

Pivoting To Peace

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Pandemic. *adjective:* prevalent throughout an entire country, continent, or the whole world.
noun: a pandemic disease.

We are living in unique times, with multiple, societal “pandemics” converging on all Earth’s species. There is much that needs to change in our world. Until 2020, aquariums, zoos, wildlife parks, animal sanctuaries, and conservation organizations (let us call collectively “zoos”) only needed to focus their mission, educational messages, revenue and influence on saving their in-house animal collections or in-situ targeted species. In 2020, the world calls for a broader focus – one where animal conservation and social justices are linked, practiced, and promoted. The public is discovering and demanding that any “broken” interconnections between all aspects of life on this planet be addressed and harmonized. No longer can society compartmentalize civilization and its functions. Some basic truths, like unity of humanity, are gaining ground to become the new normal.

Addressing human anxiety from these pandemic situations, by providing peaceful places in which all may dialogue safely on societal issues and relax in natural settings, may become the best asset that zoos can offer their local and global communities. As *Association of Zoos and Aquariums* (AZA) institutions pivot to address these hard times, the next steps to saving wildlife may just be to save humanity through pivoting to Peace.

Interlocking Societal “Pandemics”

Zoos are influenced by these pandemic-sized societal changes. Here are some of the outstanding players.

1. **Climate Change.** We know about this century’s increased number of lightning-caused wildfires, record numbers of named tropical storms, floods, droughts, ocean rise, glacier melts, and record-breaking temperatures around the world and in our own backyards. This pandemic of climate change questions society’s choices, and examines how protecting forests and natural systems plays into healthy human developments and Earth.
2. **Unsustainable Consumption of Natural Resources.** Closely linked to climate change, as well as racism and social injustice, this pandemic began in 1500s with European colonialization of the world, followed by American Industrial Revolution, and rise of a Middle Class. It relies on, and questions, long-standing Laws of Economics, intertwined with Property Rights, and the Tragedy of the Commons, asking “who has free access to natural resources?”
3. **Corporate Personhood and Corporate Wealth Greater Than Countries.** I bring this pandemic to the table to point out that the economy of wealth has grown beyond “human scale”. Like powerful kings and queens of old, as early as 800 B.C. public interest organizations could obtain “legal personhood”, such as the Roman Republic, East India Company, and the Catholic Church. Now at least 25 giant, multi-national corporations have amassed wealth to

rival nations. This opens doors for debate on values and priorities of corporations versus that of human persons and collective humanity.

4. **Materialism.** Tied to economics, materialism is the concept of “buy, buy, buy”. This mindset has penetrated the USA and world. Access to goods to improve lifestyles escalated post-WWII, and “keeping up with the Jones” became a goal of dominant cultures. This pandemic contributes to social inequities and unsustainable use of natural resources, and potential collapses of economic systems.
5. **War and Aggression.** These have been a part of human psyche and action for multiple millennia. As we graduate to global interdependence, the human species must come to terms with its use of war and aggression. In 1953, President Eisenhower, critiquing the military-industrial complex, asked, “Is there no other way the world may live?” To solve animal species and ecosystems decline, these human traits need to be transformed and ultimately eliminated.
6. **Racism and Social Injustice.** Racism, and all prejudice, is the most challenging issue of the human race. Believing that some inhabitants of tribes, clans, cities, nations are superior in various ways to “others” is the age-old challenge of humanity. Because we are now a global citizenry, we humans must embrace our unity through honoring our diversity.
7. **True (disease) Pandemics and current COVID-19.** History of human civilization includes multiple varieties of disease pandemics. The Black Death; Spanish Flu, Marburg, Ebola, HIV/AIDS, Polio, Smallpox, etc. Survival-mode kicks in, fears surfaces, daily routines change, and the world cooperates for a cure to return to “normal”.

