

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

September 22, 2006

## **GROUNDBREAKING STUDY IDENTIFIES IMPACT OF ZOO AND AQUARIUM VISITS**

*New findings confirm that adult visitors gain stronger understanding of their roles in conservation and how people relate to the natural world*

**FRESNO, California** – Going to accredited zoos and aquariums in North America has a measurable impact on the conservation attitudes and understanding of adult visitors to Fresno Chaffee Zoo, according to a three-year research project released today by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA).

The groundbreaking study, “Why Zoos and Aquariums Matter: Visitor Impact Study,” details the overall impact of a zoo or aquarium visit – both immediately and in the months after the visit. It provides an analysis of how seeing wildlife at these institutions affects the way people think about conservation and their role in helping protect the environment. Details of the study will be presented on Tuesday in Tampa, Fla., during AZA’s national conference attended by zoo and aquarium professionals from across North America.

Key results of the study found that:

- Visits to accredited zoos and aquariums prompt individuals to reconsider their role in environmental problems and conservation action, and to see themselves as part of the solution.
- Visitors believe zoos and aquariums play an important role in conservation education and animal care.
- Visitors feel they experience a stronger connection to nature as a result of their visit.
- Visitors bring with them a higher-than-expected knowledge about basic ecological concepts. Zoos and aquariums support and reinforce the values and attitudes of the visitor.

“Fresno Chaffee Zoo animal habitats such as Sunda Forest, interaction with Docent volunteers at Exploration Station, and messages conveyed during our Winged Wonders bird show are just a few examples of how we affect conservation attitudes through fun, interactive ways,” stated CEO/Director Lewis Greene.

Prior to completion of this study, zoos and aquariums have primarily relied upon the insight offered by more limited studies, attendance figures and anecdotal evidence as measures of what impact they have on visitors’ attitudes, feelings and knowledge.

“The Visitor Impact Study shows that zoos and aquariums are enhancing public understanding of wildlife and the conservation of the places animals live. It validates the idea that we are having a strong impact on our visitors,” said Cynthia Vernon, of AZA’s Board of Directors and a co-principal investigator of the study.

“These results will help institutions develop even more effective exhibitions and educational programs that help connect people with nature and encourage attitude and behavioral changes that help conservation.”

Vernon is vice president of conservation programs at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

Funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and developed through partnerships among the AZA, Institute of Learning Innovation and the Monterey Bay Aquarium, the study will be used by Fresno Chaffee Zoo to better understand and predict zoo’s and aquarium’s contribution to public understanding of animals and conservation.

The study began with a comprehensive review of existing literature about the impact of zoo and aquarium visits. The literature supported the conclusion that zoos and aquariums make a difference, but most earlier research had been limited in scope in ways that did not allow the results to be applied generally across all leading zoos and aquariums.

To address this gap, AZA held a series of public forums with zoo and aquarium professionals. Drawing on feedback from these meetings, Institute for Learning Innovation researchers developed a groundbreaking series of studies to investigate specific factors that directly relate to visitor learning and behavior, and to analyze how this information can be used to further enhance visitors’ attitudes toward wildlife and nature.

Twelve AZA institutions and 1,400 visitors participated in the studies over a three-year period. Various quantitative and qualitative methods were used in the study, including written surveys, tracking studies and Personal Meaning Mapping (PMM), which was used to identify individual changes in visitors’ thinking by allowing them to respond to a series of questions prior to and after their visit.

Nearly half the individuals surveyed offered comments about the elevated awareness of their role in conservation as a direct consequence of their visit. About 40 percent commented on the important role that zoos and aquariums play in education.

A subset of the participants was called seven to 11 months after their visit to determine the impact of the visit over time. More than half of visitors were able to talk about what they learned from their previous visit, and 35% reported that the visit reinforced their existing beliefs about conservation, stewardship and love of animals.

“For the first time we have reliable data validating the positive impact zoos and aquariums have in changing visitors’ feelings and attitudes about conservation,” said AZA President and CEO Jim Maddy. “This study clearly shows that visitors believe that accredited zoos and aquariums are deeply committed to animal care and education, and that we play an important role in species conservation. These findings enhance our goal to build America’s largest wildlife conservation movement.”

The AZA institutions that participated in the studies varied in size and geographic location to ensure a representative sample. They included:

- Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum in Tucson, Arizona
- Binder Park Zoo in Battle Creek, Michigan

- Brandywine Zoo in Wilmington, Delaware
- Bronx Zoo in Bronx, New York
- Monterey Bay Aquarium in Monterey, California
- North Carolina Aquarium at Roanoke Island in Manteo, North Carolina
- Oregon Coast Aquarium in Newport, Oregon
- National Aquarium in Baltimore, Maryland
- New York Aquarium in Brooklyn, New York
- Philadelphia Zoo in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Salisbury Zoo in Salisbury, Maryland
- Florida Aquarium in Tampa, Florida

Collectively, AZA's 210 accredited zoos and aquariums reach 143 million visitors a year.

### **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR LEARNING INNOVATION**

The Institute for Learning Innovation, a not-for-profit learning research and development organization, is committed to better understanding the nature of free-choice learning and its role in a Learning Society. Its mission is to study, support and advocate for free-choice learning – learning that fulfills the life-long human quest for knowledge, understanding and personal fulfillment. The Institute was established in 1986 in Annapolis, Md.

### **ABOUT AZA**

Founded in 1924, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, education, science, and recreation. Look for the AZA logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you, and a better future for all living things. With its more than 200 accredited members, the AZA is a leader in global wildlife conservation, and your link to helping animals in their native habitats.