

Toronto and Calgary Zoos' Vancouver Island Marmot Recovery Program Wins Prestigious Conservation Award

Silver Spring, Maryland (September 21, 2011) – The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) announced today that the Calgary Zoo and Toronto Zoo have received its 2011 Top Honors for North American Conservation for their joint work on the Vancouver Island Marmot Recovery Program. The AZA North American Conservation Award recognizes exceptional efforts toward regional habitat preservation, species restoration, and support of biodiversity in the wild.

“Together, the Toronto Zoo and the Calgary Zoo are taking the lead in North American wildlife conservation,” said AZA President and CEO Jim Maddy. “Conservation is a high priority for both the Calgary Zoo and the Toronto Zoo, as well as for all AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, and this award provides well-deserved recognition.”

The Vancouver Island marmot (VIM) is one of 14 marmot species worldwide and exists nowhere in the world except on Vancouver Island, British Columbia. It is one of only five endemic mammal species in Canada. Marmots are true hibernators and the largest member of the squirrel family. The VIM requires highly specialized habitat with small colonies found within Vancouver Island's scattered patches of sub-alpine meadow. Alteration of lands surrounding this habitat, small population size, and predator prey dynamics are the leading causes to the rapid decline in the population of this species. The population was in such a dire situation that their numbers drastically dwindled and in 2003, a meagre 30 individuals existed in the wild, making the VIM North America's most endangered mammal.

The Vancouver Island Marmot Recovery Team (VIMRT) was established in 1988 to develop and implement a Recovery Plan for the dwindling species, and in 1996 it was determined that captive breeding and reintroduction was the only solution to prevent extinction. The Toronto Zoo received the first six wild marmots to initiate the captive breeding component and Calgary Zoo and Mountainview Conservation Society soon joined the program. In 2001, the Tony Barrett Mt Washington Marmot Recovery Centre on Vancouver Island received the first captive born marmots from the zoo facilities to begin reintroductions to the wild.

To date, a total of 492 pups have been weaned and 375 marmots released back to the wild. The wild population is now estimated at 300-350 marmots and there are currently 129 individuals in the captive breeding program. There is still a lot of work to be done to ensure the VIM remains a national Canadian treasure, but it is the hard collaborating efforts accomplished to date that have made great strides in saving this critically endangered species.

About the Toronto Zoo and Calgary Zoo

Both the Calgary Zoo and the Toronto Zoo are accredited members of CAZA (Canadian Association of Zoos and Aquariums) and AZA (Association of Zoos and Aquariums) comprised of caring, trusted experts committed to ensuring that many endangered and threatened species are part of the world's future. AZA and CAZA advocate on behalf of animals with a unified and consistent voice, and collaborate with others committed to their long-term survival. Both Zoos participate in many Species Survival Plans (SSP), a network among accredited institutions designed to breed endangered species in captivity to ensure the best possible genetic diversity and maintain healthy populations in human care. Through our conservation, education and research programs, many animals in our care play an essential role in the survival of their species in the wild. To learn more, visit torontozoo.com and calgaryzoo.ab.ca

About the Association of Zoos and Aquariums

Founded in 1924, the Association of Zoos and Aquariums is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, education, science, and recreation. Look for the AZA logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you, and a better future for all living things. The AZA is a leader in global wildlife conservation, and your link to helping animals in their native habitats. To learn more visit www.aza.org.

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