

CONSERVATION | HENRY VILAS ZOO

Zoo craft project aims to save animals

GAYLE WORLAND gworland@madison.com, 608-252-6188 Dec 27, 2015



Photos by AMBER ARNOLD — State Journal

Erin Flynn, conservation education curator at Henry Vilas Zoo, displays poaching snares collected from the Annamite mountains of Laos and Vietnam. Volunteers at the zoo convert the heavy wire into dream catchers and key chains to raise money to help save a critically endangered animal.

With wire and beads, volunteers at Henry Vilas Zoo are transforming something meant to kill wild animals into something designed to save them.

Working out of a classroom in the zoo's Discovery Center building, the volunteers run the Catching Hope program, converting deadly animal snares collected in Southeast Asian forests into one-of-a-kind key chains and decorative dream

catchers.

Profits from the sale of those items are fed back to the forest, to employ people in the border lands of Vietnam and Laos to remove even more of those poaching snares from natural animal habitats.

“What’s really, really cool about this program is that we’re the first. This is leading, cutting-edge, really fresh and fun conservation,” said Erin Flynn, the zoo’s conservation education curator, who devotes her own volunteer hours to the project.

“It’s grassroots and it’s nontraditional,” she said. “We came up with it just because we were inspired to help.”

The help centers on the saola (pronounced sow-LAH), a 200-pound, antelope-type creature that lives in the Annamite mountains of Laos and Vietnam, and is one of the most endangered mammals in the world. The saola has no value to poachers, but gets caught in their snares as “bycatch” during illegal hunts of monkeys, tigers and other animals sold on the black market.

Preservation of the saola is the focus of the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN’s) Saola Working Group, headed by Middleton High School and UW-Madison alum William Robichaud. It was a talk that Robichaud gave to Vilas Zoo volunteers that inspired them to find a way to help the elusive species.

Now an image of the two-horned saola — also called “The Last Unicorn” in a recent book by that name by author William deBuys — has become the signature graphic for Catching Hope, and appears on a tag on every volunteer-made item.

“The Saola Working Group now gets support from more than 20 zoos around the world — from Los Angeles, to London, Prague and Singapore. The smallest of them is Henry Vilas Zoo,” Robichaud wrote in an email from Laos.

“Yet HVZ has been one of our most engaged, consistent and productive zoo supporters. I call them ‘the mouse that roared.’”

The zoo volunteers’ “creativity and enthusiasm” serves as an example for other zoos, Robichaud wrote.

“Look, everyone knows that raising money for wildlife conservation (especially for a species few have heard of!) is not easy. ...If they can do it, any zoo should be able to — no excuses. They’re a great model and example,” he said.

The Vilas Zoo handicrafts are made from actual poaching snares removed from the wild. The snares — basically loops of metal cable that are rigged to trees to snag passing animals — are shipped to the U.S., then cleaned up by zoo volunteers and cut into smaller pieces for decoration and sale. The group’s efforts have now reaped close to \$5,000.

“So we’re helping the animals over there — the critically endangered saola and neighboring wildlife, including tigers and elephants, monkeys, birds, reptiles,” said Flynn, who with Robichaud recently talked about the SWG program and Catching Hope at a national conservation conference for zoos and aquariums.

“And we’re helping the local people because this is helping employ them,” Flynn said, “so they don’t have to do business with poachers, or support poachers in any way.”

The world’s remaining saola live only in forests along the Laos/Vietnam border. Since 2011, “forest guard teams” recruited from local villages and trained by the Saola Working Group and its partners have removed more than 100,000 snares, according to the SWG.

The cable used in the snares is so strong that it broke many of the tools the Vilas Zoo volunteers used to try to cut it. They've since tracked down special heavy-duty cutters and have scoured Madison to buy beads large enough to fit on the thick wire.

Elise Gorchels, one of about 10 longtime zoo volunteers who run Catching Hope, is the crafter behind many of the group's elaborate dream catchers. They and other Catching Hope merchandise sell for \$10 each, with all proceeds going to the Saola Working Group.

"Originally we also had necklaces. Apparently people don't like to wear snares around their necks, so they weren't great sellers," Gorchels said.

Since the program's start in early 2014, some 150 people have participated in Catching Hope workshops, Flynn said. In addition to many UW-Madison students who lend an hour or two to help, "We've had corporate groups, Girl Scouts, church groups, school classes, all kinds of fun stuff — really involving the community."

A group from the Powers-Knapp Scholarship Program at UW-Madison filled the Catching Hope classroom on a recent Saturday morning. Laughing, chatting and obviously enjoying the task, the scholars cut wire and beaded key chains under the supervision of longtime zoo volunteers like Meg Bowden and her 19-year-old daughter Jessie.

The mother and daughter team even takes materials home to work on them when they have time, said Bowden, a zoo volunteer for 22 years. Doing the handiwork "is incredibly relaxing," she said.

From figuring out how to re-purpose the snares to finding zoos around the country that will sell them and return 100 percent of the proceeds for conservation, "I think we've come a long way," said Jennifer Johnson, a zoo volunteer for close to six years and part of the Catching Hope team.

“It’s intended to support an animal I’ll probably never see,” Johnson said. “But they’re all important. Nobody knows about this one, so I’m glad we’re getting the word out. A little zoo and a little animal — and we’re going to make a change.”

Learn more

- To learn more about volunteering at Henry Vilas Zoo, visit www.vilaszoo.org/getinvolved
- For information on the saola, see savethesaola.org
- To purchase a Catching Hope handicraft, email hvzcatchinghope@gmail.com