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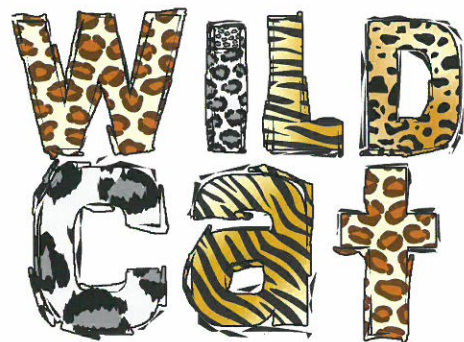
# Animal Keepers' Forum

# AKF



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Valentino pauses for a refreshing drink from the freshwater pond in his enclosure  
Photo courtesy of Cosley Zoo in Wheaton

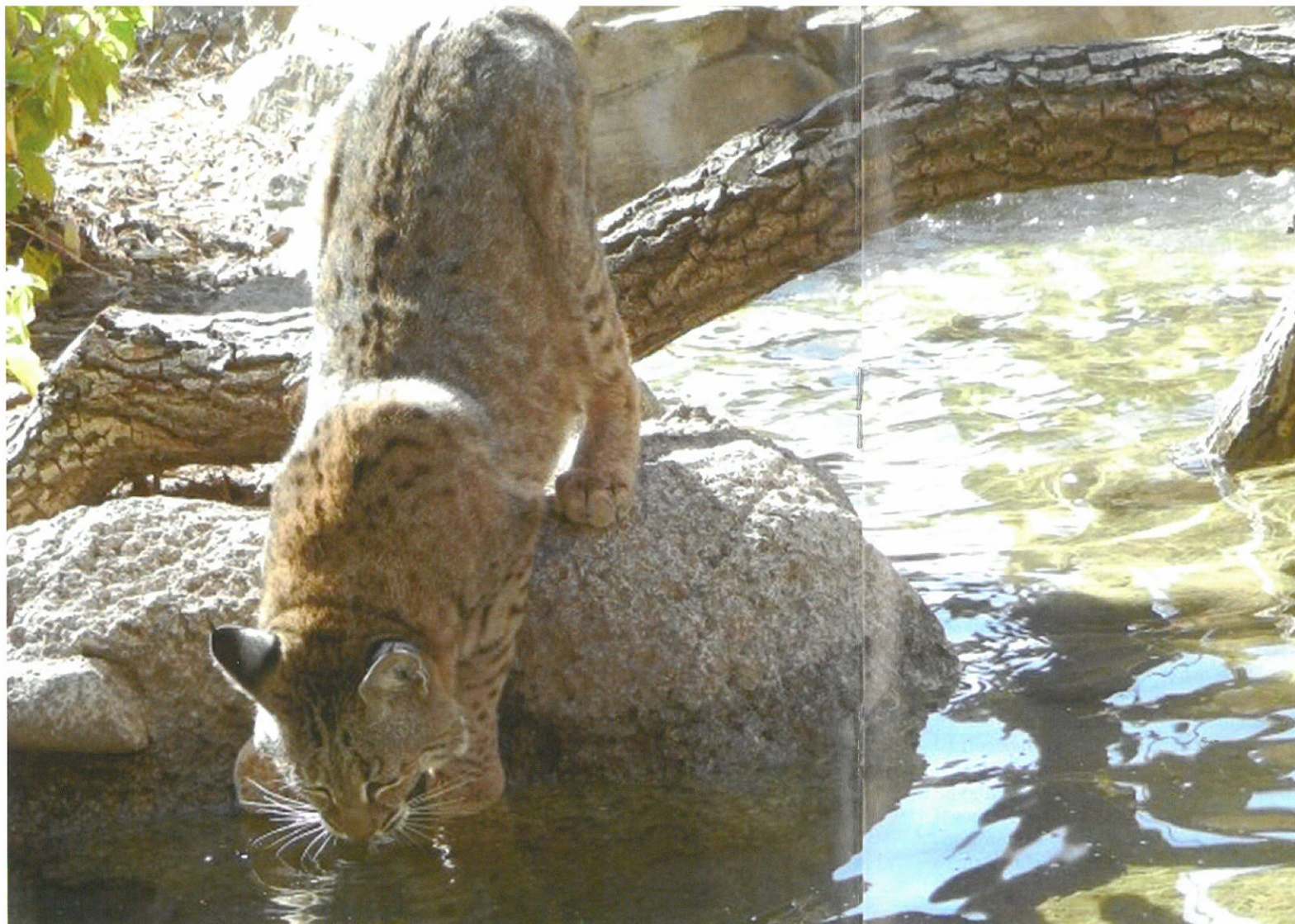


## Conservation Needs: An Examination of Public Perception

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Wild cats, with their deadly grace, beauty, and mystique, have captivated humanity for generations. Since our first interactions with felids some seven million years ago, cats have been at times our adversaries, our occasional meals, and often our best friends. At present there are 37 species of cats found across the world, from the majestic and ice covered mountain slopes of Tibet to the arid deserts of Africa. Some species of cats, such as mountain lions and bobcats, can even be found in our own backyards in the United States.

