

Achieving a balance: Animal welfare and conservation

January 31 2019

In a paper recently published in the journal *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*, a team of researchers, animal care experts and veterinarians evaluate the balance between animal welfare and conservation needs for a number of rare species of native birds being raised in San Diego Zoo Global breeding centers in Hawaii. The paper shares the challenges and complexity of situations where the needs of an individual and the needs of a species are weighed, and how that balance is achieved.

"Animal [welfare](#) and conservation breeding have overlapping and compatible goals, but promoting optimal welfare in breeding programs can require tactics that minimize the effects of captivity," said Alison Gregor, Ph.D., a postdoctoral associate at San Diego Zoo Global in the 'alalā recovery program, which prepares these [endangered birds](#) for eventual release into wild habitats. "We offer a perspective on how SDZG's Hawaiian Endangered Bird Conservation Program strives for high welfare standards while balancing the needs for [birds](#) to learn skills for the future."

The paper describes a scientific attempt to measure [animal welfare](#) standards using guidelines provided through an "Opportunity to Thrive" model, as they are balanced by the need to prepare individuals for naturally occurring stresses.

"We have seen that efforts to improve enclosures, provide enriching experiences, and address behavioral and physical needs further the causes of animal well-being in all zoo settings," said Nadine Lamberski,

DVM, director of veterinary services, San Diego Zoo Global. "However, conservation breeding programs must also focus on preparing animals for release into the wild. For many [species](#), wild situations are inherently stressful and require that [animals](#) have developed mechanisms for coping with potentially life-threatening challenges."

For this paper, the team studied the welfare needs of a number of endangered bird species, including the 'akikiki and the 'alalā. In 2015, San Diego Zoo Global started a conservation breeding program for the 'akikiki, an endangered honeycreeper species found only in Kaua'i's remote forests. As a means of preventing their extinction, the breeding program focuses on maintaining wild-type behaviors and minimizing contact with humans.

Meanwhile, the 'alalā, or Hawaiian crow, has been extinct in the wild since 2002, preserved only at the Keauhou and Maui Bird Conservation Centers managed by San Diego Zoo Global's Hawaii Endangered Bird Conservation Program. Through a [collaborative effort](#) with partners from the 'Alalā Project, reintroduction of the species began in 2016, into a protected and recovered native forest on the island of Hawai'i.

"As we enter the reintroduction phase of the recovery of this species, we learn more about the species and what it needs to survive in a natural habitat," said Ron Swaisgood, Ph.D., director of Recovery Ecology, San Diego Zoo Institute for Conservation Research. "A recent change in the program shifted our practices away from hand-rearing, towards allowing adult birds in our care to raise their own chicks. This meant a higher likelihood of nest failure for some pairs, but is an important aspect of species socialization and is expected to increase the success of reintroduced groups over the long term."

The paper describes in detail the scientific evaluation of animal welfare parameters, in balance with [conservation](#) needs, suggesting a model for

future similar efforts and indicating areas for improvement.

"While we consider high standards of welfare to be a priority goal for all species, we identified several challenges that are applicable to the care of species being reintroduced," said Greg Vicino, curator of Applied Animal Welfare, San Diego Zoo Global. "The need to stay as 'hands-off' as possible means we cannot rely on traditional operant training techniques, and instead must utilize behavioral observation in multiple contexts. The more we learn about the unique species under our care, the more we can provide them with opportunities to thrive."

More information: Alison L. Greggor et al, Animal Welfare in Conservation Breeding: Applications and Challenges, *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* (2018). [DOI: 10.3389/fvets.2018.00323](https://doi.org/10.3389/fvets.2018.00323)

Provided by Zoological Society of San Diego

Citation: Achieving a balance: Animal welfare and conservation (2019, January 31) retrieved 20 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-01-animal-welfare.html>

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