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NURTURING A NEW COLLABORATIVE

By Valerie Peckham

Quiet yet bold; shy yet determined, diamond-back terrapins are facing overwhelming challenges throughout their range. Generally speaking, turtles are appealing and the kind of animal that people want to protect. But protection can't happen without awareness so we decided to spread the word, "we" being the Mid-Atlantic Conservation Alliance (MACA).

GETTING STARTED

Formed in March 2006, MACA comprises twelve zoos and aquariums representing Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland. The idea for the group originated with AZA's Field Conservation Committee. Several coalitions exist within AZA, each with a unique operating model, mission, and set of goals. We believe this individuality is a strength as it has allowed each group to form around tenets that were achievable and based on the resources available.

Realizing that the mid-Atlantic region includes a wealth of excellent zoos and aquariums, our first step in forming MACA was to put out feelers to our colleagues in these institutions. We knew we wanted to be able to meet in person periodically, thus membership was limited to institutions within a day's travel from one another. Having formed the boundaries of the group, our real challenge was to determine what we wanted to accomplish. Fortunately, all partners were of one mind on this; we knew that we wanted to highlight the role of zoos in conservation and to directly protect wildlife. One of our first goals was to utilize our unique ability to share consistent messages with a collective audience of more than 6 million annual visitors; connecting



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people with the bigger picture for local wildlife and building grassroots support for conservation initiatives. With this in mind we forged ahead, choosing a pilot project and resolving to mold and shape our group along the way. This is where the terrapins came in.

PICKING A PROJECT

Diamondback terrapins were a natural focal species for our first joint project: all MACA institutions held this species in their collections and terrapin populations are declining in New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland. In addition, several partners had either current or historic involvement with terrapin projects. We capitalized on our joint investment in this species by developing an adaptable tool – a portable educational display – to enhance interpretation of terrapin exhibits. "Terrapin Station" proved to be an ideal first endeavor and one that focused on the plight of a declining species found in three out of four MACA states.

TERRAPIN STATIONS: EDUCATION IN ACTION

Similar to MACA itself, the stations were designed to function effectively as a whole or in parts, featuring props such as miniature cars and mock roadways (to model one of terrapins' main threats – being struck by vehicles), real crab traps (often used by many MACA zoo and aquarium visitors while at "the shore") and numerous images that function equally well as stand-alone items or in conjunction with the rest of the unit. New items and photos are easily incorporated and each MACA member is encouraged to tailor the stations' basic messages with details of their own work on terrapin issues – and visitors enjoy the stations' activities. Attractive and outfitted with unique props and artifacts, the stations capture people's attention and draw them in, stimulating discussions on how to protect these threatened creatures.

LESSONS LEARNED

The overarching value of Terrapin Stations however, goes far beyond the messages they share. As MACA begins to consider its next project, lessons learned through the implementation of Terrapin Stations over the past eighteen months will come into play. The primary lessons the collaborative learned are:

1) Logistics and relevance can pose a challenge. While there is value to all twelve institutions working together on joint projects, it is sometimes logistically challenging. Additionally, not all projects will have relevance to all MACA members. Thus we are now considering taking a more segmented approach to project development as warranted, while still maintaining our overall identity as a cohesive conservation force. The ability to work in groups of two or three will alleviate many logistical issues while enabling those MACA members to develop comprehensive projects that resonate with their local audiences and complement the full MACA portfolio.

2) Projects can benefit greatly from joint promotion. The ability to cross-promote opportunities for public involvement in local conservation events, such as a recent clean-up of Petty Island on the Delaware River, and to actively coordinate related events at our respective facilities is a MACA strength that will be developed further.

3) Shared goals are critical. A clearly defined mission statement and supporting set of goals are critical to long-term MACA success. Our mission to develop and implement cooperative conservation initiatives that protect local MACA wildlife has been in place from the start, while the formation of goals to support that mission has been more of an evolutionary process. These goals, which have been only loosely defined until now, will be finalized before moving forward.

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Coalition-building across the miles is no easy task. Terrapin Stations have provided a context for growth, affording vital firsthand experience in identifying and delivering effective broad-based messages and providing insights that will help to shape meaningful guiding principles for the alliance.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Fortunately, the same rationale that determined the physical scope of MACA – geographic proximity and the inherent connections between wildlife and environmental issues within those areas – will also provide us with the flexibility to work locally as well as regionally.

Our model for moving in this direction will be to use State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAP) to inform the process. SWAPs are state-by-state reviews of native wildlife listed by conservation priority. Smaller sub-sets of MACA members will work cooperatively, utilizing information found in SWAPs to assist them in planning strategic species-based initiatives that build on MACA strengths, maximize our ability to have a measurable impact and are particularly relevant to respective local audiences. Though these projects will be operating in multiple areas of the MACA region, the process for developing them will include discussion

with all MACA members and will support broad MACA goals. They will also be structured in ways that enable them to be linked with other MACA local initiatives.

As global conservation issues become increasingly mainstream and ways to save the planet are sought by people everywhere, the stage is set for MACA to garner support within local communities and inspire action that will lead to the lasting protection of regional wildlife. More of a work in progress than a finished product, MACA will continue to learn “on the job” and from sharing our experiences with other AZA conservation coalitions.

MACA MEMBERS

The following institutions are members of the Mid-Atlantic Conservation Alliance: Philadelphia Zoo; Elmwood Park Zoo; Lehigh Valley Zoo; Adventure Aquarium; New Jersey Academy for Aquatic Sciences; Cape May County Zoo; Turtleback Zoo; Jenkinson's Aquarium; Brandywine Zoo; Salisbury Zoo; National Aquarium in Baltimore and The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore.

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