

EUROPEAN SPECIES INITIATIVE (ESI) WORKSHOP OUTPUTS

EAZA Conservation Forum 2026

Kronberg, Germany

Workshop title

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

This document summarises the main patterns and practical ideas identified during the workshop exercises.

Participants analysed conservation activities from their own institutions and considered where those activities depended primarily on individuals and where they were supported by institutional structures.

The discussion focused on four areas:

- knowledge and skills;
- organisation and roles;
- resources and time;
- continuity and support.

COMMON INSTITUTIONAL VULNERABILITIES

Across the participating institutions, several recurring structural challenges were identified.

Knowledge concentrated in individuals

Important project knowledge, technical expertise, husbandry information and external contacts were often held by one or a small number of staff members.

This creates a risk of losing institutional knowledge when employees change roles or leave the organisation.

Lack of clear processes and protected time

Many conservation activities lacked formal procedures or clearly allocated working time.

As a result, conservation work was sometimes carried out alongside regular duties rather than being recognised as part of normal institutional operations.

Limited financial support

A lack of dedicated funding and insufficient financial planning were identified as significant constraints.

In some cases, this also limited the possibility of employing staff with dedicated conservation responsibilities.

Short-term organisational priorities

Participants noted that institutions may prioritise immediate and visible results, while long-term conservation programmes require sustained support, continuity and planning.

LESSONS FROM INDIVIDUAL CONSERVATION ACTIVITIES

The individual exercises highlighted several practical examples of structural vulnerability.

Dependence on key individuals

Some conservation programmes depended heavily on one or two people who held most of the knowledge, contacts or operational responsibility.

The departure of these individuals could therefore threaten the continuity of the entire activity.

Unclear procedures and handovers

Some breeding and reintroduction activities faced uncertainty because husbandry protocols, processes or responsibilities had not been sufficiently documented or transferred between staff.

Complexity of multi-partner projects

Activities involving zoos, universities, government authorities or other partners sometimes stalled because responsibilities and communication structures had not been clearly defined.

PRACTICAL IMPROVEMENTS PROPOSED FOR THE NEXT 6–12 MONTHS

Participants identified a range of realistic institutional actions.

Document and share knowledge

Suggested actions included:

- establishing clear procedures for documenting project information;
- storing relevant files on shared institutional systems;
- including documentation and reporting responsibilities within staff roles;
- assigning responsibility for maintaining project records.

Distribute responsibilities

Participants suggested:

- involving more staff members in key conservation activities;
- sharing breeding, husbandry, monitoring and data responsibilities;
- reducing dependence on a single specialist.

The aim is to ensure that the departure of one person does not result in the loss of the entire activity.

Strengthen external partnerships

Suggested actions included:

- establishing longer-term collaborations with universities;
- using student capacity and research skills strategically;
- cooperating with neighbouring zoological institutions;
- establishing regular communication with government authorities and other partners.

Secure time and resources

Participants proposed:

- creating dedicated budget lines for conservation activities;
- formally allocating staff time;
- clarifying project timelines and expectations with external partners before committing institutional resources.

Create lasting institutional assets

Participants also discussed ways of turning short-term conservation activities into more permanent institutional resources, for example through:

- long-term education programmes;
- permanent interpretation or exhibition elements;
- institutional procedures or materials that remain in use beyond an individual project.

OVERALL WORKSHOP MESSAGE

A conservation activity often starts because one person cares enough to make it happen.

For it to become resilient, however, the institution needs to gradually take ownership of the knowledge, responsibilities, time, resources and continuity that allow the work to continue.

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

What would allow this conservation work to continue if the person currently driving it were no longer there?