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Partners for the Planet AZA and Earth Day Network Join Forces

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BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

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A partnership between Earth Day Network and the Association of Zoos and Aquariums community is a no brainer. When we added the “spring into action” impact component to our

traditional Party for the Planet celebrations last year, many AZA members created community volunteer projects that align with their own missions while also supporting the mission of Earth Day Network—To build the world’s largest environmental movement to drive transformative change for people and planet.

“Through our partnership with AZA, we can seize the combined power of conservation, research, and education to defend and protect the species most at risk,” said Kathleen Rogers, president, Earth Day Network. “The first Earth Day in 1970 saw the passage of the Endangered Species Act. As Earth Day marks 50 years in 2020, now is the time to recommit ourselves to the protection of the world’s biodiversity.”

Grant support from the Disney Conservation Fund has been instrumental in helping AZA members celebrate Earth Day, Endangered Species Day, and World Oceans Day with projects that combine hands-on action with education. For example, Racine Zoo in Racine, Wisc., partnered with the

Alliance of Great Lakes to do a beach clean-up along Lake Michigan; and joined volunteers from Weed Out! Racine for one of their monthly garlic mustard pulls.

“We collected 44 pounds of trash, including 6,000 pieces of plastic, in two hours,” said Aszya Summers, curator of animal care and conservation education at the Zoo. “We also pulled 60 gallons of garlic mustard in Colonial Park along the Root River.”

Summers believes the benefits extend beyond the parameters of specific projects.

“It makes a big difference to educate people about making a difference themselves. We are a small zoo, but we never let that limit us. This is as much about cleaning up the beach as it is about educating the public. Getting them so excited will have an exponential impact, and the intangible long-term benefits make the projects worthwhile.”

She was planning another beach clean-up and garlic pull for Earth Day this year.

Focus on Habitats

Like Racine Zoo, AZA-accredited facilities of all types and sizes used their Disney Conservation Fund grants for restoration projects. Zoo Miami in Miami, Fla., took a group of volunteers to remove invasive species in one area of Everglades National Park as part of a long-term effort to restore that part of the Park to its natural state.

“A researcher started by giving us a lesson about invasive plants like air potato vine and Brazilian red pepper; and teaching us how to differentiate between native and invasive species,” said Jessica Parks, director of learning experiences at the Zoo. “They stressed moving the plants carefully, because if seeds fell, more would grow. It’s something they have to tackle regularly. We did half an acre between 9:00 and 2:00. When we did a survey afterward, participants said they didn’t realize the Everglades was so beautiful, and it was shocking to them to learn about this problem with invasive species.”



This year, volunteers hoped to restore a large piece of pine rockland at the Zoo by adding native plantings.

At North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher in Kure Beach, N.C., the Spring into Action project hit especially close to home.

“The Aquarium is located where the river meets the sea, and earlier in the year, we had really been seriously affected by Hurricane Florence,” said Casey Radley, family programs coordinator at the Aquarium. “We held a beach sweep at the Fort Fisher State Recreation Area and planted 300 sea oats, and it was a great way to bring the community back together. We specifically focused on getting families out and fostering their interest in nature. Sea oats protect us from inland flooding and also protect sea turtle nesting habitats. It’s also very important to the Aquarium to reduce our use of single use plastics, which is a big issue for sea turtles and shore birds.” This year the Aquarium was going to plant spartina in a salt marsh and continue the sea oat planting on the dunes.

The International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wisc., marked Earth Day by mobilizing staff and volunteers to remove invasive species in Baraboo, Jiangxi Province in China, and Zambia in Africa.

“In China, we worked with local school groups with kids and their parents; and in Africa we worked with two communities



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in Zambia that were within the borders of a national park,” said Cully Shelton, visitor program manager at the Foundation. Altogether, volunteers on three continents contributed more than 247 hours to clean up 2.5 miles of shoreline and four acres of habitat.

“We achieved our goal to bring people together to protect and restore crane habitats; and we also strengthened partnerships with other groups, including schools and local governments.”

Shelton and the Wisconsin group were also delighted by an impressive example of multi-generational commitment, when the great granddaughter of a previous Board Director participated in the project.

