

Foreword

For young people living in cities, zoos and aquariums are often their first contact with nature. If we consider that more than 600 million visitors pass through the gates of zoos throughout the world, we will quickly realize the immense potential these institutions have to become the incubators of the conservationists of tomorrow.

Zoos are vital in communicating conservation and educating the general public. They also conduct research, and generate and disseminate information and knowledge about natural systems, as well as the species that inhabit them. Thus, they enhance too our understanding of the components of biodiversity and their interactions, one of the key areas of IUCN's work.

Modern conservation zoos build capacity, and transfer technology to colleagues all over the world, to ensure the longer term contribution of zoos to biodiversity conservation, while also fostering a spirit of collaboration and cooperation much needed in our troubled world. They gather financial support for conservation in the field, which demonstrates the commitment of urban populations to maintaining the wild areas of the Earth.

Catalysts for Conservation was a very appropriate title for the symposium held in London in February 2004, on which this book is based. As a vehicle for conservation zoos play a key role in forging global communities for conservation of biodiversity and sustainable development for people. By using their skills and resources they can advocate and influence the attitudes of people to conservation.

Zoos are fun! Yet in reaching out to a significant portion of the population, zoos can also provide a means for education that no other conservation organizations have. When zoo-based and non-zoo-based organizations join their efforts, their outreach can push the conservation agenda far beyond the already important "understanding biodiversity" into the realms that link this understanding to the very human concerns of sustainable livelihoods, social equity, conservation incentives, and strengthening international agreements. All of these are key areas in IUCN's mission.

Whether by themselves or by forging alliances with other organizations, zoos are moving beyond their traditional roles as simply collections of wild species “*ex situ*”; that is, far from their natural ecosystems. In recent years we have seen zoos support and implement field conservation projects “*in situ*” that are complemented by the research and activities carried out back home. In doing so they provide a window to the natural world which can empower visitors to take positive action for nature and people, to the benefit of both. I am sure that as we move further into the 21st century the value of zoos supporting conservation in the field will grow significantly.

This book should act in itself as a catalyst and spur to define a “blueprint” and benchmark standards for 21st century zoos. It will be valuable to people working in zoos who share a powerful conservation vocation and to their colleagues and partners in the wider conservation movement.

Achim Steiner

Executive Director, United Nations Environment Program
(formerly Director General, IUCN – The World Conservation Union)