

Catching Hope: Re-purposed Poaching Snare Program

Henry Vilas Zoo, Madison, WI

Background: Henry Vilas Zoo

Dane County's Henry Vilas Zoo (HVZ) is a free zoo located in Madison, Wisconsin. The HVZ Education Department constantly strives for creativity and innovation in the development of its educational activities and programs. As an entirely self-funded entity, the Education Department does not receive an operating budget from the zoo's operating budget and must raise funds to support itself. In order to fulfill its mission of connecting humans to nature in a meaningful, lasting way through educational programming, as well as compete with larger organizations, it must constantly strive to create low-cost, engaging, unique, educational activities to effectively communicate its conservation-based messaging to zoo visitors. Henry Vilas Zoo staff and volunteers are passionate about conservation efforts.

Despite its limited resources (one full-time staff member and 32 docents), in 2011-2014 the HVZ Education Department reached 131,235 visitors, nearly half of which were reached directly with educational programming conducted by docents. Docents work closely with zookeepers on coordinated, thematic programming for our conservation education awareness events (International Polar Bear Day, Earth Day/Party for the Planet, International Migratory Bird Day, International Red Panda Day, African Penguin Awareness Day, and Orangutan Caring Week) throughout the year. During this timeframe, the Education Department has raised over \$15,000 for field conservation efforts around the world.

Project beginnings: The Saola and the Saola Working Group (SWG)

The saola (*Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*) is a little-known species found only in the Annamite Mountains of Laos and Vietnam. It is highly threatened by poaching and is the main focus of this program. Since being discovered in 1992, it has become critically endangered (the last step before extinction) and is now one of the most endangered mammals in the world. This calm, beautiful, 90 kg (200 pound) animal is the only species in its genetic group. It is more closely related to wild cattle than any other animal.

This species is unique for several reasons:

- Saola have no close relatives and are found in one location and habitat on Earth.
- Few people know about them and not much is currently being done to protect them; they are Asia's "modern day unicorn" because although local people occasionally see them in the forest, the Western researchers that have dedicated their lives to protecting and educating about the saola have never seen a live one in the wild!
- They are critically endangered with extinction, but can be saved if we take action.

The saola is disappearing mainly due to extreme levels of poaching of animals that share its habitat and have value in the illegal black market. The saola itself is not the target because too few remain to be worth money in the black market. It is being discarded as bycatch by poachers targeting other valuable species in its ecoregion such as the tigers, elephants, and various monkey, deer, bird, and reptile species.

Not being actively hunted may help us save the saola. If poaching levels can be reduced, the species' prospects are improved because its habitat remains intact and unthreatened by mining, logging, or human encroachment.

The IUCN Saola Working Group (SWG) has been working hard to train the upcoming generation of future political leaders and reserve managers in ecology and land management techniques, and has encouraged Laotian national pride for this iconic animal. Upon learning that the saola is unique to their homeland and is the only common animal name derived from the Lao language, local people have agreed to stop hunting the saola. With these initiatives in place, the SWG believes that if the saola can be preserved until the next generation of managers are established, the saola can survive. They identify poaching snares as the major threat to saola survival and removal of poaching snares in their environment as the top priority to ensure saola populations.

Project Details: Catching Hope Re-purposed Poaching Snares

When William Robichaud, the coordinator of the SWG, visited HVZ in early 2014, none of us had heard of the saola. An unlikely partnership was struck when zoo staff and docents felt a connection to the saola and the efforts of the SWG. We decided to create and sell handcrafted items made from collected poaching snares to both educate the public and raise funds for conservation. Now, SWG sends us poaching snares collected from the saola's habitat which we clean, turn into handcrafted goods, and sell and use as an education piece for the public. All items are handcrafted at the zoo by docents, and we try to incorporate all parts of the snare, including toggles and ties. Profit from craft sales is sent to the SWG to help saola field conservation efforts and support anti-poaching survey snare collection teams. This helps not only the saola, but also the rare species that live around them and the local people. More than 90,000 poaching snares have been collected from saola habitat by the SWG anti-poaching survey teams since this program began in 2011.

Catching Hope is conducted by docents, has full institutional support, and represents collaboration between the SWG, HVZ Education Department, and HVZ senior management. All profit generated by this project goes to the SWG to train and employ SWG anti-poaching survey teams to remove snares from the saola's habitat, helping not only saolas, but also the rare species that live around them and the local people. Supporting these teams has a two-fold impact: it helps provide alternative livelihoods to these local people as they work toward mitigating the impact that poachers are having on the unique Annamite Mountain ecosystem, while ensuring that these individuals are not forced to resort to poaching to earn a livelihood.

In 2014 we received a \$1,000 AZADV Small Zoo Education Grant that supported start-up costs for Catching Hope. Since March 2014, we have sold over 1,000 crafts and educated over 1,000 visitors about the saola at our conservation education events. We have expanded our program to include not only volunteers, but also interested local community groups including corporate groups, church groups, and school classes. Local energy company Madison Gas and Electric generously featured saola and Catching Hope-themed sections in the 2014 and 2015 Earth Day Fun Books; 12,000 have been distributed to local schools and at the zoo. Additionally, we have raised community awareness of the saola through local news outlets and social media. \$2,761 profit generated by Catching Hope in 2014 was sent to the SWG to support the continued removal of poaching snares from saola's habitat. In 2015 we hope to triple both

the number of items sold and visitors reached. We have hosted several community group crafting workshops toward that goal.

Importance of Catching Hope:

- This is a novel endeavor to help a newly-discovered, critically endangered species.
- It affords a powerful opportunity to teach the public about the importance of biodiversity and impacts of poaching on an ecosystem, and learn about this rare species, its native neighbor species, and the unique ecosystem of which it is a part.
- It provides the SWG critical exposure to the plight of the saola and its native neighbors species, heightening public awareness about this species and a huge poaching problem in Asia.
- It empowers and provides docents an opportunity to contribute to and directly impact the survival of this critically endangered species, Annamite Mountains ecosystem health, and livelihood of local people living in and around saola habitat.
- By supporting this project through purchases and donations, we afford the Madison community an opportunity to be directly involved in a conservation initiative across the world, engaging them as global citizens.

SWG Coordinator William Robichaud refers to HVZ as “the mouse that roars;” we are one of the SWG’s smallest partner zoos but have created one of the most successful saola support programs. He has presented Catching Hope to government officials in Laos and Vietnam and they are exploring the creation of local programs modeled after ours. In presenting our program to AZADV, we want to show that volunteers can have a meaningful global impact, no matter how small the zoo or number of docents, or how limited the funding.