

Maximizing our Impact: Challenging AAZK to go further for native species

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Introduction

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (2018) currently identifies 1,662 threatened or endangered plant and animal species in the United States, the majority of which depend on or are solely found on privately owned lands (Shaffer, Scott, & Casey, 2002; U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, 2009). This number is only expected to grow as we face unprecedented environmental changes and conservation funding falls short of recommended

levels (Shaffer, Scott, & Casey, 2002). At the same time, urbanization and lack of community participation in species management undermine conservation efforts. As a result, the need for local conservation leadership, support, and financing is greater than ever before. With Chapters located across the country comprised of knowledgeable and enthusiastic individuals, AAZK is uniquely positioned to face these challenges head-on.

Coyote. Winning image from the Red River AAZK Chapter's 2017 photo contest. Each year winning images are featured on merchandise and promotional materials benefiting conservation. Photo by Christina Schmitt.



Participation in environmental behaviors on a local level relates to factors including developing a personal affinity for nature, particularly early in life, and exposure to environmental education and mentorship by environmental leaders (Redkop, 2010). However, building this connection between people and nature has become a major challenge in the United States. As children experience rigorous academic demands, environmental education and time spent engaging in free play outdoors often take a backseat. Additionally, as less than 20% of the United States population lives in rural areas, opportunities to enjoy the outdoors may be limited for many. As a result, many people experience a disconnect between daily experiences and their impact on the natural world (Miller, 2005).

The disconnect between daily life and conservation is also reflected in conservation research. Miller & Hobbs (2002) found that the bulk of research is conducted in areas with minimal human impact, which perpetuates the mindset that conservation occurs in far removed areas of the world. This mindset is also created by focusing the conservation narrative on remote flagship species such as elephants or pandas (Schwartz, 2005). Educational efforts and fundraising relating to conserving species thousands of miles away do little, if anything, to engage people in preserving their own native species (Schwartz, 2005).

Strong local environmental leaders are critical for developing new pro-environmental social norms (Redkop, 2010). Located across the United States, local AAZK Chapters have great potential to address regional needs. As local community members ourselves, we can identify the conservation challenges relevant to our specific areas, whether they relate to urbanization, lack of community engagement, or any other factors. We are uniquely situated to lead community dialogue, environmental education and mentorship, and problem-solving efforts.

Analysis of AAZK Conservation Funding

One way of gauging the importance an organization places on national or international conservation programs is through analyzing monetary contributions to each. As a national organization, AAZK supports two conservation initiatives, Bowling for Rhinos (BFR), and Trees for You and Me (TFYM). BFR is an international initiative that distributes funds primarily amongst three conservation partners to the benefit of rhinos and other Asian and African wildlife: the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, International Rhino Foundation, and Action for Cheetahs in Kenya. TFYM aims to combat climate change through reforestation and habitat restoration. Select grants are funded each year to that end. TFYM can fund grant projects in the United States, as well as internationally. For example, in 2016 grants were awarded to fund two projects. One enabled reforestation of critical sandhill crane habitat in Florida. The other financed the Akron AAZK Chapter launching a can recycling program as an ongoing fundraiser to restore Brazilian rainforests. Although both of these projects do have local impacts, the continued proceeds from the can recycling program are utilized for international conservation as well.

According to the 2015, 2016, and 2017 AAZK Annual Reports, an astounding \$1,805,836.83 has been raised between the past



Eastern Indigo Snake. The eastern indigo snake (Drymarchon couperi) is one of over 1,600 native species listed as threatened or endangered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Photo by Rachel Hughes.

three years for BFR. Each year roughly 85 individual AAZK Chapters financially support AAZK's flagship conservation initiative. In comparison, TFYM fundraisers have brought in \$44,600.42 since 2015, making up less than 2.5% of annual conservation fundraising. In 2015, TFYM was only supported by 13 individual AAZK Chapters. Additionally, as TFYM does not strictly fund US-based conservation projects, it can be comfortably said that on average less than 2.5% of AAZK's annual organizational donations address conservation needs within the United States.

From these figures, it is clear that at the national level AAZK disproportionately supports international conservation initiatives compared to national ones. While this does not necessarily mean that AAZK views local conservation needs as less important, at the very least they are overlooked. Although each individual AAZK Chapter may allocate additional funds to local conservation, the significance of the disparity suggests that this trend is reflected within many local Chapters as well. For example, in 2018 the Red River AAZK Chapter contributed 73% of conservation funds to international organizations. The remaining 27% supported conservation efforts on behalf of local organizations. Although not as significant as the national trend, we can see that international needs were still prioritized overall.

