

A Model for Accredited Zoos and Aquariums to Partner with IUCN on Red List Assessments

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1. Georgia Aquarium

2. The Deep Aquarium

3. IUCN

The IUCN Red List is the international gold standard for assessing conservation status of animals and plants and aims to provide extinction threat assessments for 160,000 species by 2020. However, much of the work behind Red List assessments is conducted by specialist groups, consisting of volunteer taxonomic experts in academia and the NGO sector. Historically, zoos and aquariums have not played a significant role in the Red List process, and this is a missed opportunity for four reasons: first, a significant amount of taxonomic expertise resides among zoo and aquarium staff globally; second, zoos and aquariums typically have an explicit conservation goal, especially among non-profit facilities; third, participating in Red List assessments has the potential to dramatically increase the scientific profile of the zoos/aquariums involved; fourth, these facilities have enormous potential to educate the public about red listed species; they come with “built-in” extension capability. We present a model that would distribute a portion of the red listing workload (and associated costs) among zoos and aquariums by contributing a portion of staff effort at a zoo or aquarium to IUCN red listing activities. We have trialed this model at The Deep aquarium in the UK and Georgia Aquarium in the US and it is proving both effective and scalable. This model can greatly increase capacity to conduct Red List assessments and thereby understand the extinction threats faced by the species we care for. Furthermore, it better integrates zoos and aquariums into one of the key conservation tools in the modern arsenal, and provides a workflow to share the results of that work directly with the public through zoo and aquarium programs and public relations. We encourage zoo and aquarium executives to consider contributing staff expertise to the IUCN Red List process for the better conservation of wildlife globally.