

## Communication from Public

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## L.A. ZOO'S VISION PLAN COULD USE CORRECTIVE LENSES

by Carol Henning

The “vision” in the Zoo’s plan seems distorted, like a look at oneself in a fun-house mirror. Does the L.A. Zoo need a 60-foot deep canyon (to be blasted and excavated down to bedrock) offering rock climbing? Does the Zoo need a hilltop Yosemite-style lodge with views of a 25,000 square-foot vineyard? (Does the Zoo plan to develop its own winery? It certainly produces an endless supply of fertilizer for the vines.)

At a cost of \$650 million, the Zoo wants to expand its footprint in Griffith Park. Much of its “Vision Plan” has less to do with better care of its animals, educational outreach to the public and species survival, and more to do with enhancing its revenue stream and burnishing its image as a world-class destination for tourists expected to mob Los Angeles for the 2028 Summer Olympics.

To people who care about ecology, the most unacceptable aspect of the Zoo management’s project is its plan to destroy 23 acres of native woodlands. These woodlands are home to 120 coast live oaks, 60 toyons, 22 California black-walnut trees and stands of federal and state-listed endangered shrubs in the proposed development zones. (Louis Sahagún, “They’re not wild about L.A. Zoo Plan,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 2021). Gerry Hans, president of Friends of Griffith Park, says the 23 acres contain 227 protected trees listed under L.A. City’s Protected Tree Ordinance. These trees are home to every species of hawk and owl in L.A. County as well as other state species of special concern, such as the Southern California legless lizard.

The Vision Plan crows about its “naturally beautiful site,” yet it intends to wipe out 23 acres of it. Go figure. Cynthia Robin Smith, chair of the Sierra Club Angeles Chapter Diamond Bar-Pomona Valley Task Force, points out that “Southern California ranks as one of the 36 “biodiversity hotspots” in the world....Part of what makes the California floristic province a hotspot is that its spectacular biodiversity is seriously threatened. At least 75 percent of the original habitat has already been lost....The legacy of the Los Angeles Zoo will benefit by recognizing and supporting the remarkable biodiversity existing in its backyard!”

Sahagún writes that the California Department of Fish and Wildlife has warned that the Zoo’s plan should restore a minimum equivalent acreage of impacted oak woodlands in approximately the same composition and orientation as the project impacts. But Travis Longcore, science director at the Urban Wildlands Group, argues that such a strategy would be insufficient. ‘Mitigating plantings never include the associated understory species of an intact oak woodland.’ He explains. (Quoted in Sahagún, Op. Cit.) Gerry Hans observes: “The Zoo’s plan refers to its native woodlands as underutilized and underdeveloped.” Friends of Griffith Park “vehemently disagrees with this assertion from the perspective of conservation and biodiversity.”

The Vision Plan makes sparse mention of the fact that the Zoo is inside Griffith Park. The Vision Plan calls the Zoo “a regional gateway to nature.” Doesn’t that better describe the Park itself? Meanwhile, the Zoo is not alone in its plans for expansion within the Park. Each entity focuses on itself and its perceived needs, but each exists inside Griffith Park. Perhaps it would be prudent for the Zoo, among others, to pay more attention to the context in which it finds itself.

The idea of perpetual growth, writes Amitav Gosh (*The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*) has become an addiction and a grave danger in this world of growing human population, shrinking habitat and dwindling resources.

A letter to “our valued donors” from GLAZA (Greater Los Angeles Zoo Association) president Tom Jacobson points to the *Los Angeles Times* article and its “main assertion...that the goal of the Zoo’s 20-year Vision Plan is to compete with attractions such as Disneyland and Universal Studios Hollywood.” Jacobson insists that, “nothing could be further from the truth.” This declaration contrasts with statements in the Vision Plan (p. 83) that, “Attractions of all types require reinvestment into the visitor experience in order to maintain market share and grow attendance.” Backers of the plan say “it would give [the Zoo] a competitive edge in a market dominated by powerhouse tourist attractions”—such as Disneyland and Universal Studios? One of the Vision Plan’s objectives, he writes, is to “enhance the visitor experience and improve accessibility to better engage and serve diverse communities.” Hmm. Is it the diverse communities who require an aerial tram and fine-dining opportunities? “Our mission,” declares Jacobson, has always been to conserve wildlife and connect people with nature.” How, one wonders, is blasting down to bedrock and destroying habitat for native plants and animals going to connect people with nature or conserve wildlife? Jacobson explains that the planned rock-climbing wall, small vineyard and aerial tram are, in fact, “mission focused.” The rock-climbing experience would show guests “what it’s like for wildlife biologists and Zoo condor keepers to perform condor nest checks in the wild---and “the vineyard would speak to the history of agriculture in Los Angeles.”