Although the International Crane Foundation will be closed this spring for a significant renovation, Shelton looks forward to participating in Spring into Action in the future.

Kids are the Key

Conservation-minded individuals in zoos, aquariums, and every type of environmental organization, agree on the importance of educating those who will follow in their footsteps. And it’s never too early for the youngest members of our communities to get their hands dirty—sometimes in the most literal sense.



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“The kids were very excited to be there. I was in awe of the fact that they cared as much as they did. They helped us design what the garden would look like, and they really took ownership of it.”

Lion Country Safari in Loxahatchee, Fla., partnered with the Grassy Water Elementary School to enhance their green space and STEM curriculum.

“We had families with young children, teachers, and community members plant 65 plants in a pollinator garden,” said Tina Cloutier Barbour, curator of conservation, research and chimpanzees at the Park. “The kids were very excited to be there. I was in awe of the fact that they cared as much as they did. They helped us design what the garden would look like, and they really took ownership of it.

“We went back later to help staff incorporate the garden into their curriculum and educate the kids about the importance of pollinators.”

This year Cloutier Barbour hopes to engage more families in a similar project at another elementary school and an adjacent middle school.

At Oklahoma City Zoo and Botanical Garden in Oklahoma City, Okla., last year, children and adults pitched in to plant a pollinator garden on the Zoo grounds.

“We were surprised by how extremely enthusiastic people were,” said Rebecca Snyder, director of conservation science at the Zoo. “A monarch came and laid her eggs, and I was able to show the kids the eggs and explain how we’re planting the milkweed for the caterpillars.”

The video that Snyder’s team made about the project won the 2nd place in AZA’s video contest, and as stipulated by the rules, the Zoo gave their \$10,000 prize to a conservation organization. In this case, it went to Oakies for Monarchs, which the Zoo helped to found.

This year’s plans included planting a demonstration garden that features recommended plants; and having children pledge to be pollinators by putting ketchup and mustard handprints on a banner that will later be given to the elephants to eat.

They are also partnering with Pepsi to sponsor a statewide art contest for “creative conservationists” in grades K-12. The theme is the 50th anniversary of Earth Day, and prizes include the chance to have their artwork on a Pepsi vending machine at the Zoo for a year.

Close Collaborations

With regard to the 2020 Earth Day theme of climate change, Earth Day Network believes AZA can play a significant role.

“Zoos and aquariums have such incredible power and influence with their visitors,” said Tracey Ritchie, Earth Day Network’s vice president of programs and partnerships. “They are amazing community assets that make the environment a priority.”

In addition to creating their own projects, AZA members are welcome to participate in some of Earth Day Network’s biggest projects. One such opportunity is the Great Global Clean-up, an initiative to create the largest clean-up crew around the world.

“We want to invest more in the root causes,” said Ritchie. “We’ll be using a sophisticated Earth Science 2020 citizen science app to collect data about what people are finding, and where. Once someone submits their data, the app will generate a pop-up with calls to action in that specific geographic location. We want civic action to be a big part of this.” (<https://cleanup.earthday.org/pages/find-a-cleanup>).

In addition, Ritchie said that this year’s global environmental teach-in represents a return to Earth Day’s roots. These events will be designed to educate community members of all ages about local environmental issues and the ways in which climate change will affect their region, their country, and the world. Zoo and aquarium staff would be effective teach-in content experts about pollinators, SAFE species, and the daily actions people can take at home that will make a real difference on the other side of the world. (www.earthday.org/2020-teach-in-toolkit/).

The collaboration between AZA and Earth Day Network is defined by shared goals, powerful messaging, and a broad reach—real reasons for hope in light of the problems we face. As the two groups continue to work in tandem, the planet and all of its inhabitants will be the winners.

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



© Oklahoma City Zoo



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Community volunteers lend a hand to plant sea oats to restore sand dunes at the Fort Fisher State Recreation Area impacted by Hurricane Florence. The planting and corresponding beach sweep were organized by the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher for its Party for the Planet on World Oceans Day, 8 June 2019.

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