

BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE PRESIDENT

July 23, 2010

Dear Friends of the Zoo;

People die every day. Good people: mothers, fathers and children. Scientists, teachers, trash men, doctors, construction workers, policemen. People who have done great things; great people. Yet we don't miss them because we don't know them. I'm here in the Darien province of Panama, doing work that I hope you'll care about. To be honest though, I know it will be tough going to get the average person to care. It's understandable. You don't know what I know, nor have you seen what I've seen. You haven't held a species of frog in your hand and seen it slip into extinction right before your eyes. I can only hope to relate this experience to you in such a way that you will begin to know this place without being here and know these frogs without seeing them.

Imagine it this way: you have a child that likes something. Basically, if they show any interest, you become interested. You search out opportunities to let them experience that thing.

I have a son, Dayton. He likes soccer. Because of his interest, I go to soccer games and watch some on TV. I never played soccer; I played football, wrestled, and ran track, but no soccer. We played Midwestern sports when I was a kid. We never had a soccer league.

My daughter, Milly, is into shopping. She loves malls. Apparently, when you're an 11-year-old girl, malls are interesting. Definitely not to a 43-year-old man, but to an 11-year old girl, they're pretty great. For Milly's birthday, she and I went on a shopping trip. She saved up her money and we went to Taos, New Mexico for a shopping birthday weekend. I got to travel, she got to shop. Seems fair enough to me.

Here's the deal and it's big. What if tomorrow every soccer ball vanished and every field was plowed? Or every opportunity to shop was gone? I suspect I would care, because my kids care. The thing is, what is happening right now with amphibians is the same sort of situation as losing the world's soccer fields and shopping malls, except it's far worse and has far more of an impact. Amphibians are dying at an alarming rate and, so far, we've been unable to stop it. Everybody says we should protect things for future generations. But it's hard to think about those future generations in a real way. Imagine what's happening in Panama is happening right here in Colorado--let's say it's your kids and they love nature, but there is no more nature; no trees, no grass no bugs. That would be a loss far greater than soccer or shopping. We can fabricate soccer balls, we can build malls, but we cannot make species reappear.

Less than one year ago we searched a nearby region in Panama for black frogs with green stripes. We found them--they were charismatic and beautiful. To the best of our

knowledge, they are now gone from the wild. I only have a carving of one on my desk to remind me of how amazing they are. You will never see one in the wild. Your kids may never see one in the wild unless we are successful in the captive breeding and releasing efforts we are making now. Today, I've searched all day for that frog's cousin, an orange frog with black spots; spots all the way to the tip of her tiny little toes. They are abundant here, and we're happy to have found some on this trip; we're worried that someday they won't be as easy to find. We'll take them to our care and breeding facility in Panama to try and help them avoid the same fate as their cousin the black and green frog; we hope we can help their species to remain stable and strong.

We are working in Panama right now to save amphibians. They are dying at a disturbing rate, and we'd like to stop that if we can. The rate of extinction in amphibians is unprecedented, can be compared only to that of the dinosaurs. We care about amphibians for a variety of reasons, not least of which is because they are unique and special and an integral part of nature. With the disappearance of each species comes a sense of personal loss: we didn't do enough, we didn't do it fast enough, we did it but it didn't work. Each species, the orange one with the black spots, the tiny green one, they're all important. But today, I'm thinking about the black one with the green stripes.

As I sit here writing, I miss her. I've missed her all day long. I hope somewhere in your heart you'll begin to miss her, too. Stop by my office sometime to see her--the carving is beautiful. She is beautiful. Her future has hope, but not in the wild. At least not yet. My hope is that, if we continue to work hard on her behalf, we can save her species and many others. We can change the world, in our own small way. I know we can make a difference.

Warmly,

Bob Chastain