San Diego Zoo Global Water Conservation

By Adam Ringler

The San Diego Zoo in San Diego, Calif., and San Diego Zoo Safari Park near Escondido, Calif., have been through a year of changing drought scenarios. Both parks responded quickly to save water when the California Governor implemented mandatory reductions. San Diego normally gets approximately 10 inches of rain each year; therefore most water is imported from the California State Water Project and the Colorado River. During years of normal rainfall, local San Diego supplies provide about 16 percent of the total water supply, but those sources dry up in drought years.

With several years of below normal rainfall and snowfall the state was left in dire circumstances. Snowpack in the Sierra Mountains on 1 April 2015 showed bare ground. As a result, the Governor of California implemented mandatory water consumption reductions. The lush grounds of the San Diego Zoo and the many pools make the Zoo one of the larger water users in San Diego.

San Diego Zoo Global (SDZG) formed two Water Task Force Committees, one at each park, with weekly meetings to determine new best practices for water conservation and this became one of the main strategies of the organization’s new strategic plan. The Zoo and Safari Park sent surveys to all employees to get water saving ideas that could be implemented immediately. An email address was created to easily report leaks.

We instituted daily water meter readings and sought to determine the different quantities and uses of water. Irrigation makes up a huge part of our needs so we obtained a variance to water more than the allotted two days per week. San Diego Zoo Global was recognized as a major attraction that needed to remain well irrigated for the sake of the plant and animal collection and to provide guests with a great experience.

Some locations received artificial turf, and the grassy lawn area outside the Safari Park was allowed to go brown as a symbol of our efforts to conserve water. The Park and Zoo also worked closely with the San Diego County Water Authority to provide visitors with helpful reminders on how to conserve water with graphics installed around the facilities. Low-flow aerators were installed at sinks and waterless urinals, and daily grounds maintenance was altered to reduce hosing. The 2015 mandated water reductions were 16 percent compared to a base year of 2013. SDZG bested those numbers when conservation was most critical.

San Diego County has a new $1 billion desalination plant which just opened on the coast in Carlsbad, Calif., and contributes an additional 8-9 percent of the county’s water needs. The plant provides a drought-resistant supply of water and because of it, restrictions are easing slightly in 2016.

Although water use is reduced, the costs for water are rising as the same infrastructure is required to transport, store and deliver the water locally. San Diego Zoo Global is up to the challenge, and we will continue to keep our water conservation methods in place as the new normal.

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