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CAPTURE

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DAVID JACKSON

Tell us about Conservation Ambassadors, the “Zoo to You” program and how it came about.

My dream was to create a rescue zoo where un-releasable and unwanted wild and exotic animals could have a permanent and loving home. A place where these animals would have a second chance at life by becoming ambassadors for their species through an outreach education program. Twenty-five years later, Conservation Ambassadors and “Zoo to You” has rescued hundreds of animals and educated millions of children. Some of these animals have injuries that prevent them from being released, some were confiscated by fish and wildlife as illegal pets and some are simply un-wanted exotic pets. Our zoo is different than most where animals spend their lives inside. At “Zoo to You” they get to come out, meet new people, visit new places and live an adventure everyday.

What goes into your decision to take in a rescue animal?

We ask the following: do we have the facilities, expertise, and funds to care for the animals properly and provide a permanent loving home for the rest of its life? We also try to choose animals that have the potential of becoming ambassadors. Since we are



often the “Last chance Saloon” we occasionally accept animals that will never fit into our program but we are the best option for their survival. An example of this is a young mountain lion rescued from one of the largest fires in California history. Knowing he would never become an animal we could take to school programs, we agreed to give this little cougar a home otherwise he would have been euthanized. When we rescue or accept animals we make a life long commitment to provide the best care for the life of the animal. For 26 years we have provided a permanent loving home for hundreds of

animals like Spike an alligator rescued from a crack house drug raid, a spider monkey found in an LA garbage dumpster and a blind bald eagle shot by humans.

Is there a special rescue story you can share with us?

25 years ago California fish and game called me about providing care and a permanent home for a rescued young spider monkey. Maya was found in a Los Angeles garbage dumpster very sick and nearly dead by animal control. She was permanently deformed and only a third the size of other spider monkeys. She required almost 6 months of intensive care.

Like many of the animals we adopt, she was probably the victim of the illegal wildlife pet trade. With much love and care she made progress daily, and would sit in my lap while I worked on the computer in the office. Once she was healthy and strong enough we introduced her to her new friends at the zoo. Maya has become one of our greatest animal ambassadors, and visits schools almost daily so we can share her story. There is no better way to inspire children to protect wildlife than to connect them with our animal ambassadors.

What changes have you noted in the last few years for protecting exotic animals? ?

The biggest change we have seen in the last 5 years is the social media “group think” culture. Because of social media every one has an opinion and every one's opinion matters even if they have no understanding or background on the subject. Expertise is no longer required to shape public opinion. This has created a complete misunderstanding of animal rights vs. animal welfare. This new phenomena can make it difficult for us to share our animals with the public to create a much needed connection to nature at a time when it is critical for saving wildlife.

Is there one person or a mentor who has been influential in your life?

Yes, Jack Hanna, Director Emeritus of the Columbus Zoo and Aquarium. The public knows Jack for his contributions to wildlife and conservation but what they don't know is his equal contributions to humanity. I have had the privilege of knowing Jack for over a quarter century and have traveled the world with him. I've witnessed entire villages greet him with respect and gratitude for what he has done for them and the places they live. I aspire to be half the human Jack is.



David with Jack Hanna



What is the best advice you have received?

The best advice in life, love and business has been to give more than you take.

What is your favorite spot in the world?

Washington, California on the Yuba River. This is where I grew up camping with my family and found a connection to nature. I've been camping here for over 40 years now with my children and their families. It has miraculously been left unchanged.

What are you most proud of?

I am lucky and blessed because I visit the same schools year after year and I get to see the kids grow up and become heroes' for conservation.

In addition to cash donations, are there other ways we can get involved with Conservation Ambassadors?

S? So many ways, your imagination is the limit. You can bring your personal talents to the zoo. As an example right now we have an artist creating our set design for an upcoming wildlife show at the State Fair. We have volunteers of all ages. On the weekends a dad brings his 7-year-old daughter to help trim the trees and bushes around the animal's homes. We have college interns from all over the States that spend their vacations learning how to become animal keepers. You're never too far away, these days you can help from your home miles away with social media support.

Learn more about David & Conservation Ambassadors at www.conservationambassadors.org

