

MINUTES OF THE EUROPEAN SPECIES INITIATIVE (ESI) WORKSHOP

EAZA Conservation Forum 2026

Date: 22 May 2026

Location: Kronberg, Germany

Workshop title

Do we have what it takes? Building institutional capacity for conservation

Facilitators

Tomislav Krizmanić, Zagreb Zoo

Ana Milković Opašić, Zagreb Zoo

Participants

29 participants from 25 institutions

Workshop goals

The workshop aimed to help participants:

- identify where conservation work in their institution depends on individuals and where it is supported by institutional structures;
- understand four key areas of institutional capacity and apply them to their own context;
- identify one realistic institutional improvement that could strengthen conservation work.

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

Tomislav Krizmanić opened the workshop by introducing the European Species Initiative (ESI).

ESI supports European zoos and aquariums working on native species conservation through practical tools, peer learning and capacity building. It particularly supports institutions that are beginning their conservation work or have limited resources for large-scale projects.

The workshop focused on the practical question of what institutions need in order to sustain conservation activities over time. Rather than discussing what conservation is, the session explored how institutions can create the conditions that allow conservation work to continue.

UNDERSTANDING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

Institutions may have good ideas and motivated people, but conservation projects can stall when they depend too heavily on one individual, lack formal support or lose momentum when priorities change.

The central question was therefore not only *What should we do?*, but also:

What does it take for this work to continue?

Participants discussed four interconnected areas of institutional capacity:

- **Knowledge and skills** – ensuring that expertise is documented, shared and transferred;
- **Organisation and roles** – defining responsibilities and embedding conservation duties within institutional structures;
- **Resources and time** – allocating appropriate budgets and protected working time;
- **Continuity and support** – ensuring management support and effective handover processes.

Conservation activities often begin with one motivated person. For them to continue over time, knowledge, responsibilities, time and organisational support gradually need to become embedded within the institution.

INDIVIDUAL EXERCISE: CONSERVATION ACTIVITY ANALYSIS

Participants completed a 15-minute individual exercise focused on one conservation activity from their own institution.

Rather than evaluating project success, the exercise focused on operational dependencies and the question:

Does this activity depend on a person or on the organisation?

Participants worked through five steps:

1. Situation selection

Participants selected one concrete example: an existing activity, an activity that was struggling or had stopped, or an idea that had not yet been started.

2. Retention risk

Participants considered:

If you left tomorrow, would this activity continue?

Possible answers were Yes / Probably / Uncertain / No.

3. Capacity storage mapping

Participants assessed where different parts of the activity were currently “stored”:

Area	Mostly in people Shared Organised in institution
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Knowledge and skills	
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Roles and responsibilities	
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Time and resources	
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Support and continuity	
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4. Fragility diagnosis

Participants identified the main vulnerability affecting the activity, such as dependence on one

person, unclear responsibility, lack of allocated time, insufficient management support or unclear processes.

5. Realistic improvement

Each participant identified one realistic, small operational improvement that could be implemented within the next 6–12 months.

GROUP EXERCISE: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Participants then worked in small groups of two to three people for a 30-minute comparative exercise.

The aim was to compare individual examples and identify broader patterns across institutions.

The group exercise followed four steps:

1. Case sharing

Each participant briefly presented their selected conservation activity.

2. Comparative discussion

Groups discussed which operational problems were similar, which challenges or structures were different, and which aspects already depended successfully on the institution rather than on an individual.

3. Pattern identification

Each group identified one shared pattern representing either a common structural vulnerability or an institutional success factor.

4. Root cause and action

For the selected pattern, groups discussed why it occurred and proposed one realistic institutional change that could be implemented within the next 6–12 months.

CONCLUSION

The workshop concluded with a shared recognition that conservation activities may start with individual motivation, but their long-term continuity depends on institutional structures.

Three key messages emerged:

- **Structures sustain conservation work.** Activities are more resilient when knowledge, responsibilities and resources are embedded within the institution.
- **Small changes matter.** Realistic organisational improvements can strengthen conservation work without requiring major structural reform.
- **Continuity must be planned.** Institutions need to consider what allows conservation activities to continue when staff, priorities or circumstances change.

The central question participants were encouraged to take back to their institutions was:

What allows this work to continue without relying on a single person?

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