

Zoos and wildlife conservation

By **John Linehan**/ Special To The Tab

Wednesday, January 4, 2006

It never ceases to amaze me when people appear surprised to learn how much zoos in general, and Zoo New England in particular, are doing in the conservation arena. Perhaps some people hold to the outdated perspective of zoos as purely recreational facilities. The role and function of zoos has evolved dramatically in recent years. In the past, we were animal exhibitors and wildlife consumers. Today we are net wildlife producers as well as interpreters for, and advocates of, a natural world under siege.

Zoos are uniquely positioned between the increasingly urbanized human world and the world of wildlife. We are the most effective bridge linking these two disparate worlds. The irony is, of course, that these are not two worlds at all; humans and wildlife are inhabitants of one planet and the survival of all of us is inextricably linked. The bridge we zoos create is built with informational logs and intellectual mortar provided through our exhibits, our signage and our programming. The underpinnings of the bridge lie in the creation of emotional bonds between people and animals. In establishing these bonds, the animals in our Zoos serve as ambassadors par excellence for their wild living brethren. Once established, this is a "bridge" that grows and takes on a life of its own. The challenge for zoos today lies in knowing that there is much bridge construction to be done if we are to secure a healthy future for the children and grandchildren of the Earth's current inhabitants.



John Linehan, left, and a giraffe
(photo by Stacey G. Nathanson)

The conservation projects and programs we engage in and support are either in-situ (in an animal's natural range) or ex-situ (outside an animal's natural range), or sometimes both. An example: Zoo NE staff has perfected artificial insemination techniques to produce fertile eggs from our red-crowned cranes which have then been shipped to a Russian nature reserve for hatching, rearing and release. We have supported projects around the world: we are helping to protect African Wild Dogs in Zimbabwe, training herders in Pakistan to manage their flocks to avoid snow leopard predation, and identifying prime jaguar habitat for priority protection in Guatemala. The sad truth is that these programs and projects are mere bandages to slow the bleeding.

In order to save the patient, we must connect the urban population with the natural world and ultimately find ways to change human behavior. To succeed in our mission, our ex-situ programs must replace ignorance with understanding, fear with compassion, and irreverence with respect.

If we can achieve these lofty visions, we will have a profound impact on the generations that follow us. This is a daunting task, and it will not be easy, but we must keep trying. In Margaret Mead's immortal words, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

John Linehan is president and CEO of Zoo New England, the non-profit organization which manages our two state-owned zoos, Franklin Park Zoo in Dorchester and Stone Zoo in Stoneham. He serves on several committees of the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums.