

## **European Species Initiative Ostrava Workshop Minutes**

**Date:** June 7, 2024

**Location:** EAZA Conservation Forum 2024, Ostrava

**Facilitator:** Andrea Bračko

**Workshop Title:** Protecting European Species and Engaging Local Communities

This workshop, part of the European Species Initiative (ESI), focused on the pivotal role zoos and aquariums play in the conservation of European species. The workshop aimed to foster collaboration, conservation of native species, and community engagement while offering resources and support to stakeholders.

### **Part 1 Understanding the European Species Initiative and Zoo Projects**

#### **Participants:**

50 experts from various zoos and conservation organizations attended the workshop to exchange knowledge and develop new strategies for conserving European species.

#### **Presentations:**

- Alessandro Di Marzio, Riga Zoo - Riga ZOO native amphibian conservation project
- Friederike von Houwald, Zoo Bern - Beetles – how to challenge your life
- Valentina Isaja, Zoom Torino - Pollinators guardians: the bee friends project
- Anna Kazazou, Attica Zoo - Mediterranean Monk Seal project

After the presentations, interactive booths were organized where participants could speak directly with the presenters, going deeper into specific topics such as engaging local communities and forming partnerships.

### **Summary of Discussions**

#### **Riga Project**

The discussion highlighted the importance of engaging local volunteers and students, both of whom bring valuable manpower and fresh perspectives. Their involvement, alongside the critical role of veterinarians, is essential for monitoring the health and welfare of the animals in both captive and wild settings. However, the project faces significant challenges related to staffing, particularly in retaining scientific and educational staff, as well as students, which affects long-term sustainability.

A recurring theme was the need for credibility and transparency in conservation projects to avoid greenwashing. Participants stressed that telling a true, compelling story is key to building trust and support from the public and corporate partners. This ties into the broader challenge of engaging with companies: it is crucial to clearly articulate "what's in it for them" in terms of corporate responsibility or improving public perception.

Funding remains a major hurdle, particularly in securing support from the European Commission (EC). Participants noted that the process of obtaining EC grants is difficult, and this often slows down project progress. Additionally, there are frustrations with the IUCN evaluation system, as delays and incorrect assessments can hinder conservation efforts. In contrast, the Green Status was recommended as a more effective and timelier tool for tracking species recovery.

When starting a project, it's crucial not to spread efforts too thin. Instead, teams should focus on a solid foundation, beginning with manageable tasks like monitoring species and gradually building from there. While corporate and national recognition is important, so is defining a clear focus to ensure that the project stays on track.

The group discussed the potential of a multinational approach to conservation, emphasizing the benefits of cross-border collaboration, especially for shared species and habitats. However, workload management was noted as a critical challenge, particularly when it comes to the complex and time-consuming reporting requirements.

The conservation of noisy species also poses a unique challenge, especially in urban settings where conflicts with residents can arise. Finding solutions to mitigate such issues was identified as important to maintaining public support.

In closing, participants underscored the significance of building a strong network and fostering social connections, both nationally and internationally. These networks are critical for sharing knowledge, gaining recognition, and collaborating on future projects.

### **Torino Project**

The Torino Project emphasized the importance of marketing and promotion in boosting visibility and engagement. A highlight was the pollinator garden, where participants' names were displayed on insect houses, fostering a sense of community. The project's focus on pollinators, particularly bees, led to an increase of 11,000 visitors, largely due to workshops, organized tours, and citizen science activities. A creative initiative, the "Seeding Game", allowed visitors to participate by throwing seed-filled balls in designated areas, actively contributing to sowing efforts.

To gauge the project's impact, tracking digital material downloads and analyzing which resources were most accessed was suggested as a valuable measure of outreach. A citizen science expert was hired to oversee the project's interactive components, ensuring effective community involvement. A key practical activity involved planting pollinator-friendly vegetation tailored to different regions, depending on the species of pollinators being attracted. However, several challenges were noted. The biggest issue revolved around farmers and land cultivation practices, particularly the use of pesticides. The solution proposed was fostering collaboration with local farmers and organizations, ensuring that conservation activities were aligned with agricultural interests from the outset. Another significant issue was the presence of food in bee areas, which attracted the wrong kind of attention. The solution involved restricting "sweet food" in these spaces. There was also a taxonomy challenge: the need for plant and insect experts to properly identify species was complicated by NGOs' concerns over traditional entomology practices, which sometimes involve sacrificing insects for accurate identification. This led to uncertainty over whether the plants and insects in the area were truly native.

Farmers' resistance to "overgrown" plants was another issue, with the solution focusing on maintaining a balance between aesthetic preferences and biodiversity goals.

