May 7, 2020

The Honorable Jerry Moran
Chairman
Senate Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
142 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable José Serrano
Chairman
House Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
H-310, The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Jeanne Shaheen
Ranking Member
Senate Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
125 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Robert Aderholt
Ranking Member
House Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies
1016 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Moran, Chairman Serrano, Ranking Member Shaheen, and Ranking Member Aderholt,

I am writing to urge you to include $15,000,000 in any upcoming COVID-19 relief legislation package to provide critically needed funding for zoos and aquariums that are accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) 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 during the current COVID-19 pandemic when most of AZA’s accredited zoos and aquariums are closed 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 and aquariums in the areas of animal care and husbandry, conservation, education, science and recreation. AZA’s 240 accredited aquariums, nature centers, science centers and zoos 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. In 2018, AZA-accredited facilities spent more $230 million on field conservation in over 130 countries benefiting more than 880 species and subspecies including more than 240 which are listed as endangered or threatened under the ESA.

AZA and its members are vital to the conservation of the world’s threatened and endangered species. Given the stay-in-place restrictions across the country to minimize the spread of COVID-19, more than 90% of AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, which are nationally recognized institutions for animal care, husbandry, rescue, rehabilitation, and captive propagation, are closed. Yet these institutions still need to retain staff in order to tend to the over 800,000 animals collectively under their daily care. Normally, funding from institutional gate receipts has been used to support the facilities’ operational expenses, which include care
and maintenance of threatened and endangered species and those animals involved in recovery and reintroduction efforts, including NOAA-protected (and in some cases, NOAA-owned) species such as corals, pinnipeds, cetaceans, and sea turtles. However, with this recent drastic loss in revenue, these organizations may soon not be able to fund animal care, life support systems and maintenance operations, or any other costs associated with these efforts.

For example, the Florida Reef Tract is currently experiencing a multi-year, disease-related mortality event that has resulted in massive die-offs in 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, along with 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. To maintain care for these rescued corals, AZA institutions involved in this massive rescue effort will need significant funding in order to ensure that they can continue their critical work.

This is just one example of AZA institutions and their commitment to collaboration at the Federal and state levels. AZA aquariums and zoos are involved in the daily care and maintenance of numerous species of native threatened and endangered species of sharks and other marine fishes, cetaceans, and marine invertebrates for conservation breeding and rescue/rehabilitation/reintroduction purposes throughout the country. Similar to our coral rescue efforts, the cost of these efforts runs into millions of dollars, normally supported by facility guest-driven revenues that are now not available. Without the federal support we are requesting here, it is doubtful that AZA members will be able to continue these efforts going forward.

Overall, we estimate that $2.5 million per month for the next six months is needed to maintain operations at these facilities related to ESA-listed U.S. species, rescued and confiscated wildlife, and other Federally-owned animals under the purview of NOAA.

As you consider 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 maintenance of ESA-listed and rescue/rehabilitation animals. Absent such support, these facilities may be forced to discontinue these activities that they have proudly provided as community and national service. Interruption in the care of these animals and the loss of these partnerships would drastically impede, or entirely derail, progress in meeting numerous governmental priorities.

For decades, these facilities have volunteered to help the federal government fulfill its responsibilities to conserve endangered species. Now, these facilities need help from their government.
I look forward to working with you in the coming months as we collectively work to ensure that our nation and the wildlife resources entrusted to us emerge from this crisis.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dan Ashe
President and CEO