So why do some of us persist in our griping? After all, Jacobson reminds us: “Throughout the process the Zoo has engaged the public and consulted with key stakeholders to gather extensive input.” Who were these stakeholders? Most people I ask, including some of the Zoo’s own docents, knew little or nothing of these plans. One of the docents, upon being apprised of the Zoo’s Vision Plan, said: “When I joined the L.A. Zoo docent program, it was because of my love for animals and a desire to conserve them and their habitats. I also felt that, to really appreciate these special animals, the public should be able to see them in person and learn about them. Our animals, their stories and our efforts to conserve these species, and many more, should come first.”

Nigel Rothfels, a historian at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, is quoted in the Sahagún article pointing out that zoos “have always been for people and not animals.” Behind the scenes, he observes, “large scale municipal zoos in the United States and around the world have always been places of tension....That’s because of the competing agendas embedded in them—education, scientific knowledge, conservation and recreation...”

One example of this competition between education and entertainment involved the biologist Julian Huxley, grandson of renowned British zoologist, Thomas Henry Huxley, and brother of author Aldous Huxley. In 1935, Julian was hired as the director of the London Zoo, which he tried to transform into the center and focus of popular interest in every aspect of animals and animal life. “His tenure at the zoo was controversial, however—some board members were unimpressed by his research and public education initiatives, preferring to focus on ‘the display

of our Menagerie.” While Huxley was on a speaking tour of the U.S. in 1942, his position was eliminated. (Michelle Nijhuis, *Beloved Beasts*, Norton, 2021, pp 130-31.)

“Objectification of animals began at least 10,000 years ago, at a time when hunting was being replaced by herding and gathering was giving way to agriculture. Over the centuries since then we have come to relate increasingly to nonhuman animals as commodities rather than fellow creatures who share the planet with us and whom we treat with respect,” writes Michael Mountain. (“How we View Nonhuman Animals,” *Best Friends Magazine*, November/December, 2021). Public zoos, he explains, began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when “capturing exotic animals was an endorsement of modern colonial power.” Mountain asks, “What does a young person inevitably learn most from a visit to the zoo? Basically that it’s O.K. to take the animals out of their true homes and put them on display for our own purposes.” He quotes Randy Malamud, Professor of English at Georgia State University and a Fellow of the Oxford Centre for Animal Ethics: “People will say they are looking for nature, for communion, connection, empathy. But they are in fact viewing animals from a position of privilege, of exploitation, of decontextualization. When we look at other animals through a cage, when we separate ourselves from them, we are asserting our superiority. “We make them the other, the lesser, in the same way that men have done to women....and Europeans have done to the rest of the world.”

As many humans have neither the money nor the time to see exotic animals in their native habitats, Zoos play an important role. However, they should encourage patrons to think about their objectification of nonhuman animals. Most large metropolitan zoos try to educate the public. The L.A. Zoo has been accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums for longer than two decades. Its docent training program is first rate, and it deserves credit for helping to bring critically endangered species back from the brink of extinction. Two of these are the California condor and the Southern California yellow-legged frog.

Nonetheless, the Zoo’s current plan, full of glitzy attractions, sets aside only 35 percent of its undeveloped natural space for conversion to animal-care purposes. Clare Darden of the Griffith J. Griffith Charitable Trust expresses her opposition to the Vision Plan succinctly: “There is no need for another amusement park in L.A. But there is a dire need for preserving its native ecosystems.” (Quoted in Sahagún, Op. Cit.)

The destruction of 23 acres of native woodlands is a slap in the face of the 30x30 campaign, which is supported by the U.S. government, by the State of California and by the Sierra Club. Its goal is to protect 30 percent of wildlands and waters in the U.S. by 2030 in order to meet the challenge of climate change and provide space for wildlife and communities to thrive.

A compromise proposal, supported by Friends of Griffith Park, calls for reducing the Zoo’s anticipated footprint by eliminating development at Condor Canyon (blasting, rock-climbing), the Africa and California project areas, the vineyard, and the aerial tram planned to air-lift visitors to Africa. This compromise is sensible, and we should support it. Soon, the Vision Plan is expected to be taken up by the L.A. City Council’s Arts, Parks, Health, education and Neighborhoods Committee. The Committee Chair is Councilmember John Lee (CD 12). Vice Chair is Councilmember Mike Bonin (CD 11). Let them know how you feel about the L.A. Zoo Vision Plan. There is also a petition you can sign.