June 17, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader McCarthy, and Minority Leader Schumer,

I am writing to urge you to include at least $30,000,000 in any upcoming COVID-19 relief legislation to provide critically needed funding for facilities accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) that are providing direct and ongoing support to federal agencies for the daily care and maintenance of: 1) animals rescued from the wild or confiscated at U.S. ports or borders for critical care, rehabilitation and/or reintroduction; 2) breeding populations of species listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) for conservation purposes; and 3) animals that are owned by the federal government. These funds would be used to offset the significant expenses incurred during the current COVID-19 pandemic when most of AZA’s accredited zoos and aquariums are closed or operating at reduced capacity but still providing high-level professional care for these animals on a daily basis without the benefit of revenue from gate receipts.

AZA is a non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of accredited zoos, aquariums, nature centers, and science centers in the areas of animal care and welfare, conservation, education, science, and guest experience. AZA’s 240 accredited members annually host more than 200 million visitors, collectively generate more than $22 billion in annual economic activity, and support more than 210,000 jobs across the country. They are located in 169 congressional districts, 46 states, the District of Columbia, and 12 countries. In 2018, AZA-accredited facilities spent more than $230 million on field conservation in over 130 countries benefiting over 880 species and subspecies. The expertise of AZA-accredited aquariums and zoos in scientific research, conservation breeding, and wildlife rescue and rehabilitation is supported by their premier role in conservation education.

Overall, we estimate that at least $5 million ($2.5 million through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and $2.5 million through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) per month for the next six months is needed to maintain operations at AZA-accredited facilities related to ESA-listed U.S. species, rescued and confiscated wildlife, and other federally-owned animals.

Without adequate supplemental funding, facilities may be forced to discontinue their participation in species recovery activities with the Service that they have, to date, largely provided as a community service, and may need to relocate the animals in their care immediately. Many native U.S. species listed under the ESA are held by AZA-accredited facilities for captive propagation to support recovery and reintroduction efforts. For
example, across eleven taxa (California condor, black footed ferret, red wolf, Mexican wolf, Florida panther, manatee, Northern and Southern sea otters, polar bear, sturgeons, silvery minnow), 207 zoos, aquariums, and similar facilities are supporting recovery and reintroduction efforts. For species such as American burying beetle, Wyoming toad, whooping crane, Attwater’s prairie chicken, Louisiana pine snake, Massasauga rattlesnake, hellbender, Florida grasshopper sparrow, Steller’s eider, gopher tortoise, desert tortoise, eastern indigo snake, freshwater mussels, and Guam kingfisher, nationally recognized zoos and aquariums offer the only support. Interruption in the care of these animals and the loss of these partnerships would drastically impede, or entirely derail, progress in meeting the Service’s priorities of delisting and down-listing ESA-listed species.

For NOAA-protected (and in some cases, NOAA-owned) species such as corals, pinnipeds, cetaceans, and sea turtles at AZA facilities, without additional funding these organizations may soon not be able to fund animal care, life support systems and maintenance operations, or any other costs associated with recovery and reintroduction efforts. For example, the Florida Reef Tract is currently experiencing a multi-year, disease-related mortality event that has resulted in massive die-offs of multiple coral species. As many as 25 coral species, including both ESA-listed and primary reef-building species, have displayed tissue loss lesions that often result in whole colony mortality. First observed offshore of southeast Florida in late 2014, the disease has since spread to the northernmost extent of the Florida Reef Tract and south into the Lower Florida Keys. Some species experience up to 100 percent mortality at individual reef sites.

In November 2018, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and NOAA requested assistance from the AZA member community, recognizing their unique capabilities. As is typical, they responded, and AZA-accredited facilities are now working alongside state and federal partners to assist the Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project by creating land-based nurseries to house corals removed from the reef tract for future reintroduction. Currently, over 1,800 corals are being held in 18 AZA facilities in 13 states with more disease-free corals on their way. Unfortunately, because of the economic pressures resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, these facilities are now bearing significant costs to continue this valuable rescue work at a time when guests are not coming through their gates.

Most AZA-accredited facilities closed in March and those that have reopened are operating at limited capacity to help minimize the spread of COVID-19. However, they have been providing daily care to their animal populations while making difficult staffing and operational decisions. Normally, funding from gate receipts is used to support these facilities’ participation in recovery and reintroduction efforts, eliminating or minimizing the need for federal support. However, with the recent, drastic loss of revenue, these organizations may soon not be able to fund animal care, life support systems, maintenance operations, or any other costs associated with these efforts.

As you consider additional economic stimulus and relief legislation to address the COVID-19 crisis, I strongly urge you to ensure that AZA-accredited facilities can continue their critical role in the recovery of ESA-listed species and species owned or managed by the federal government. I look forward to working with you in the coming months as we collectively work to ensure that our nation emerges from this crisis.

Sincerely,

Dan Ashe
President and CEO