

Behind the Scenes with the President

May 1, 2009

Dear Friends of the Zoo,

It was a plain brown lunch bag with raffia handles and three simple words, “Adams Mountain Café.” It was clear, though, that this bag had been recycled and held something way more prized than a lunch from the popular Manitou café. Inside was a chicken sandwich, three pickles, some oranges, a Sobe’ sports drink and a sack full of love. As I drove to the Colorado Springs airport I couldn’t help but feel like I was in the sixth grade and on my first field trip. My “Zoo Mom” Jane, who is our guest services manager, packed this for me to take on my flight.

I’m on my first leg of a four-day trip to Panama to rescue frogs. In case you haven’t heard, frogs are disappearing at an alarming rate. How alarming? Let’s pretend you are 70 years old. Before the end of your life one-third to one-half of all the amphibians in the world could disappear and for once scientists are not saying humans are to blame. Certainly human-induced pollution and habitat loss have played a part, but in this case the deadly blow is from a skin fungus, *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis* (Bd) or chytrid for short. Amphibians breathe through their papery-thin skins, and the chytrid fungus suffocates them. Scientists suspect chytrid came over from Africa on the African clawed frog, which was widely used in the 1930s and 1940s for pregnancy tests.

Imagine a fungus so powerful that when 100 frogs in a laboratory are exposed to chytrid, 100 frogs die. Now imagine a frog that only lives in one small area of the world. When chytrid sweeps through, as it eventually will, chances are that every frog of that species will die. Chytrid now lives on every continent with amphibians and moves about 27 miles a year, with deadly results.

Fortunately for more than 120 species of frogs in the Darien region of Panama, eight organizations have banded together to alter the fate that most certainly awaits them: possible extinction. The partners include Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, The National Zoo, Zoo New England, Houston Zoo, Africam Safari in Mexico, Defenders of Wildlife and the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute. Our goal is to go into the Darien region – the last stretch of wilderness in Central America that does not have chytrid – and capture frogs before they die. After capture they will be bred in Panama while we work with a bacterium that kills chytrid. In a test study, if 100 frogs were infected with the deadly chytrid fungus and then treated with this bacteria, all would live. Eventually we hope to treat the captured frogs and release them back into the environment. The idea is to build resistance to chytrid in the frogs’ immune system. If we fail, 40 to 70 species of frogs could disappear forever.

On day one of the trip we visited the Summit Zoo outside of Panama City. The plan is to capture frogs and leave them in Panama to build national awareness and pride. The frogs will be housed in shipping containers at the zoo. This seems particularly appropriate given that the Panama Canal is nearby and literally thousands of shipping containers a week go through the area. Each container can house hundreds of specimens.

The second day of the trip was pure magic. Our group drove two hours to El Valle where we toured a similar project started by the Houston Zoo. Houston was five years into its project when chytrid came through the area. Local streams that were once full of frogs and their wonderful song are now empty and silent.

Upon entering the small park-like zoo in El Valle where this project is housed, the first thing we encounter is a plant nursery. These small local nurseries are everywhere and the money they raise helps to fund the parks. After passing several outdated exhibits, we reach a simple building that houses the El Valle breeding facility. This special place holds frog species that no longer exist in the wild. One is the Panamanian Golden frog, a bright yellow and black species that is Panama's national symbol, much like our bald eagle. Then there's a frog that looks like a leaf. Another one has skin so thin you can actually see the heart beating in its chest cavity. And then there's my favorite: a frog that carries rows and rows of pea-sized eggs on its back for 3 to 4 months before they hatch. Many of these frogs will be on public display when a soon-to-be-open wing is completed.

Our last full day in Panama was spent on the canal in a small boat observing wildlife. Here we saw two-toed and three-toed sloth, all three species of local monkeys and lots of birds including shore birds, birds of prey, water birds and song birds. There was no mistaking that I was in a special place when the toucan with a striking yellow bill flew by.

But perhaps the story as shared here is not enough for you; maybe you'd like to experience this remarkable place yourself? On May 16, you'll have that opportunity. That's when our annual "Zoo Ball" will offer guests a chance to bid on a trip to Panama, which I will lead. Together we'll journey into this beautiful land and see firsthand the progress being made at our breeding facility, as well as visit the facility at El Valle. Make a difference this year. Be part of conservation history and form life-long memories of how you helped save a piece of our amazing world from extinction. See you there!

With warmest regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Bob Chastain". The signature is stylized and fluid, with the first name "Bob" and last name "Chastain" clearly distinguishable.

Bob Chastain
President & CEO