



The Wildlife Watch Binocular

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COVID RELIEF FUNDS USED TO BUILD AN AQUARIUM!???

By Debbie Rose

PHOTO COURTESY OF PAR



Onondaga County Executive, Ryan McMahon, is using 85 million in Covid relief funds to build an aquarium! While the construction of this project will cost closer to 100 million, the County Executive is asking for private donors. If they are not able to obtain the difference from private donors, it's likely the taxpayers will foot that bill! Covid relief money was for the health of the citizens of Onondaga ...shouldn't it be used for that purpose?

Syracuse, NY is known for being a poverty-stricken city! Driving around, you will see destitute people standing on street corners holding signs asking for help. There are people sleeping under bridges in makeshift tents, other poor souls are living in remote areas. I was in a restaurant not so long ago and was shocked when

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UNDERSTANDING CAPTIVE BREEDING IN INDIA

By Bindu Gopal Rao

As the winds of climate change blow across the world, there has been a steady decline in several species that has prompted captive breeding efforts.

October 16th, 2024 is going to be a date that will always be remembered at the Sudasari Great Indian Bustard Breeding Centre in Jaisalmer district of Rajasthan. **In fact, this date will also not be forgotten by wildlife lovers as this day saw a historic first when a baby chick of the Great Indian Bustard (GIB) was born via artificial insemination.**

CHEERING FOR THE GIB CHICK

India has several different captive breeding programs running across the country for the conservation of several endangered species. The hatching of the GIB has specifically brought in cheer as the species is critically endangered with just about 128 of them alive in the wild. This captive breeding program is a tripartite project between

Great Indian Bustard (GIB)



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MoEFCC (Gol), Raj. FD (Rajasthan Government) and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun. All team members/biologists involved in the project are employed from the WII side as project staff. Sumit Dookia, Wildlife Biologist and Faculty at GGS Indraprastha University, New Delhi, says, “as per the documents available with Raj. FD/WII, this project is going to produce GIBs through captive breeding and third generation born out of captive bred birds will be released into the wild. The project started in 2019 and release year probably in 2042-2043. I am working exclusively outside the boundary or jurisdiction of Desert National Park (Protected Area). My working area is a community owned landscape where GIBs are freely roaming.”

ONE OF ITS KIND

This project is completely unique, as so far there has been no experience of producing captive GIB anywhere. The expertise came from the Houbara Bustard Breeding Centre from Middle East Asia, especially Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi. The project team visited those centres for months to get trained with the Houbara Breeding Team. “Initially two expert scientists from Abu Dhabi Centre also stayed in Jaisalmer for training and starting the centre. Wild laid eggs were being picked with care and taken into captive incubation machines, each egg in a single incubator. These chicks were reared in hand by caretakers, human imprints were purposefully done so that these chicks can be handled like pet birds. These birds became part of the founder population and now a second generation is being produced from these birds. These second generation chicks will be trained to become wild now and this is a real challenge. Only the future will tell the success of this project. Rewilding is a real challenge for any wildlife, as how to face the real life danger in the wild is not possible to teach in captivity,” adds Dookia.

ZOOS FOR CONSERVATION

Under the central zoo authority there are certain species that have been identified that are endangered and are of special interest. Different zoos have been assigned for taking up their conservation via a captive breeding program. It creates a backup population that can be used for



Red Panda

PHOTO © RADHESHYAM PEMANI BISHNOI

research, release, and other studies. Dr Basavaraj S Holeyachi, Director, Padmaja Naidu Zoological Park (PNZP) says, “Darjeeling Zoo has the highest mandate of these including **snow leopard, red panda**, thar, blue sheep and pheasants and Himalayan Salamander. **The snow leopard and red panda breeding have been very successful and we have 11 individuals of snow leopards now.**

Red panda is also successful as we have now taken up an augmentation program that would lead to releasing them into the wild. We have released nine red pandas of which seven have acclimatized to the wild, with five births also recorded.”

FLYING HIGH

India has also achieved some success with releasing vultures through a conservation breeding program at four Vulture Conservation Breeding Centres (VCBC) across the country in partnership with the Governments of Haryana in Pinjore (2001), West Bengal in Rajabhatkhawa (2005), Assam in Rani, Guwahati (2007), and MP in Bhopal (2011). The population of Gyps species – white-rumped vulture (Oriental white-backed vulture), Indian vulture (long-billed vulture), and slender-billed vulture crashed during the mid-1990s throughout the Indian subcontinent.

Kishor Rithe, Director, Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), says, “there are several advantages I see as when there are species that are at the

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PHOTO © RADHESHYAM PEMANI BISHNOI

Snow Leopard

threshold of extinction, we must ensure that we do something for its conservation and captive breeding is a strategy to bring that population back. Vultures is one of the species as is the green munia as well as other bird species. We have released about 57 vultures to the wild. Success of conservation breeding can be measured only based on how many birds were released that is proportionate to those in captivity and how many of them have been able to survive living in the wild.”

CHALLENGES GALORE

However, captive and conservation breeding is not without challenges. This is a need-specific activity that is undertaken only when the population of a species is dwindling in the wild and there is a need to go for a rewilding process. “On the flip side, care needs to be taken to ensure that any breeding program is done carefully and scientifically. We must maintain genetic diversity; pedigrees should be properly maintained and most diverse individuals should be paired to avoid any inbreeding issues. This needs people who are qualified to handle this,” says Holeyachi. Rewilding is the challenge. “The habitat is not going to remain the same in 2042-43 and it is already facing share decline due to various

anthropogenic issues and powerlines here and there. It’s a bird, training these birds to fly in open sky, in captivity, is a real herculean task. There is a plan to construct a long-wide tunnel shaped cage to train and make their flight muscles strong enough to take the flight,” says Dookia.



PHOTO © RADHESHYAM PEMANI BISHNOI

Vulture

It is also obvious that lessons have been learnt from mistakes in the past, in terms of releasing birds as soon as we had enough breeding stock population.

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“Now we have set up the right infrastructure and two aviaries have been constructed in Maharashtra and one is scheduled to be constructed in Assam and Madhya Pradesh. We have released 31 birds from 2020 to 2022 in West Bengal and while four died the rest have survived, so I would say it has been a successful effort,” says Rithe. While the debate about captive breeding will probably not end in a hurry, it does seem to be a step in the right

direction to ensure endangered species see the daylight for the next generation.

Bindu Gopal Rao is a freelance writer and photographer from Bengaluru. She enjoys birdwatching and environment, as well as taking the offbeat path when traveling. You can follow her on Instagram @bindugopalrao and find her work on bindugopalrao.com

EYE ON THE NEWS

An Emotional “Good-bye” to Two Pandas



Two pandas, Bao Li and Qing Bao were moved from a panda research center in China to the National Zoo in Washington, D.C.

Ren Zhijun, a panda keeper at the giant panda research center in Dujiangyan, China

Having cared for the bears for weeks, it would be hard to say goodbye, Ren told CNN on Sunday. “The pandas are like my own children,” he said.

The World Wildlife Fund reports that “... pandas remain scattered and vulnerable, and much of their habitat is threatened by poorly-planned infrastructure projects – and remember: there are still only 1,864 left in the wild.”

Pandas are highly endangered due to habitat loss.

nationalzoo.si.edu/dcpandas

cnn.com/2024/10/14/china/china-pandas-coming-to-washington-intl-hnk/index.html

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