

Cute little baby animals - more than meets the eye!

By John Linehan/Special To The Tab
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A visit to either the Franklin Park Zoo or Stone Zoo this summer will reveal lots of cute new faces. It has been an unusually productive year at Zoo New England's institutions. The "oohs" and "ahs" are audible while mothers shepherd their offspring and teach them the requisite skills for their lives ahead. It's easy to see that these mothers revel in their maternal roles and responsibilities.

There was a time, not long ago, when even good zoos produced offspring merely for the sake of attracting visitors. As good zoos evolved, under more enlightened leadership, the realities came into focus. Unchecked reproduction of some animals and non-reproduction by others was rapidly depleting genetic diversity and in other cases leading to over-production. Surplus animals sometimes ended-up in bad situations.

This has changed dramatically. With the aid of computer modeling programs, improved animal husbandry techniques and a wildlife conservation focus, accredited zoos across the country now manage much of their animal collections as if there were no ownership. Individual animals are paired for breeding based upon their genetic background. Animal transfers between zoos are planned and carried out with well-organized master plans designed to ensure the conservation of species. As we have established husbandry techniques for successful reproduction, we have also developed a wide variety of contraceptive techniques. Each species is different physically and behaviorally. Zoo veterinarians and keepers are continuously challenged by the diversity of species' biologies. The goal of the programs is to maintain the maximum genetic variability in each of these species and then to maintain stable populations that are in balance with the space and other resources of the zoos. Today, zoos are net wildlife producers, not consumers. While some of these efforts result in reintroduction programs, most are aimed at maintaining self-sustaining captive populations and safeguarding wild population.

Our growing Mexican wolf pups at Stone Zoo are part of a successful program to re-establish this species in Arizona, New Mexico and Mexico. We have red crowned cranes at Franklin Park Zoo, which now have offspring reintroduced and migrating in Asia. There are many others, such as gorillas, giraffe, jaguar, zebra. The existence of these animals supports wild populations through education and partnerships with other zoos and conservation organizations. The organization and cooperation required to plan and enact these complex programs is carried out mainly by zoo staff volunteering their time to make the programs work. Their tireless efforts are coordinated through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and facilitated by a small group of population biologists.

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