Zoos currently address pandemic issues related to their wildlife conservation mission, specifically climate change and unsustainable use of natural resources, in educational programs on habitat loss or saving species from extinction. Other human issues may not seem directly related to zoos, and therefore are generally ignored. However, in these times of COVID-19 and global awareness, zoos are beginning to speak out against these established, but broken human beliefs and actions.

New Norms Reveal Old DEIA Needs

One by one, and in combination particularly with COVID-19, we feel and see these connected, pandemic-sized problems create tension, anxiety, and massive change in the United States of America and world. As we pivot focus to address and deal with these issues, many diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) injustices are revealed, as well as exciting new opportunities towards creating peace and unity are born.

Because COVID-19 effected every nation of the world simultaneously, it makes real our interdependence and interconnectedness. As we locked ourselves up in our homes, we experienced equity more than ever before, living the same experiences on a global scale. Confined, except for “essential” outings. Curfews, masks, social distancing. Access to Internet is now almost obligatory. Grandparents, managers, educators, doctors, church goers, zoo keepers learn Zoom and GoToMeeting. Education is virtual. Worship services are virtual. Court cases are virtual. Doctor consults are virtual. Theater is virtual. Here in Belize, Central America, I am not

able to travel two hours to family in Houston, Texas because Belize's borders are closed. All Belizean school children will soon have access to government-sponsored internet devices for distance learning, thereby forever changing this small nation's ability to communicate locally and internationally. Our past ways of being human – public gatherings, travel, tribe, cliques, clubs, celebrations – are no longer adequate. Traditional human systems are falling apart and reinventing themselves.

Ironically, as humanity advanced historically from family units to villages, towns to cities, nations to world corporations, it is now our global nature that is being challenged to both shrink and grow in new ways. Physical safety lies in family-units only. Public transportation is discouraged. Work from home is encouraged. A top-selling realtor in Houston told me that her clients are reassessing their open-concept homes, and selecting houses with separate rooms for offices, home-schooling and even newly moved-in family members.

In this confined and contracted state, we have opportunities to examine what is really precious. We understand and express empathy and compassion for unknown persons across the globe. Humans have a built-in radar for what is just. The Golden Rule is written within all religions, various versions of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." In this time of crisis, age-old injustices – racial inequities, killings, economic disparities, lack of access to food and security, unemployment, lack of health care – rear their ugly heads. Marches and protests by people demonstrate that it is time to correct injustices that we've learn to live with without question or solutions.

Over 20 years ago, the AZA chose to focus on diversity – see its Diversity Committee meetings and posted resources in the AZA Network and at AZA conferences. Inclusion, equity and access were added over the years, as society deepened to address these related realities. As our communities morph and deal with these pandemic changes, we need more than ever institutions that unite and bind individuals and groups.

On June 2, 2020, in response to Black Lives Matter, racial killings, and racial protests in the USA, AZA issued an official statement on social and racial justice, inclusion and equity. Here is a short excerpt from that AZA Statement:

"We recommit to eliminating all aspects of brutality, racism, and injustice that persist in our world, our nations, our communities, and our profession; to listening; to learning; to celebrating, supporting, and protecting human diversity as passionately as we do the diversity in nature. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums envisions a world where all people respect, value, and conserve wildlife and wild places. That vision says 'all people,' so to achieve it we must create a world where Black people are safe and welcomed in our communities, our member facilities, in nature, and the field of conservation. Our 240 member organizations aspire to be welcoming and peaceful places....to listen and support their employees of color, to speak out, to act peacefully, and inspire peaceful action in others."

Pivoting To Peace

In order to create welcoming and peaceful places, and inspire peaceful actions in others, let us take note of some historical facts around peace.

Peace and justice movements have flourished all over the world, on both grand global scales and small scales in local communities. A few of my favorite peace initiatives include Wangari Maathai and her Green Belt Movement; Oscar Arias, President of Costa Rica and his work for peace in Central America; Rigoberta Menchú Tum and her work for social justice for indigenous peoples of Guatemala; James Twyman, Peace Troubadour; Mildred Lisette Norman, Peace Pilgrim; Louise Diamond and The Peace Company; Ohio's Dayton International Peace Museum; Bradford, England's Peace Museum and Peace Trail; Manchester Peace Trail; Atlanta Peace Trails, to name a few.

