



A Legacy of Leadership: Celebrating Tanya Peterson's Retirement



San Francisco Zoo & Gardens announces the retirement of Tanya Peterson, our CEO and Executive Director. Ms. Peterson's journey with the Zoo began as a dedicated Board Member, where she served in various leadership roles including ZooFest Chair, Legal Committee member, and ultimately Vice Chair.

Six months after the 2007 tiger incident, she stepped into the role of CEO, bringing stability, renewed vision, and a deep commitment to animal care, conservation, and community connection.

Merrill L. Magowan, who served on the Board for 30 years including 5 years as Chair of the SF Zoological Society, shared heartfelt thoughts and high praises for Tanya Peterson's accomplishments as CEO and Executive Director. He addressed how Tanya stepped up as interim CEO during a time when the zoo needed saving and did such an exceptional job that led to her permanent role in the position.

Leadership Legacy

During her tenure, Ms. Peterson led the Zoo through transformative growth. She spearheaded fundraising for numerous new animal exhibits, including the Great Ape Passage, Snow Leopard Lodge, and Sifaka Sanctuary, as well as major renovations like Komodo Dragon Crossing, Mexican Gray Wolf Canyon, and new habitats for rescued black bears and endangered African Lions. She was also the driving force behind the creation of the Wellness & Conservation Center—a one-of-a-kind facility focused on animal well-being and cutting-edge veterinary care.

A respected leader in the zoo and conservation communities, Ms. Peterson oversaw the Zoo's USDA re-licensing in January 2025, with no non-compliant items identified—a testament to her commitment to excellence in animal welfare. Under her leadership:

- The Zoo introduced groundbreaking animal care protocols and training programs
- Staff professional development became a top priority with robust funding and participation
- Zoo security evolved into a visible, welcoming presence
- Attendance rebounded, reaching nearly 1 million visitors annually
- The Zoo's operating budget grew significantly with sound financial management
- Animal habitats were consistently well maintained

From the beloved Red Panda Treehouse to the Sculpture Learning Plaza and Elinor Friend Playground, her projects reflect a deep passion for wildlife, inclusion, and education. Ms. Peterson also launched acclaimed DEAL initiatives, a horse therapy program, and brought international conservation to local audiences through immersive storytelling like Kingdom Animalia and Red Ivory.

Thank You, Tanya!

As we reminisce on Ms. Peterson's legacy she leaves behind, we would like to quote Former Board Chair Merrill L. Magowan one last time as we could not have said it any better:

“Managing a zoo is a difficult task—not everything will go smoothly [...] In my opinion, Tanya Peterson is unquestionably [one of] the most able Executive Directors I have witnessed during my time on the Board, and the Zoo is lucky to have had her.”

We are deeply grateful for Tanya’s tireless work on behalf of the Zoo, our animals, and our visitors. Her legacy lives on in every renovated exhibit, every rescued animal cared for, and every child inspired by nature. She will be greatly missed, and we wish her all the best on her next adventure.

Want to learn more about Tanya’s achievements during her tenure?

Read a recent reflection on her leadership featured in the San Francisco Examiner [linked here](#).

**San Francisco Zoo & Gardens connects all people with wildlife,
inspires caring for nature and advances conservation action.**

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The Zoo is located at Sloat Blvd. & Great Highway