Our story takes place at Cosley Zoo, a small AZA-accredited public zoo, opened in the far western Chicago suburb of Wheaton, Illinois in 1974. Cosley's animal collection focuses upon animals native to the state of Illinois and domestic farm animals, and over the years their reputation for excellence in animal care and guest education has garnered a great deal of public support. With 200 animals



and over 70 species represented in their collection, however, Cosley was still missing one important component: a cat species. But that was all about to change. After much planning, preparation, and the building of a beautiful new enclosure, Cosley Zoo was ready to add bobcats to its collection! In September of 2012, Cosley proudly acquired two magnificent male bobcats (*Lynx rufus*), brothers named Salvatore and Valentino ("Sal" & "Val"), to much fanfare and public excitement.

As a zoology graduate student focusing my thesis work on wild cats, I was delighted to be accepted on as an animal care (keeper) volunteer with the Cosley staff at this exciting time. One component of wild cat conservation that is of particular interest to me is the public's knowledge (or lack thereof) of small wild cat species as opposed to their larger and more "famous" large cat relatives (lion, tiger, jaguar, leopard, snow leopard, puma, and cheetah). With

this lack of knowledge comes a lack of funding for conservation efforts and a lack of public support, even though many smaller cat species desperately need our help. Most of us have heard of the plights facing tigers and amur leopards, but how many of us know how dire the situation is for fishing cats, also endangered? The public will rally behind sad stories of the poaching of lions and tigers, but tales of the Iberian lynx nearing extinction do not make headlines on the news stations. This popularity of large cats over small cats is echoed in the research realm – small cats have rarely been studied in the wild, and some species not at all. It was this dynamic that I wished to examine while at Cosley, especially considering the increased local public interest in wild cats due to their new exhibit. So, with Cosley's support and assistance I set about creating a set of surveys and observations to gauge the public's knowledge and support of wild

cat needs. I chose to examine not only the difference between their knowledge of small wild cats and large wild cats but also their knowledge of native versus non-native cat species.

During the fall and winter of 2012, I collected data examining guest knowledge of wild cat species (small and large; native and non-native), and guest attitudes, beliefs and actions regarding wild cat conservation. Could guests name cat species in each category? What were their thoughts on the importance of cat conservation efforts? Were they aware of any cat conservation groups? Were they actively trying to make a difference in this area? It was hypothesized that zoo-going guests would have a much greater knowledge and support of large wild cat species' conservation needs and efforts. In my own perusal of the subject matter available, it seemed clear that even though small cat species outnumber large cat species more than 2:1, very little is

known about and minimal research effort is done on behalf of most small cat species. Large cats, however, dominate the news and images on conservation sites. These cats are very beautiful and charismatic, and children grow up knowing and loving cats such as lions and tigers. Public knowledge and support for these animals are very strong. What I did not imagine was just how true this would be!

promoting awareness of small felids? There is clearly a lack of knowledge of small cat species as compared to large cats, as anticipated, but the public does desire this information. There appears to be a breakdown between the researchers and conservationists in the field, and how this information is then being relayed to the public. The public needs to be further connected to opportunities where they can help,

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As predicted, the general public was more aware of large cats than small, with **92.2%** of guests being able to name a large cat species while only **86.4%** could name a small cat species (and most of those answers as expected were "bobcat," showing that what the public did know was likely learned from Cosley's exhibit). The public was much more aware of foreign cat species than those species found in the U.S. – **100%** could name a non-native cat species, but only **79.6%** could name a native species. The most interesting issue of all, however, was raised by the answers collected for the conservation-based questions. **66%** of respondents answered 'No' when asked if they were aware of any wild cat conservation programs. And a shocking **100%** of respondents answered 'I am concerned, but uncertain how to help' when asked what their reaction to the conservation crisis is. Clearly, this demonstrates that word-of-mouth and marketing campaigns for wild cat conservation programs have not yet effectively reached the general public, and that there is a need for such education. The public claims to have a strong desire to support such programs, but simply does not know how to do so.

The goal of this study was to bring to light the public's perceptions of the different cat species and its support for the conservation efforts of these species. The study also serves to highlight shortcomings in the current state of conservation for small cat species, and to demonstrate where we can best increase our efforts to maximize our impact for the benefit of felids both small and large. So, what do the findings mean to researchers and conservationists interested in

and this in turn will aid in producing desperately needed funds to support further research. Zoos and zoo staff can help to educate the public about such programs or opportunities, and serve as a catalyst in order to motivate guests to become more involved.

A next step for those who are not experts or researchers in the field would be to simply help spread the word on what the public can do to help. There are ample organizations out there to support large cat conservation efforts, but only a few to support small cats. Increasing donations and volunteer efforts for these organizations, or even just promoting them through websites, flyers, or word-of-mouth will make a tremendous difference. If we all work together, we can make a tremendous difference for our feline friends. 🐾

Salvatore and Valentino in their enclosure, Cosley Zoo  
Photo courtesy of Cosley Zoo in Wheaton, IL