Economic and social costs of non-peace can be quantified. In 1953, President Eisenhower stated, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some fifty miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter with a half-million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people...This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron." Eisenhower's speech highlights the high cost of violence, of any kind, towards nations or individuals.

Zoos already know the benefits of pivoting to peace. After 11 September 2001, the world burst into marches for peace. On that fateful day, the AZA's conference was wrapping up in Saint Louis, Missouri; at 7:45am the conference came to a screeching halt. With all flights cancelled, we helped each other get home via vans, buses, personal cars. With gratitude, Nevin and I travelled in a van for seven hours with folks from Birmingham, and then had friends pick us up and drive us home to Atlanta. The next day almost all AZA institutions opened their doors for free to the public, to provide places of peace, safety, solitude and reflection during the next few days and weeks. This act was so appreciated by their communities. Pivoting to peace was the right choice.

The world watched 9-11 and joined with numerous peace initiatives. In early October 2001, I travelled to Assisi, Italy, for the annual conference of International Institute for Peace through Tourism (IIPT), and encountered a Peace March in Assisi by thousands of people. Their joy and commitment to Peace was infectious; I joined the crowds in their walk. Similarly, stepping onto a train to Switzerland, I found myself in a crowded train car next to people with dove flags and peace symbols painted on placards that they carried to a join a Peace March in Geneva. At every train stop, more people marching for peace joined us!

In 2020, as the world is focused on COVID-19 and other social “pandemics”, old paradigms of separateness are ready to be changed. Peace is the way towards uniting humanity in new norms that assert and manifest justice and well-being for all.

Zoos Open Hearts and Provide Peace

As Peace Pilgrim stated, “When enough of us find inner peace, our institutions will become peaceful and there will be no more occasion for war.”

Natural, green spaces are needed to help humanity heal their hearts from fear of changes, learn about local ecosystems, and spark curiosity and play in nature. Zoos offer these spaces now. Zoos are also uniquely equipped to provide peace gardens in which to reflect and discuss hard topics in society: bullying in schools, Black Lives Matter, climate change, materialism, use of natural resources, what the world will be in future.

People are walking and getting outside more than ever before. Zoos are seeing more first-time visitors. Nature parks, beaches, and hiking trails are packed (with social distancing). Finding inner peace is no longer a luxury, it is a necessity of life.

These unique times of interlocking societal “pandemics” offer opportunities to bring peaceful thoughts and actions to the forefront of human existence. By pivoting to peace, zoos can help to create more inclusive and empathetic communities, and to help communities build lasting relationships across diverse cultures, to equalize privilege and access, to include all. Zoos believe in these goals. Zoos can be a catalyst for peace. By providing peaceful places in which all may dialogue safely on societal issues and relax in natural settings, zoos can help to transform current unjust behaviors and mindsets into new norms that respect, listen, celebrate and support both human diversity and diversity in Nature.

Resources:

1. Pandemic definition: <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/pandemic>
2. DEIA: <https://thirdsectorcompany.com/cultural-shift-diversity-equity-inclusion-and-access/>
3. AZA statement on social justice: <https://www.aza.org/aza-news-releases/posts/statement-on-social-and-racial-justice-inclusion-and-equity>
4. Corporations bigger than countries: <https://www.businessinsider.com/25-giant-companies-that-earn-more-than-entire-countries-2018-7>
5. Human scale: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_scale
6. Materialism: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/psychology-materialism_n_4425982 and <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0267257X.2014.959985?journalCode=rjmm20> and <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/materialism>
7. Racism: <https://bahaiteachings.org/racism-americas-most-challenging-issue/>
8. Peace Quotes: <https://www.goodhousekeeping.com/life/a27115824/peace-quotes/>
9. Golden Rule: <https://www.nrm.org/2018/03/golden-rule-common-religions/>