Walking the Talk of Coexistence

By Ollie Zirbel, Coexistence Supervisor, San Diego Safari Park

Zoological facilities are often leaders in conservation, supporting wildlife and habitat protection efforts around the world. The San Diego Safari Park is recognized as a world leader in this field. Opened in 1972, the 1,800-acre park includes more than 900 acres of undeveloped land that provides habitat for over 250 species native to San Diego County.

Balancing the needs of the park's animal population with the conservation of native wildlife requires ongoing collaboration, careful management, and a commitment to coexistence. While challenging, this work is both rewarding and essential to our conservation mission.

I would like to share our experience working with a variety of native species, from mountain lions and snakes to bats and bees, with a particular focus on F307, a mountain lion that regularly frequented our property. Through the use of a defensible space strategy, we were able to "teach" her that while she could utilize the surrounding bioreserve and prey on native deer, areas near animal habitats were off limits. By strengthening this approach and maintaining consistent responses, we successfully coexisted with F307 for 18 months.

To support this effort, we utilized a variety of technologies, including drones, thermal imaging, trail cameras, and GPS collar data through partnerships with UC Davis, CDFW, and SDZWA.

This case study serves as a proof of concept for how zoological facilities can advance wildlife coexistence strategies while maintaining the safety of managed animal populations. As conservation organizations continue to expand their role in protecting biodiversity, opportunities exist to share knowledge, refine best practices, and work alongside the wildlife that called these landscapes home long before our facilities were established.