How a Small Zoo Decided to Go Green

By Paige Rudasics

The Abilene Zoo in Abilene, Texas, may be one of the smaller Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)-accredited zoos in our state, but we’ve got ideas as big as Texas.

AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums of all sizes embrace animal conservation and sustainability in their mission statements, but we lose our credibility if our facilities are not able to “walk the talk.”

In Abilene, we saw an opportunity to be an advocate and set an example. With that in mind, in September 2015, we created the Abilene Zoo’s Conservation Committee. Committee members represent all major areas of zoo operations: education, maintenance, animal care, guest services and administration. It attracted staff members who already had a passion for conservation, but also those who wanted to learn more about sustainability.

The group has two roles: oversee the Zoo’s monetary donations to ex situ conservation projects and evaluate the sustainability of Zoo operations.

Among its first mandates was to choose organizations that would receive funds generated by our new Quarters for Conservation project, which was launched around the same time.

Another big step was to become familiar with AZA’s Green Scientific Advisory Group. We found many great resources that provided us with direction, helpful tools and continuing support.

The first few months were spent quantifying the Zoo’s baselines through staff surveys, past utility bills and a thorough inventory and assessment of all chemicals used onsite. Once these baselines were gathered, we prioritized our efforts and planned accordingly.

We set an initial goal to reduce energy use by 5 percent this fiscal year. This target will include the energy consumed by our new, well-lit Giraffe Safari exhibit, which opened in April.

The Abilene Zoo currently has no budget for sustainability initiatives, yet we still have big goals for large projects. With our committee being so new, community partnerships are proving useful. The committee has pushed staff to think outside the box and create partnerships with local organizations that share our goals. Further exploration of city programs has given us access to resources such as free energy audits, expert advice and financial incentives. Partnerships with local organizations, such as our local chapter of Keep America Beautiful, have created opportunities for future funding.

The Abilene Zoo is determined to improve its sustainability in our facility and our community—a goal inspired by the great strides taken by other AZA-accredited facilities.

As we make our own improvements, we hope to inspire other institutions—regardless of size—to join the collective effort.

Paige Rudasics is an Abilene Zoo educator and Conservation Committee Chairman for the Zoo.