

Minutes of the European Species Initiative (ESI) Workshop

EAZA Annual Conference 2024

Date: Saturday, 12 October 2024

Location: Leipzig, Germany

Facilitators:

- Andrea Bračko, Zagreb Zoo
- Tomislav Krizmanić, Zagreb Zoo
- Dijana Beneta, Zagreb Zoo

Workshop title: *Progress and Future Plans: Enhancing Conservation Efforts for European Species*

1. Welcome and Introduction

The workshop started with a presentation by Andrea Bračko from Zagreb Zoo, who provided an overview of the **European Species Initiative (ESI)**. The ESI aims to engage European zoos and aquaria in the conservation of local species by offering practical support, resources, and fostering greater collaboration among institutions. By building strong partnerships, the initiative seeks to address the conservation challenges unique to European species and enhance efforts to protect Europe's biodiversity.

The **primary goals of the ESI** include:

- Actively involving European zoos and aquaria in local species conservation.
- Supporting institutions, particularly smaller zoos and aquaria, by providing the tools necessary for effective contribution to conservation efforts.

Approximately 30 participants attended the workshop, working in four groups.

2. Summary of Previous Workshops

An overview of the workshops held as part of the ESI was provided:

- **1st Conference – Albufeira (September 2022):**

A poll was conducted to identify key conservation challenges faced by zoos and aquaria. The results were used to start the creation of the "European Species Conservation Starter Kit" - toolkit designed to support zoos and aquaria with practical steps and strategies for contributing to local species conservation.

- **2nd Conference – Helsinki (September 2023):**

Work continued on the Starter Kit, with ongoing refinement based on feedback from the

previous workshop. The Starter Kit aims to provide practical guidance for zoos and aquaria starting conservation projects.

- **3rd Conference – Ostrava (June 2024):**

The focus of this workshop was Fostering Effective Collaboration with Stakeholders.

Participants worked in groups to develop conservation project plans focused on European species, with a key objective of identifying relevant stakeholders and devising strategies for effective zoo and aquaria collaboration with these groups. The discussions were highly productive, with four participant groups presenting well-structured conservation project plans.

Additionally, an unexpected positive outcome of this conference was the development of a LIFE application on pollinator conservation, involving eight zoos and two universities, which was seen as a major achievement, although not originally planned.

3. Workshop Focus: Species Prioritization and Zoo and aquaria Involvement

Workshop had two key objectives:

Species Prioritization: Helping zoos and aquaria prioritize species for conservation.

Zoo and aquaria Involvement: Providing strategies for increasing zoo and aquaria participation in local conservation efforts.

Part I – Prioritization of Conservation Projects and Species

Presentation by Karoline Albig (Zoo Halle):

Karoline presented their process of developing The Conservation Strategy with the stress on criteria for Selection of species and criteria on Selection of projects.

Scenario-Based Group Exercise:

Participants were divided into groups and tasked with prioritizing species in fictional scenarios, using the provided criteria. They were asked to justify their decisions and explain the most influential factors.

Each group presented their prioritization results, with justifications and explanation of the key criteria used.

Results:

This exercise required participants to analyze complex conservation scenarios and make prioritization decisions under resource constraints. Across four diverse cases, participants prioritized species based on ecological urgency (IUCN status), feasibility of action, and potential long-term impact.

In Scenario 1, the small mammal (European hamster) was favored over a high-profile large carnivore due to lower costs and greater feasibility, with a strong argument for reallocating saved resources toward habitat improvement.

In Scenario 2, the group chose the lesser-known but threatened Balkan terrapin over the charismatic puffin, emphasizing local relevance, education potential, and a shift away from popularity-driven decisions.

Scenario 3 highlighted a preference for local, independent projects (Pyrenean desman) over larger collaborative ones, due to manageability, community connection, and staff capacity.

Scenario 4 showed a willingness to take on breeding challenges (European mink) in favor of real-world reintroduction potential, suggesting that impact on wild populations was more important than ease of success in captivity.

A key conclusion across all groups was that ethical responsibility and local engagement often outweigh public appeal, and that prioritization should be criteria-based, transparent, and adaptable to changing conditions. The exercise demonstrated the importance of strategic focus and institutional self-awareness when planning conservation actions.

Part II – Reasons for Zoo and aquaria Involvement in Conservation

Presentation by Dobromir Borislavov (Sofia Zoo):

Dobromir shared insights from Sofia Zoo's conservation efforts, highlighting the benefits and challenges of integrating conservation into zoo operations.

Group Exercise: Zoologists vs. Directors:

Participants were divided into two groups—zoologists developed pitches for conservation projects, focusing on the benefits of zoo and aquaria involvement, while directors identified potential challenges and concerns.

The groups presented their findings, identifying both benefits and potential obstacles.

Results:

The exercise revealed distinct but complementary viewpoints between zoologists and directors regarding the implementation of conservation projects in zoos. Zoologists emphasized the broad institutional benefits of conservation work, including species preservation, public education, institutional visibility, access to external funding, and stronger partnerships. Their pitches showed that even small-scale projects can have significant local and reputational impact.

Directors, however, highlighted practical constraints and strategic risks—such as misalignment with existing collection plans, limited space and resources, lack of staff expertise, and concerns about long-term sustainability.

Conclusion was the importance of aligning conservation initiatives with the zoo's core strategy, available capacities, and communication efforts. A recurring theme was the need for internal collaboration between departments to address concerns early and build realistic, well-supported project proposals. The exercise underscored the value of mutual understanding: zoologists must anticipate operational constraints, while directors should stay open to conservation-driven innovation.

4. Next Steps

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

The feedback, ideas, and suggestions gathered during the workshop will be used to refine and expand the **European Species Conservation Starter Kit**. Future updates will be provided on the initiative's webpage and through the mailing list.

Contact Information:

For further inquiries or to register for future workshops, participants were encouraged to contact:

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