

Behind the Scenes with the President

June 2018

Dear Friend,

The trouble with failing is that it can make you want to quit.

I have to admit, after 23 years of working at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, something happened this year that feels as monumental as anything I can remember. I am not saying it is more important than getting our 3rd elephant, (or 4th and 5th and 6th). Nor is it more important than releasing black footed ferrets back into Colorado for the first time in who knows how long. Or even collecting vanishing species of frogs in Panama.

What I am saying is that our road toward wolf pups has been a long one. There were times that giving up seemed like the only choice. It was about two years ago that we reached out to our good friends and partners at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife to say, “If you still care about us as partners you have to send us some younger wolves, otherwise maybe we should just choose a different species to work with.” As good partners do, we talked. They told us that both Navarro and Luna are very important genetically and they wanted us to give Luna one more year to produce offspring. Navarro was one year old and Luna was 10. Luna had never had a litter so it was a long shot. If she did not have a litter this year, they would send us a young female. Now, if that does not make her the underdog I don’t know what else would.

The path to that moment included many other old wolves at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo. One after another, we celebrated an arrival and then a death as they reached the end of their lives. It seemed like every one was like Luna – an older wolf on a final journey. This was really hard on our keepers and on our members, who know and love these animals and watched them leave us too soon.

Our last pups were born in 1998. When I asked Rebecca, the senior lead keeper, to trace our wolf history from then, she reminded me that she hasn’t been at the Zoo long enough to remember wolf pups. She’s been here nine years. What she did remember were the three brothers – Imado, Masidi and Tasai. That was when we were not breeding but rather holding a bachelor group.

From there we kept Masidi and received a female named Weeko. We were hopeful back then but they had a still born pup and that was it. Then it was Weeko and a new male named Aldo, named after conservationist and writer Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), whose collection of essays – *A Sand County Almanac* – is considered one of the most respected books about the environment ever published. The book includes an essay, “Thinking Like a Mountain,” which contains a paragraph that has long resonated with me: “We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes – something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters’ paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.”

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Leopold then came into our lives to be with the female Weeko. Weeko passed and Leopold was paired with a new female named Lighthawk. Unfortunately, they did not produce wolf pups.

Our friends at U.S. Fish and Wildlife wanted to send us Luna and Phoenix as a new breeding pair. We were once again excited. Phoenix came and he was beautiful; very wild looking. The pair bred last year and by all accounts

Luna appeared pregnant; both she and the Zoo made preparations for pups. You can imagine our disappointment when once again no pups came. She had what is called a pseudo or false pregnancy – she got heavier, had false labor, and looked like she had milk – the whole nine yards. Some say this happens so the female can keep her high place in the pack. Unfortunately, Phoenix passed a short time later. This takes us back to the call we made and the request the U.S. Fish and Wildlife made of us.

“Give her one more chance.”

Navarro came into our lives this past November. At just over one year old, he was very young. We never really did see breeding between Navarro and Luna so our hopes were pretty low. I honestly gave up believing it would ever happen, and certainly not this year, with this unlikely pair – a young male going on two and a female nearing the end of her life. Yet on May 8th, everything changed.

It was a group of teenagers that were at the Zoo as part of a summer program who saw them first. Startled at the scene, one of the teens remarked, “Look, they had wolf pups!” to which another responded, “Those aren’t wolf pups. They’re probably little ferrets that they gave them for enrichment.” (Let me pause here and state for the record that we have never in my 12 years as CEO ever fed one endangered species to another for enrichment.)

Those teens were there because of a guy named Mitch, who loves wolves. Mitch helps run the teen program. He had seen Luna have what he believed were contractions earlier that day. We did not really believe him. Remember, it had been 20 years. Yet when the teens went there that night with another leader, Mitch’s belief about the contractions were obviously true. The amazing thing is Mitch had spent from 10 am to 5 pm observing the wolves on his day off and then missed the whole thing that night. But Mitch came back the next morning and was blessed to see number eight born right in front of him.

The pups are doing well. Of the eight born, six remain. (One was stillborn and one died early.) They are growing fast. I hear they are even having little puppy dreams, complete with the twitching legs and impulsively moving tails. Probably all the while whining like your dog does when having dreams. Just this week the pups made their first appearance at the entrance of the den and had their first interactions with dad.

Two final reflections really sum up this experience. One is from our graphic designer, Hannah, who said when she saw the wolves for the first time that “something so primal welled up inside me that I began to cry.” The other is from two long-time members who come to the Zoo nearly every day to exercise. We could not help but take them to see the camera viewing just after the pups were born. The older gentleman looked at the wolf pups for a very long time and then sighed deeply, “Well isn’t that just beautiful.”

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All I can say is thank you for staying with us through this amazing journey. Six more wolves have joined a world where only 100 live in the wild and 300 live in human care. The world is a pretty wonderful place at times.

Warmly,

Bob Chastain
President & CEO