



San Francisco Zoo & Gardens Celebrates News of Thriving Wild Bald Eagle Population, Once on the Brink of Extinction

SF Zoo's 16-year-long captive breeding and release program contributed greatly to the bald eagle's successful recovery

SAN FRANCISCO, Calif. — March 30, 2021 — From 1985 to 2007, San Francisco Zoo & Gardens' Bald Eagle Recovery Project helped to re-establish a species on the brink of extinction, ultimately reintroducing 103 California bald eagles to the Channel Islands and Santa Cruz Island, where the species once ranged. The conservation program, conducted in conjunction with the Institute of Wildlife Studies and U.S. Fish & Wildlife, served as the only large-scale captive breeding program for bald eagles in the United States. This week, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife report released by the U.S. Department of the Interior announced that populations of the American bald eagle, the national symbol of the United States, have quadrupled since 2009 and considered today a conservation success story after decades of protection and conservation efforts.

"This is such great news and we're extremely proud of our role in the comeback of this symbolic and majestic species," said Tanya M. Peterson, CEO and Executive Director of San Francisco Zoological Society. "The commitment and dedication of our Bald Eagle Recovery team for 16-years in performing vitally important research, field study, breeding and species management, is truly inspiring as the program's success led, in part, to the delisting of the bald eagle from the Endangered Species List in 1999, and ultimately, its removal from the list in 2007."

The Zoo initiated its California Bald Eagle Breeding Program in 1985 to help with the recovery of the state's bald eagle breeding population, which had declined from a historic high of approximately 400 pairs to fewer than 35 pairs in the 1970's. From 1947 to 1971, millions of pounds of DDT pesticides flushed into Los Angeles County sewers had a disastrous effect on the marine life around the Santa Catalina and Channel Islands. This legacy of contamination severely affected the food chain, from the smallest worm to the bald eagle, to marine mammals, like the California sea lion.

Bald eagles vanished from the islands in the 1950s and were re-introduced to the area in the 1980s but pairs were not reproducing successfully and found to have high levels of DDT resulting in reproductive issues like fatal egg thinning. SF Zoo's Avian Conservation Center, established for the program, developed special techniques and expertise to manage eggs taken from wild nests. Zoo staff would care for wild eggs, while dummy eggs replaced them in wild nests. The wild eggs would then be incubated and hatched, with chicks fostered by the breeding

pairs that lived at the facility before being returned to wild nests. Breeding pairs would also rear their own chicks to fledging, which were later released and monitored. The Bald Eagle Recovery Project completed its program in 2007, and U.S. Fish & Wildlife acknowledged it as a successful partnership that demonstrated how partners, like the Zoo, are key to restoring healthy wildlife populations.

According to the federal report just released, the bald eagle population has flourished, growing to more than 71,400 nesting pairs in the U.S. from an all-time low of 417 known nesting pairs in 1963 in the lower 48 states.

Bald eagles are a protected species.

About San Francisco Zoo & Gardens

Established in 1929, San Francisco Zoo & Gardens connects people to wildlife, inspires caring for nature and advances conservation action. An urban oasis, the Zoo & Gardens is home to more than 2,000 exotic, endangered and rescued animals representing more than 250 species as well as seven distinct gardens full of native and unusual plants. Located at the edge of the Pacific Ocean where the Great Highway meets Sloat Boulevard. SF Zoo & Gardens is currently closed to the public due to COVID-19. Visit www.sfzoo.org for more information.

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