It is truly inspiring the degree of conservation fundraising that is produced by AAZK Chapters each year. We should all be very proud of our efforts, as well as those of our conservation partners through BFR and TFYM. Many of us are inspired to fundraise because we are passionate about the exotic animals in our care, and donating to international conservation is certainly commendable. However, AAZK Chapters can and should play an important role in engaging our own communities in local conservation actions through dialogue, environmental education, and monetary contributions. I would like to challenge AAZK to evaluate critically our overall conservation contributions. With such a focus on international conservation, are we meeting our full potential to promote conservation of our own local species?



Pollinator Garden. The Red River AAZK Chapter maintains two wildflower gardens and promotes native pollinator conservation with outreach events and contests each year. Photo courtesy of Red River AAZK.

Where We Go from Here

The good news is, there are many ways to make sure we are providing adequate support for the conservation of local species at the national as well as Chapter level. Funding localized conservation initiatives and research, particularly in populated areas, has great potential to help people understand the relationship between their actions and locally threatened species (Miller & Hobbs, 2002). As an AAZK Chapter, investigate what underrepresented local species are in need of help, or what local conservation initiatives or research are worthy of financial support. Discuss goals for annual conservation donations and consider pledging to donate a certain percent of conservation funding to local needs each year. Analyze the percent of funds your Chapter donated to local groups in prior years and aim to surpass that amount. You may even wish to implement a plan for incrementally increasing local conservation donations over the course of a few years to reach a greater target.

In addition to financial support, many conservation contributions are not monetary but focus on public perception, education, and engaging local communities in conservation actions (Schwartz, 2005). Opportunities to spend time in nature, participate in environmental education, and mentorship by environmental leaders are needed to help people in the United States connect with native species

and realize the necessity for conservation actions (Redkop, 2010). This opens the door for Chapters to do more for local species while still fully backing BFR and other international organizations. AAZK members possess the passion, creativity, knowledge, and skills to help foster stakeholder support for preserving threatened native species in our communities. Get creative and think about how to raise awareness and active participation in preserving local species. The possibilities are limitless, but here are some ideas to get the gears turning:

- Focus Chapter social media posts on local species and their conservation needs. Connect viewers to the species by sharing local news stories about wildlife, biographies about native species in human care, infographics, quizzes, or games with a conservation message. Remember, environmental education can be fun! Encourage viewers to share their own photos or stories about native wildlife.
- Initiate a community photography contest featuring images of native species. Print the winning images on postcards, magnets, or other merchandise and donate the proceeds to deserving local conservation initiatives

- Partner with local teachers or your facility's education department to create educational resources and lesson plans that highlight native species. Look into sharing these materials for free as an online resource.
- Partner with local businesses to put on proceed nights, conservation trivia nights, wine tasting fundraisers, and so on. Tie in an interactive learning opportunity by working with local chefs to host a cooking class featuring sustainably sourced local ingredients.
- Volunteer with other local conservation groups to participate in bird counts, Frogwatch USA, beach cleanups, and so on. Volunteering time to help other local groups is a great way to build a network of collaborators for future projects.

At the national level, AAZK can also do more to inspire and enable Chapters to promote local species. It's time to break from our nearly singular focus on exotic megafauna as flagship species for conservation, and include local conservation needs in the conversation as well. On an organizational level, AAZK can promote native species conservation by:

- Expand the role of AAZK's conservation committee to specifically include local species conservation. Just as a variety of resources are available to Chapters looking to host BFR events, similar resources should be available for Chapters to help identify and address local conservation needs. Establish a local conservation liaison within the committee to serve as a point person for Chapters in need of guidance or resources.
- Continue to grow and expand TFYM so that more grants can be funded each year. AAZK does not yet have a dedicated US conservation initiative, but in the meantime, TFYM does enable at least some funding to benefit local reforestation projects.
- Develop a dedicated AKF column for articles pertaining to native species conservation. This will help efficiently disseminate relevant and up-to-date local information to AAZK's predominantly US-based subscribers.

- Just as individual Chapters can actively use social media to promote native species, so should AAZK as a whole. Establish a schedule spotlighting the work AAZK Chapters are doing for native species on a reoccurring and regular basis.

Within the United States, there is a great need for conservation funding, leadership, and environmental education on a local level. We must not overlook the conservation needs that exist in our own neighborhoods in our efforts to protect remote species. AAZK members have amazing potential to be agents of change and community action. Be proud of what we have accomplished together so far, and challenge yourself, your Chapter, and AAZK as a whole to go further for native species. 🐾

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