Several key questions were raised and addressed:

- Additional staff requirements: Three education staff, one communication staff, and one zoo staff member for insect husbandry.
- Funding sources: Private regional organizations and foundations, not from zoo funding.
- Seed selection: Native species are prioritized. Although seeds are currently purchased, future efforts will involve gardening native plants and collecting seeds in-house.
- Visitor engagement: Visitors respond positively to the bees, showing interest in the project.
- Species focus: Currently, the project targets general pollinators, but the next steps involve identifying specific species of plants and insects, creating corridors for metapopulations, and focusing on more targeted species conservation (strategic planning).

The overarching goal of the project is to plant native species, improve vegetation, and enrich biodiversity in the area. This requires gathering data on plant-insect interactions, particularly as there is no historical data available on which plants local pollinators prefer.

Looking ahead, the project's next steps include:

- Pollen research and understanding plant preferences.
- Expanding from the current nine monoculture vegetation types to introduce new native seeds.
- Providing not only plants but also nesting places to support pollinator populations more holistically.

## **Bern Project**

The Bern Project focused on addressing common misconceptions about zoos and their role in conservation. A key challenge identified was the belief that zoos are not essential for nature protection, with critics arguing that animals taken from the wild often become unsuitable for reintroduction or research. To counter this, zoos must showcase their contributions to both habitat research and breeding knowledge, especially for smaller or overlooked species, not just large mammals.

A significant part of the discussion centered around engaging politicians. For any project to succeed, it is crucial to find a way into the minds of local authorities. Political recognition should be seen as an official goal, and building relationships with government figures is essential, particularly if there is a lack of political will. Participants suggested starting by building a single connection and expanding influence from there.

Effective planning is essential for a successful project, especially when facing limited staff capacity. Zoos often struggle with this, as staff members are already busy with daily operations. The recommendation is to carefully assess the human resources available and plan in advance who will handle different parts of the project. Monitoring released animals and ensuring there's a strategy for each step of the process should be part of the formal action plan.

Another crucial consideration is species selection. Participants discussed how the decision of which species to focus on should be made thoughtfully, considering the legal frameworks that differ between regions. For instance, species that are illegal to capture in one district might be permitted elsewhere. Zoos should also focus on "flagship species" that attract attention while working to protect less recognized species. It was advised to prepare expertise on keeping and breeding certain species before the action plan is fully developed so that knowledge gaps don't hinder progress when the species is ready for conservation efforts.

Participants emphasized the importance of sharing best practices and even mistakes among zoos.

This is vital for mutual learning and for enhancing conservation outcomes across institutions.

Additionally, while scientists may excel in taxonomy and monitoring, they often have less expertise in the practical aspects of animal husbandry. Cooperation between scientists and zoo professionals was highlighted as a key to success.

There were challenges noted in building cooperation with NGOs. Initial tensions and misunderstandings can occur, so it's recommended not to rely on immediate support from these organizations. Collaborative efforts should be gradually nurtured.

The project's scope should either focus on a specific species or a particular environment to begin with and then expand over time. Importantly, projects should also plan their official end goal to ensure they reach meaningful, recognized outcomes.

## **Part 2 Fostering Effective Collaboration with Stakeholders**

In the second session, participants discussed these topics such as Differentiating Stakeholders and Beneficiaries, Defining Project Partners, and Target Groups. The discussions aimed to answer three critical questions:

- Who do we need for conservation projects?
- Why do we need them?
- How should we approach them?

Participants worked in groups to develop conservation project plans focused on European species. The objective was to identify relevant stakeholders and devise effective strategies for zoo collaboration with these groups. The discussions proved highly productive, with four groups of participants creating well-thought-out project plans.

The group collaboration provided insights into successful strategies for European species conservation within zoo settings, particularly focusing on engaging local communities. Participants also enhanced their skills in project design, stakeholder engagement, and collaborative planning, leaving them better equipped to initiate or improve their own conservation efforts.

### **Concept Projects Developed**

- Human-bird conflict in urban areas
- Cash for *Epidalea calamita* (Natterjack toad)
- All you need is dung
- Protection of Grey partridge (in Strohgäue region)
- Conservation of biodiversity in open landscapes with Grey partridge as a flagship species

These concept projects will be published separately and are intended to serve as practical examples for others embarking on similar conservation initiatives.

**Next Steps:**

All feedback, ideas, and suggestions gathered during the workshop will be used to refine and expand the European Species Conservation Starter Kit.

It is planned that species in an upcoming workshop at the EAZA annual conference in Leipzig we address two further action items that were identified at Helsinki workshop: reasons for zoo involvement in conservation efforts and criteria for prioritizing