

Why this former SeaWorld ambassador is working to save animals you've never heard of

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The Chinese pangolin (*Manis pentadactyla*) Credit: Sarita Jnawali of NTNC – Central Zoo The United States, CC BY 2.0

In her many years as the director of the animal ambassador programs for

SeaWorld and Busch Gardens, Julie Scardina was a favorite guest on "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" and the "Today" show. Thanks to her high TV profile, the energetic animal lover brought adorable baby penguins, a blanket-wrapped baby gibbon and a free-flying Scarlet ibis to millions of homes across America.

For her second act, the Poway, California, resident wants to put pangolins on your radar. Also painted dogs, Grevy's zebras and bonobos.

Scardina is the co-founder and president of Mission Wildlife, a San Diego-based nonprofit dedicated to supporting and conserving species through fundraising and education. And in the case of an under-the-radar species like the ant-eating pangolin, the organization wants to raise awareness about animals that could disappear before many people even knew they were here.

It is a challenging job, and Scardina was born to do it.

"When I was growing up, I remember having a picture book of all of these different animals, and it was dog-eared and torn up because I was always flipping through it," said Scardina, who began working at SeaWorld San Diego as a trainer in 1977, when she was 19. She retired in 2016.

"I just don't remember a time when it wasn't my main focus to be outdoors and to be around animals, and that has never changed. It has only gotten stronger as I've gotten older."

Mission Wildlife was born in 2013, when Scardina arranged a trip to Uganda and Kenya for herself and some SeaWorld colleagues, including Heather Armentrout and Julie Byford. While they were there, the trio met with representatives from several animal-conservation groups. When the three animal lovers got back to San Diego, they decided to turn their

passion into action. Armentrout is now the organization's treasurer, and Byford is its secretary.

"We were supporting all of these wonderful people through larger organizations, but we wanted to do something personally for them," Scardina said. "After visiting these places in person, being a part of that environment, and understanding that you can make a difference by taking action, that's when we really said, 'We need to do this.'"

The all-volunteer Mission Wildlife had its first fundraising event in 2014. It brought in about 50 attendees and raised \$4,000 for Save the Elephants and Ewaso Lions. So far, the organization has distributed \$200,000 to a handful of beneficiaries that also includes Grevy's Zebra Trust, Lola ya Bonobo and the Cheetah Conservation Fund.

This year's main fundraiser, which is being split into two events to allow for social distancing, will be held on Oct. 2 and 3 at Casa de Glory, an event venue in Middletown. The beneficiaries are Save Pangolins and Painted Dog Conservation, and if you are not sure what a painted dog looks like or what a pangolin could possibly be, Mission Wildlife is here to help you help them.

Painted dogs are wild dogs that are found only in Africa. Snares, [traffic accidents](#) and shootings have reduced the continent's painted-dog population to fewer than 7,000. The Painted Dog Conservation in Zimbabwe is home to about 700 of them.

Pangolins look like what would happen if you crossed an ant-eater with an artichoke, but their future is no joke. Pangolins are killed and trafficked for their meat and for their scales, which are used in traditional Asian medicine. Four of the eight pangolin species are on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's critically endangered list.

"These animals have been around for about 70 million years, and the only reason they could go extinct is if humans consume them to death and poach them to extinction," said Paul Thomson, co-founder and executive director of Save Pangolins.

"When an organization like Mission Wildlife comes along and gives us a platform and connects us with donors and people who want to support us, it gives us a huge boost. Education and awareness is so important. I always say that you can't save something if you don't know it exists."

Thomson will be attending both Mission Wildlife fundraising events, as will Painted Dog Conservation's operations manager, David Kuvawoga. In addition to chatting up the experts, attendees can interact with the ambassador birds and animals, bid on silent-auction items, watch a painting performance by Stephen Fishwick, and take in an animal show.

And while they're enjoying their day with the [animals](#), Mission Wildlife supporters can be part of a bigger, more optimistic picture. For the pangolins, the painted dogs and the planet.

Just a few decades ago, the American alligator and the American bald eagle were in danger of extinction. Thanks to protections put in place by the Endangered Species Act, both the alligator and the bald eagle are off the endangered species list. This is an animal story Julie Scardina never gets tired of telling.

"These are two wonderful success stories that I don't want people to forget. It's not impossible. We can't give up just because an animal is in severe decline," Scardina said. "We had to pay attention, and we had to protect them and their environment in order for them to succeed. That's what we are trying to help these organizations to accomplish."

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