



## Conservation and Education: Inextricably Intertwined

BY JAMES DANOFF-BURG, PH.D., DIRECTOR, CONSERVATION EDUCATION DIVISION

What makes a successful conservation project? Is it enough to have thorough scientific understanding of the ecological and biological challenges facing a species or habitat? What goes into defining a project as sustainable over the long run so that species survival is guaranteed? How does human economic well-being relate to conservation success, and should it? These are questions worth asking, and ones that my team and I always consider.

Before joining San Diego Zoo Global last August, I taught conservation and education classes for 14 years at Columbia University, studied the value of urbanized green space for insect conservation in New York City, and directed an environmental restoration and poverty alleviation project in the Dominican Republic. These diverse experiences indicate to me that a conservation project is more successful when the local community is involved. By keeping a community informed and gaining its support, the most urgent conservation problems can be discussed and culturally appropriate strategies can be implemented. With the community as partners in the struggle to save endangered species, our projects are more likely to succeed.

At San Diego Zoo Global we recognize the value of education: training local people in the care and management of endangered species and their habitats is the first step, making good stewardship a way of life. We also suggest more sustainable livelihood alternatives to typical short-term destructive practices. If conservation is to succeed, people need to find new ways to support their families. In the Ebo Forest of Cameroon, many park rangers are former bushmeat hunters who are now dedicated to protecting wildlife. We also partner with local researchers and government officials to help ensure support for our field projects. Sharing and teaching about the numerous breakthroughs our researchers have accomplished with local and international conservation groups is key to our interactions.

Conservation education and skills training increase community involvement in a project and address people's day-to-day needs. Corrin LaCombe (pictured above) from our Conservation Education Division works in a remote region called Khau Ca, part of Ha Giang Province in northern Vietnam and home to one of the world's rarest primates, the Tonkin snub-nosed monkey. Corrin talks with local people to identify their needs and the hardships they face, which could affect a proposed protected area for the monkeys. She currently works with the local community to come up with appropriate and environmentally sensitive solutions to reduce these conflicts, giving people the resources they need to survive and ensuring animals will thrive in a safe and healthy ecosystem.

Many of our conservation projects have an education component, such as the one led by Russ Van Horn, Ph.D., in our Applied Animal Ecology Division, involving the conservation of Andean bears near Lambayeque, Peru. Russ has found that wood and sapote fruit harvesting are major threats to these bears because they destroy forest habitat. Samantha Young, Conservation Education research technician, works with Russ to inform the local community about these bears, the value of reforestation efforts, and the unique aspects of biodiversity in this area. She is also involved in education outreach at the community level, which builds support for our conservation efforts there.

The real long-term stewards of wildlife and natural resources are the local people living near the areas where we work as conservation biologists. These communities will persist long after we leave, and they will determine the long-term success of any conservation efforts. By considering the well-being of both animals and people in our 100-plus conservation projects around the world, the Conservation Education team is working hard to ensure that local communities are equipped with the best possible skills and knowledge—they will be at the forefront of conservation for years to come. 🌱