

Institutional Collection Plans

Why Do You Have that Species?

By Stacey Johnson

In casual conversation, few curators hesitate before reeling off half a dozen, or more, good answers to that question. They know the species' status in the wild, natural history, Species Survival Plan® Program priorities, ecological significance, conservation story, charismatic appeal and its potential to generate merchandise sales in the gift shop. Yet many struggle to prepare and use a systemic, effective institutional collection plan other than to comply with accreditation requirements.

It is precisely because the choice of species has such far-reaching consequences throughout our institution that establishing and reviewing an institutional collection plan (ICP) is a core accreditation standard. Setting up a good ICP should be a thoughtful, disciplined activity that has a constructive impact on the zoo or aquarium's mission, reputation, operations and income rather than an exercise in frustration. Therefore, to explain it as a modern zoological best practice and to align ICPs with the goals of Association of Zoos and Aquariums' cooperatively managed SSP Programs, the Wildlife Conservation and Management Committee has drafted institutional collection planning guidelines to be available in the AZA Accreditation Resource Center. The expectation is to strive for continual improvement in management of animal populations for individual zoos and aquaria, promote sustainable SSP populations across the Association, and encourage prioritization of species based on objective criteria. The hope is to make this key curatorial prerogative a satisfying, rewarding experience and prevent its becoming a tedious chore.

The point of an ICP is to create a living document that addresses the purposes, considerations and processes that systematically define and inform decisions. Its details should accurately reflect interaction with other institutional plans and objectives (e.g., education, conservation, research, strategic and master plans). As part of the AZA-accreditation program, an emphasis on plans that include objectives, goals, tasks and review is intentional and systemic. All of an institution's program documents and plans should connect with and inform one another, and the ICP is no exception. It is no accident that Standard 1.3.1, requiring an ICP, is at the front of the book. The ICP should be the framework to which all the others are attached. It should reflect the member organization's mission and purposes for its resident animals and ought to include a statement of institutional vision and mission.

No two ICPs will have identical priorities, organization or appearance. They should be as unique as our individual organizations. However, core components to strengthen every ICP should include objective species selection criteria and considerations, an appropriately simple species assessment process and a concise plan document. Regular review is required, as well.

This article began with the idea that there are good, known, available reasons for why species are managed, or excluded, in AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums. Using that knowledge to make informed, documented strategic decisions for our organizations is what a good ICP facilitates.

The first step is to establish species selection criteria and considerations so knowledge and expertise can be consistently and objectively applied. Selection criteria are the categories of decisions that lead to the

ultimate choice to include, maintain, exclude, or remove a species from the collection. They generally answer the “What?” and “Why?” questions of managing a species. Considerations are the variables and filters that may be applied within each criterion. The questions “How?,” “Where?,” and “When?” are usually covered by the considerations.

A general criterion example could be purpose, setting up the opportunity for considerations to include things like conservation, education, recreation and science. More specifically, welfare assurance is another example of a selection criterion that can be connected to considerations of physical environment, choice, behavior, diet, self-maintenance, life stages and others. A third example, not intrinsically linked to animal care but no less important, is cost/benefit analysis with considerations such as acquisition and husbandry costs, financial value added, housing costs, guest experience and organizational mission advancement.

Keeping in mind that although individualism is a key strength of the zoo and aquarium community, the ICP selection criteria should contain AZA cooperative species management programs. Zoo and aquarium participation in Species Survival Plans®, studbooks and other programs is the cornerstone of their ability to manage demographically and genetically healthy populations, and all AZA-accredited organizations and certified related facilities are expected to actively collaborate in animal management. While a prescribed number of programs cannot be dictated, each institution should carefully weigh its ability to exert the most positive influence for program species that fit its mission and vision.

There are no firm rules for the number or format of selection criteria and considerations, except perhaps the KIS (Keep It Simple) principle. Another thing to remember is that when reviewing the plan, it might be necessary to amend the criteria and considerations right along with the species goals. Knowing when to be flexible is as important as following the prescribed plan.

Next comes a process for consistent application of the criteria and considerations to each species. The goal is to establish a method that works well for the organization to define and consistently assess criteria, and document the results. Using a SMART goals method (in which each one is made specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-sensitive) can actually simplify the process while increasing its likelihood of achieving them.

The process, through rational choices, should guide the users to a reasonable outcome. Curatorial staff drive institutional collection planning but including leaders from as many other departments as are touched by the decisions will provide valuable perspective and a more cohesive approach. The chief executive officer/director is ultimately accountable for the collection and all animal transactions (Accreditation Standard 6.4); so it is strongly recommended that he or she endorse the ICP and ICP process prior to its implementation.

That being said, the simplest method is still usually the best. Be sure to incorporate all the defined selection criteria but stay clear, concise and consistent in procedure and documentation. The method should fit the size and personality of the organization. Decision trees, flow charts, numerical rankings, cross-referenced matrices and plain old lists are just a few of the methodologies that are successfully in use today. Find a style that is most appropriate for the size of your zoo or aquarium and the complexity of the decisions being made.

A final note on process: a good ICP is objective in practice but leaves room for subjective choices. Science is a core tenet of our profession, but art has a valuable role to play. It is perfectly acceptable to identify a suite of scientific reasons for including (or excluding) a species but still recognize that a donor, the marketing department, the chief executive officer—or any other stakeholder who influences the choice—has a good personal reason to add (or remove) it. Building a rigid, purely logical process is not the goal. Instead, a successful ICP is one that conducts reasonable and comprehensible planning for the benefit of the entire organization.

Rolling the concepts and the process into a useful document is the final piece of this puzzle. As with the other parts, clarity and consistency are critical to that result. An ICP document that reflects institutional culture and objectives is ideal, especially when it clearly demonstrates thoughtful decision-making. Still, ICP documents are generally expected to include several key headings. They include present in-house population numbers for each species alongside target population numbers. Short- and long-term goals for the species and relevant background and descriptive information such as International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List™ status and AZA program participation are also among the desirable column headings.

Some flexibility in the layout or format of the ICP document may be a good idea, as it will be viewed, consulted and used by a variety of audiences. For example, the detail needed for routine curatorial use would be quite different than the version given to an organization's board of directors. Some institutions may prefer a table versus narrative format or geographic rather than taxonomic organization. Electronic links to other plans and documents embedded within the ICP can save space and allow for summarized versions. Once again, an ICP's unique design and effectiveness is the prerogative of the organization writing it.

At just over four pages in length, the ICP Guidelines that will be available are not a difficult read. Most readers will find that their own thinking is validated in them. The hope in providing the guidelines is, first, to clarify the Accreditation Commission's expectations of an ICP. Second is to encourage managers to expand how they think about collection planning; and, finally, to remind all members that sustaining AZA's SSP Programs is a responsibility we all share—and that it is achievable.

The ICP is a core requirement of AZA Accreditation because modern zoological practice calls for management that goes out of its way to plan for success. Far from being extra burden, added for its own sake, a good ICP should crystallize existing ideas and help curators marshal resources and support to bring them to fruition. Crafting and utilizing such an ICP should enable practitioners to implement their best ideas, strengthen the impact of their actions and establish a legacy for those who follow in their footsteps.

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