

Lions, Tigers and Bears and So Much More: Zooville, USA

by Ginny Mink

What started off as a Barbary lion program known as Preservation Station in 1997, has blossomed into an impressive educational resource facility aptly named Zooville, USA. Originally, Director, Susan Bradshaw's plan included working with geneticists and conservationists to propagate and return these majestic creatures to their wild habitats. "However, over the years people started contacting us for help in taking animals that were in need of a home. There were more and more animals in need so we evolved and took a different direction and before we knew it we had a sort of zoo. These animals are spokespeople for their wild cousins," Bradshaw explains.

Zooville's long term goals are to attract enough corporate sponsorship to allow student visitors to come in for free. They "hate that educational opportunities depend on the dollar," and while they provide wildlife educational programs to schools and do assemblies, they are in need of additional financial supports. Assistant Director, Sherry Dewald adds, "We're working on doing week long summer programs for youth, but space will be limited." The zoo is 100 percent volunteer driven and they are so thankful for "the support of a phenomenal vet staff at Animal Diagnostic Center in Valrico."

The over 30 species that call the zoo home, are not reclusive, in fact, "some of our animals have been seen on the Tonight Show, Dr. Oz, Good Morning America and Jack Hannah." The objective has been to spread messages of conservation and these ventures have been, "a very exciting opportunity not just for the zoo but for the volunteers that got to travel and participate in them. We hope to do a lot more of it, it was a great opportunity to reach a lot of people."

They legally changed their name to Zooville, USA in 2010 because the original mission was for preservation of one species, "now we're a zoological community, we've gotten animals from all over the US and we thought having zoo in the name would make us more identifiable to kids for what they're gonna find here." Zooville, USA is unique because "we are not species specific, not dedicated to just big cats, wolves or primates. We'll provide a home to any exotic animal if we have the room," Bradshaw elaborates.

As mentioned previously, the zoo is home to over 30 different species as big as lions, tigers and bears and as small as the Cotton Top tamarin, and every size in between. Thusly they are licensed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the US Department of Agriculture and the US Fish and Wildlife Service and are inspected regularly. Due to Florida's unique weather they want people to know that they have hurricane shelters for all the big animals and that "all animals have hurricane safe lockdowns."

Given the large range of animals at the zoo it's hard to choose one that's most interesting, however, Bradshaw says, "the Viverridae family, which includes the binturong (a bearcat) and the Asian Palm and African civets," fits the bill. Depending on a visitor's olfactory sense, the binturong either smells like Fritos or buttered popcorn. "It is one of only two carnivores in the world with a prehensile tail. It's a very unique looking animal." The African civet used to be caught for the purpose of having its scent glands expressed to make musk cologne. "Today everything's synthetic and musk is now made from palm oil which is depleting the forests and habitats of many species," Bradshaw passionately explains. While the Asian Palm civet is "not as interesting looks wise, it's where the Kopi Luwat coffee comes from." This is an expensive coffee made from cleansed and roasted beans that the Asian Palm civet eats and excretes.

Zooville, USA is a beneficial addition to Hillsborough County but since it is solely volunteer supported and run, they have a list of needs and desires for continued growth, like an educational center, onsite classroom, pavilion and butterfly garden. Anyone who can assist in the following areas would be greatly appreciated: construction (materials, equipment and skills), fencing (materials and installation) and landscaping (plants and design). In addition, zoo volunteers are willing to "turn your trash into the animals treasure," by accepting and hauling all forms of scrap metal - even the bigger ones like cars and appliances in an effort to assist in fundraising. Corporate sponsorships are available via banners that will hang in the zoo area for a year and individual animal sponsorships help provide funds for the care of the animals.

Bradshaw's husband, Stewart, and Dewald's husband, Mike are deserving of kudos as Stewart and his brother are responsible for building Bradshaw's dream while working full time jobs, and Mike is the "best chef in town," because he comes and cooks the BBQ whenever they have special guests. "It's a family affair," the ladies add.

For more information on the zoo you can visit the website: www.zoovilleusa.com. If you'd like to set up a school visit or a private tour, please call Susan Bradshaw at (813) 690-9696 and if you're interested in summer programs or are in need of native wildlife rehabilitation (just another aspect of what these tremendous women do) please call Sherry Dewald at (813) 416-0129.

