

Evaluating Recommendation Outcomes for AZA's Managed Programs

Overview: Through a 3-year Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) grant, scientists from the Lincoln Park Zoo (LPZ) and the Population Management Center (PMC) will build a monitoring system to evaluate the outcomes of breeding and transfer recommendations made through AZA's Species Survival Plans (SSPs) and Population Management Plans (PMPs).

Project Background: SSPs and PMPs manage and maintain sustainable populations to serve as insurance for wild populations and to meet the conservation and education goals of AZA member institutions. Cooperative population management is implemented through breeding and transfer recommendations made through regular planning with the PMC. The planning process and the implementation of recommendations involves hundreds of professional volunteers, hundreds of institutions and thousands of animals - a huge investment of time and resources. Despite this tremendous effort, there is no systematic process for evaluating the breeding and transfer recommendation outcomes. The lack of an organized way of determining outcomes means that the community is left to make management changes based on hunches rather than information. This grant will provide the necessary tools and data to understand, monitor and improve AZA's cooperative population management system.

Project Plan: From 2008-2011, the grant team will:

1. Develop a "monitoring system" for tracking management of AZA SSPs and PMPs, which will:
 - a. track breeding and transfer recommendations, their outcomes (whether they occurred or not), and specific reasons why recommendations did not occur
 - b. track important information about the PMC business process
 - c. assist program leaders in preparing for PMC planning meetings
2. Collect retrospective data from past breeding and transfer plans (~9 years since the PMC was initiated)
3. Analyze the logistical and biological characteristics (e.g. taxa, program type, life history) correlated with recommendation outcomes
4. Integrate data collection into the PMC planning process for continuous monitoring into the future

Project Outcomes:

For individual SSPs and PMPs:

1. A summary of recommendation outcomes for previous breeding and transfer plans that can be used to refine planning (e.g. making more breeding recommendations based on low fulfillment rates)
2. Assistance in preparing for PMC planning (gathering wants and needs, previous plan's outcomes)
3. A system for monitoring each program into the future

For individual institutions:

1. Summarized data on fulfillment rates by recommendation type (e.g. 90% of the 10 transfer recommendations for SSP animals were fulfilled)
2. Data for each SSP and PMP species at the institution over time (numbers of breeding and transfer recommendations issued for institution, status of the recommendations)

For the AZA community:

1. An understanding of why recommendation outcomes vary across SSP and PMP programs, taxonomic groups, and life history
2. An understanding of what logistical and biological variables correlate with recommendation outcomes
3. Potential areas for improvement in the management system (e.g. for species in which biological rather than logistical variables affect breeding recommendation outcomes, directions for more in depth research)
4. A means of monitoring for the future that will allow us to track whether changes lead to improvement

The project will improve the scientific basis of recommendations, validate the existing procedures and improve program efficiency.

Project Participants: The project team is led by Lisa Faust (LPZ) and Sarah Long (PMC), and is coordinated by Melissa Theis (LPZ). The team will gather input from the PMC, the AZA Conservation and Science office and AZA program leaders. Input will be solicited at focus group meetings held at LPZ and AZA annual meetings and from an online working group of advisors.

For more information or to get involved, please contact Melissa Theis at mtheis@lpzoo.org or 312-742-8865