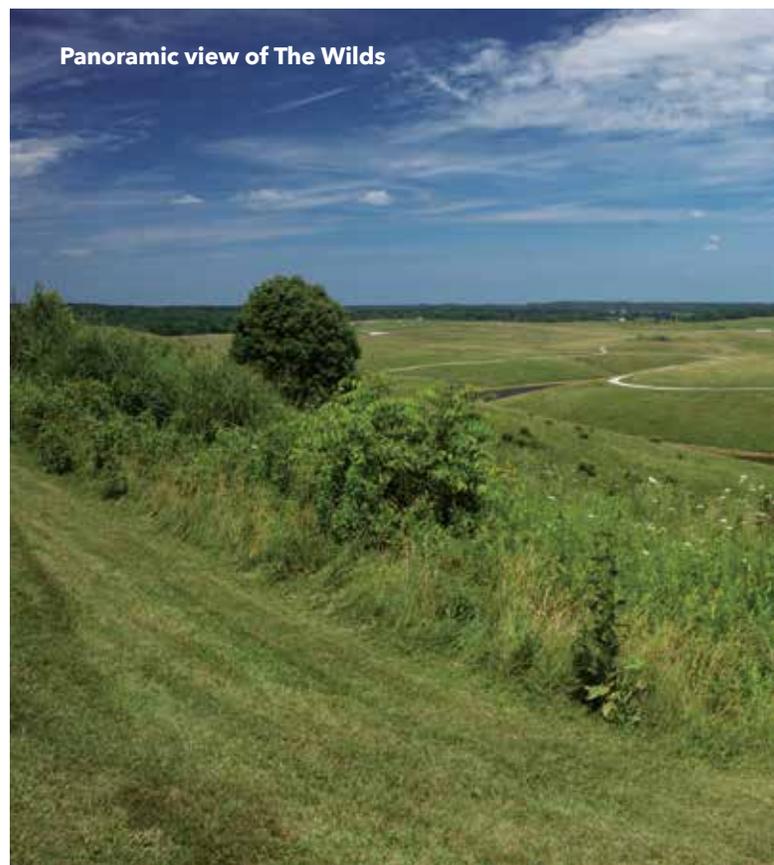
The Wilds team has also worked closely with students from Muskingum University, West Liberty University, and The Ohio State University, among others. There is a well-developed ecology apprentice program, and they also welcome younger budding conservationists to the facility to take advantage of a variety of educational day trips and overnight camping programs.

“The Wilds is a very special place—almost jaw dropping once you see our expansive pastures and herds,” said Ramer, who joined the facility in 2017. “We just had a wonderful year in 2019, with 121,000 visitors. Our guests love the safari experience, we truly connect people and wildlife in a unique way and we’re making important contributions to conservation. The Wilds really grabbed me when I first came here and continues to leave a lasting impression in the heart of everyone who visits.”

Mary Ellen Collins is a writer based in St. Petersburg, Fla.



Scimitar-horned Oryx



Panoramic view of The Wilds

