Recognizing Public Animal Institutions as Conservation Partners: A Visitor-Supported Funding Framework for the Zoological Community

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Public animal institutions—including zoos, aquariums, reptile facilities, wildlife parks, and other USDA-licensed exhibitors—collectively engage millions of visitors annually while contributing to conservation, education, animal care, and species preservation. Despite these contributions, there is currently no unified framework that formally recognizes these institutions as conservation partners within a dedicated conservation funding system.

Purpose: This presentation introduces a first-of-its-kind conservation funding framework designed to connect public animal visitation with measurable conservation outcomes while strengthening the long-term resilience of participating institutions.

Methods: The framework was developed through analysis of existing conservation funding models, stakeholder engagement with zoo professionals, conservation leaders, and industry representatives, and preliminary evaluation of potential implementation pathways. The model explores a visitor-supported conservation contribution associated with admissions and animal experiences rather than direct institutional expenditures, allowing facilities to participate without diverting existing operating or conservation budgets. The framework also examines equitable participation mechanisms for institutions of varying sizes, including support structures for smaller facilities and incentives that encourage continued progress toward accreditation and professional standards.

A preliminary survey of zoological, conservation, and related stakeholders indicated approximately 78% support for further exploration of the concept.

Key Outcomes and Takeaways: Attendees will gain an understanding of how a scalable, industry-wide conservation funding framework could generate measurable conservation investment, support veterinary capacity and workforce development, strengthen institution-led conservation initiatives, and improve recognition of public animal institutions as conservation partners. The presentation will also explore implementation considerations, stakeholder feedback, and opportunities for future collaboration across the zoological community.