

How Boise Might Help Save the 'Last Unicorn'

The plight of the saola represents a clear and present danger

By George Prentice @georgepren



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Zoo Boise Director Steve Burns holds a tangle of snare traps retrieved from the jungles of Vietnam and Laos. The traps are a deadly enemy of the incredibly rare saola (right).

Sometime this month—maybe next week, possibly the week after—someone will walk through the gates of Zoo Boise and the organization will achieve a milestone.

"We'll hit the \$2 million mark," said Zoo Boise Director Steve Burns.

"It's quite... Well, that's quite remarkable, isn't it?" he said.

The \$2 million isn't earmarked for the zoo or its exhibits, although Zoo Boise has significant needs, and its plans for growth are considerable. Instead, the \$2 million will leave Boise to fund conservation efforts across the planet in an effort to save the very species zoo attendees love to visit.

"We have to do it. Society is changing and has higher expectations," said Burns. "People ask, 'Why do we have animals at the zoo in the 21st century?' It's a good question. For us, the answer is because these animals help us generate hundreds of thousands of dollars every year to help us protect their wild counterparts and, now, we've reached \$2 million. That's our mission now."

It wasn't and isn't always the case. Many American zoos and aquariums don't collect or send funds outside their gates to help with global conservation efforts. What's more, Zoo Boise has taken the lead in what started as a controversial economic model but has resulted in a major success story. Its roots can be traced directly to Burns.

"I don't know if many people really know what a global force of nature Steve Burns is," said renowned animal biologist Dr. William Robichaud. "I've seen him speak before global organizations of zoos, and he's the guy saying, 'We need to be, foremost, conservation organizations—not just amusement parks with animals.'"

Zoo Boise's conservation efforts began about 10 years ago when Burns was thinking about leaving the zoo. He had applied for a job with a well known conservation nonprofit and when Clay Gill, then-board chairman of Friends of Zoo Boise, asked Burns why he would leave, Burns explained his passion was in conservation.

"That's when Clay Gill gave me the greatest professional gift I ever received. He said, 'If you want to focus on conservation, I'll support you,'" said Burns. "It gave me permission to think differently about the zoo. It took me a few months to wrap my head around it, and then it came to me: a quarter."

Twenty-five cents may not seem significant but, \$2 million later, it has literally saved the lives of some of our planet's most vulnerable creatures. Here's the secret: None of those 25-cent donations were voluntary. They were tacked onto the price of zoo admission. Burns said 25 cents wasn't really big enough for anyone to argue over. But, boy, it adds up fast," he added.

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Three years after the program began, the 25-cent hike became 35 cents added to each admission, then it was increased to 50 cents, where it currently stands. All revenues from Zoo Boise's popular river boat ride, income from the giraffe and sloth bear encounters, and the "zoo farm," where visitors can feed the animals, all benefit the same purpose.

"We turned the act of visiting the zoo into an act of conservation," said Burns. "You show up, you pay a conservation fee. You ride the boat; feed the giraffes, the sloth bears or llamas; you support conservation. We have a moral and ethical obligation to do something like this."

Burns said he couldn't have embarked on such a project without the "political support" of Boise Mayor Dave Bieter and the Boise City Council.

"It's not easy to send 10 percent of your money out the door," he added.

Burns is a bit of an evangelist, convincing as many as 27 other United States zoos to replicate Zoo Boise's conservation economic model. Just imagine what could happen if all zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums—there are about 200 in the U.S.—put a percentage of each admission toward conservation.

"If every one of those AZA institutions were to commit to the level of Zoo Boise—about 10 percent of our budget—that national number would be about \$500 million a year. You don't get an opportunity to create a billion dollars every two years," said Burns. "We have a large percentage of the American public coming to us; no one else is in the position that we are."

Burns himself is in a good position to bend the ears of his counterparts at other zoos: He's currently the national chairman of the board of the AZA.

It was at another organization's symposium where Burns heard a compelling story about the near-extinction of one of the planet's most elusive animals, which is sometimes called "the last unicorn."

"I heard the speaker talk about the saola, and I kept thinking, 'The saola, the saola. Where have I heard of that before?' And then it came to me: 1992," Burns said.

In 1992, a team of biologists discovered the saola—Vietnamese for "spindle horns"—deep in the forest between Laos and Vietnam, in what the World Wildlife Federation calls "one of the most spectacular zoological discoveries of the 20th century."

"It was an animal unlike any other on Earth," wrote *The New York Times'* Emily Anthes.

"Like that other one-horned beast, it stands close to being the apotheosis of the ineffable, the embodiment of magic in nature," wrote William deBuys in his book, *The Last Unicorn: A Search for One of Earth's Rarest Creatures*. "Unlike the unicorn, however, the saola is corporeal. It lives, and it can die."

The man whose story grabbed Burns' attention was Robichaud, who has spent the last 20 years in Laos tracking the saola. Robichaud is the coordinator of the International Union for Conservation of Nature Species Survival Commission Saola Working Group. He said of the 35 members of the IUCN SSC SWG—most of whom are biologists—only two of them have ever seen antelope-like animal.

"The saola is maybe the most endangered large mammal in the world," Robichaud said.



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Global Wildlife Conservation

The saola lives in the densest of jungles on the border of Vietnam and Laos. Experts believe there are as few as 70 in existence.

It is also unlike any other animal, according to biologists, as it has no close relatives. It has what is described as "a preternaturally calm disposition," and its two parallel horns appear as one when viewed from the side. It lives in the densest of jungles on the border of Vietnam and Laos. Experts believe there are as few as 70 in existence.

Though the jungles of Laos and Vietnam are home to the saola, those same jungles are also rife with danger, filled with traps to capture the many other animals that are regularly poached for black market purposes or medicines.

While the saola is not wanted or particularly needed by poachers, those traps do not discriminate and have sealed the fate of unknown numbers of the animal. Currently, the Vietnamese government employs rangers to rid the jungles of the snares and traps, giving the rangers a bonus—the equivalent of 25 cents—for each trap they retrieve.

"And that's when it hit me: 25 cents," said Burns. "If Zoo Boise has learned anything over the years, we know that you can accomplish quite a bit with 25 cents."

Every day this summer, teenagers who are part of the Zoo Teen volunteer program are fanning out across the zoo and sharing the story of the saola.

The teens carry a large wicker basket from which they pull out maps of the Laos/Vietnam region, rare photographs of the saola, and real traps and snares that have been pulled from the jungles.

"Visitors are quick to ask, 'How can I help?' Our answer is, 'Would you like to give a quarter today to pull a snare out of the wild?' We raised \$2,500 last summer. That pulled out 10,000 snares," said Burns. "The company that operates our food and gift concessions at the zoo, Service Systems Associates, just told us that they'll match all of those donations this summer. That could be \$5,000."

Robichaud said he was stunned when he heard about the Zoo Teen program and their conservation efforts focused on the saola.

"Who knows how many saola they might save? I can't wait to talk with these kids face-to-face," said Robichaud, who will make a special trip to Boise to meet with the Zoo Teen team.

Burns said Robichaud's visit will be "under the radar," and the biologist wants to keep his trip low-key. That said, Burns tells anybody who will listen that the plight of the saola represents a clear and present danger.

"The natural world is in incredibly serious trouble. Most people have no idea. By 2050, it's estimated that 30 percent of all mammals will be extinct, 45 percent of amphibians will be extinct, 15 percent of birds will be gone," said Burns. "We think we can do better, and visitors to Zoo Boise apparently think so, too."