

Oregon Zoo establishes endangered species justice fund

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

The Oregon Zoo is receiving money from criminals -- criminals who violate wildlife statutes, that is. Community service payments ordered by Oregon's federal court as part of wildlife-crime sentences will now go into an Endangered Species Justice Fund, created by the zoo and the U.S. Attorney's Office in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Money in the fund will be used to help endangered and threatened species. "It's sad to see crimes that hurt wildlife, but we are pleased with the opportunity to have some good come from tragedy," said Oregon Zoo Director Tony Vecchio. "It's an honor for us to team up with the U.S. Attorney's Office and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to help endangered wildlife."

The start-up money from the fund comes from the prosecution of a nationwide conspiracy to sell ocelots illegally. In recent years, wildlife investigators have prosecuted criminals for a broad range of crimes, from trafficking in endangered species and furs to illegally killing hundreds of migratory birds.

"I plan to make sure that criminals who commit wildlife crimes pay to help undo the damage they've done," said U.S. Attorney Karin J. Immergut. In 2005, Immergut and Gov. Ted Kulongoski established a similar endowment to target money from industrial-pollution prosecutions to environmental grants. The endowment -- known as the Oregon Governor's Fund for the Environment -- makes annual grants of hundreds of thousands of dollars to local environmental groups.

The goal of the Endangered Species Justice Fund is to decrease the environmental harm caused by wildlife crimes prosecuted in Oregon. Grants will fund programs that protect and support endangered and threatened species, as well as programs that work to combat illegal trafficking and sale of endangered and threatened species.

Since crimes prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney's Office involve animals from all over the world, the fund will support programs that help Northwest species as well as efforts abroad.

The Endangered Species Justice Fund will be a part of the zoo's Future for Wildlife program. The program has a long history of success in international conservation efforts to help elephants, rhinos, penguins, cheetahs, leopards, snow leopards and chimpanzees in Africa, Asia and South America. FFW also has a proven track record locally, helping to fund regional conservation activities such as the reintroduction of Oregon silverspot butterflies, Washington pygmy rabbits and California condors.

"I am very proud that the U.S. Attorney's office has recognized the zoo's great work in helping endangered wildlife here in the Northwest and around the world," commented Vecchio. "With their help, we will make an even greater impact."

"We are grateful to the Oregon Zoo and the U.S. Attorney's Office for focusing attention on the problem of wildlife crime and ensuring that penalties from those offenses benefit species here and abroad," said Ren Lohofener, director of the Fish and Wildlife Service's Pacific Region, headquartered in Portland. "When an individual or organization unlawfully sells wildlife -- especially protected species -- it creates a market that encourages their exploitation, in some cases driving a species closer to extinction."

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