

William Conway

A Tribute

“Bill Conway was the intellectual guiding light—the most influential person in the zoo community ever,” said John Robinson, Joan L. Tweedy chair in conservation strategy at the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) in New York, N.Y. He is far from alone in his opinion of the legendary zoologist and conservationist who passed away in November of last year.

By Mary Ellen Collins



William G. Conway retired as the president and general director of the Wildlife Conservation Society in 1999 after a 43-year tenure, but his groundbreaking approach and accomplishments continue to inform the work of every

Association of Zoos and Aquariums-accredited facility.

“I knew him all of my professional life,” said Jim Breheny, director of the Bronx Zoo in the Bronx, N.Y., and executive director of zoos and aquarium of WCS. “He was amazingly dedicated and focused, and those of us who saw his passion, drive, and vision work to carry that on every day.”

Conway was an icon, a mentor to many, and an inspiration to all. We would like to take this opportunity to remember and appreciate his unparalleled commitment and contributions to animals, zoos and aquariums, and conservation.

Impact on Zoos

Conway will forever be known as the man who transformed zoo exhibit design with a revolutionary approach that involved showcasing species as they lived in nature.

John Gwynne, former vice president for design at WCS, said that helping Conway bring his exhibit designs to life could be challenging, but was always worth the effort.

“He was tough on himself and a tough taskmaster. I had the best job in the world, but it wasn’t easy. Sometimes we sent him a design to review, and he would say, ‘I kind of expected better.’ That pushed us to come back with something that was better—and usually more expensive! When we opened JungleWorld, I was walking around the area, which was filled with crowds. People were so excited, and one woman said to me, ‘This is the most amazing place I’ve ever been in—a real rainforest!’ Bill created magic that inspired people to care and created the optimal

environment for animals.”

Ed Maruska, director emeritus, Cincinnati Zoo in Cincinnati, Ohio, is among those who credit Conway’s immersive designs for prompting them to make changes.

“I’m 88 and I regard him as the greatest zoo director of my era, not just locally, but globally. He was our guru. One of his papers, *How to Exhibit a Bullfrog: A Bed-Time Story for Zoo Men*, really showed the depth of his thinking and changed the way I thought about our exhibits,” he said. “At the time, most of us kept gorillas in pairs, but in the wild they traveled in families and groups of 10 to 30. We became the second zoo to exhibit a family of gorillas in an outdoor landscape; and our Jungle Trails was named one of the best immersive displays.”

The fact that Conway never lacked for ideas and gave his staff members great latitude inspired many of them to work for him for decades.

“We would have lunch once a week and talk about the things we wanted to do,” said Jim Doherty, retired general curator at WCS. “He had enough plans for a whole other career—I think he was a dreamer. He trusted me and let me do things that hadn’t been done before.”

Conway’s strong belief in the ties between animals in the wild and those in zoos and aquariums became a hallmark of his exhibits.

“He believed that zoos exist as agents for conservation, and that it is incumbent on us to connect the animals in the collections to the animals in the field,” said Kris Vehrs, retired executive director at the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. “Bill championed the idea that when you build an exhibit, you have to tie it back to the wild, morally and ethically.”

The Congo Gorilla Forest at the Bronx Zoo exemplified this idea.

“When we first opened the exhibit, you had to pay a separate fee which went directly to African forest conservation,” said Pat Thomas, vice president and general curator at WCS. “At the end of the exhibit there was a voting pavilion listing projects and species so you could direct where your money went. We also received many additional donations because the exhibit was so powerful.”



The Congo Gorilla Forest at the Bronx Zoo.

Impact on Conservation

Championing the connection between animals in zoos and aquariums and those in the wild was also an integral part of Conway's approach to conservation. In 1966, he established the Institute for Research and Animal Behavior, a collaboration between the New York Zoological Society and Rockefeller University that supported a small team of conservationists, including George Schaller and Jonah Western, in studying animals in both environments.

"Bill was always interested in conservation and saving wildlife in the field, and this came from a very deep respect for nature," said Robinson. "As the head of the New York Zoological Society, as WCS was known at the time, he was pushing a very clear vision of zoos, aquariums, and conservation, and the idea that our parks needed to do more than exhibit animals, they needed to be conservation partners. He was also involved in the original draft of CITES and created a culture of conservation and respect for animals that is pervasive throughout the entire zoo

and aquarium community."

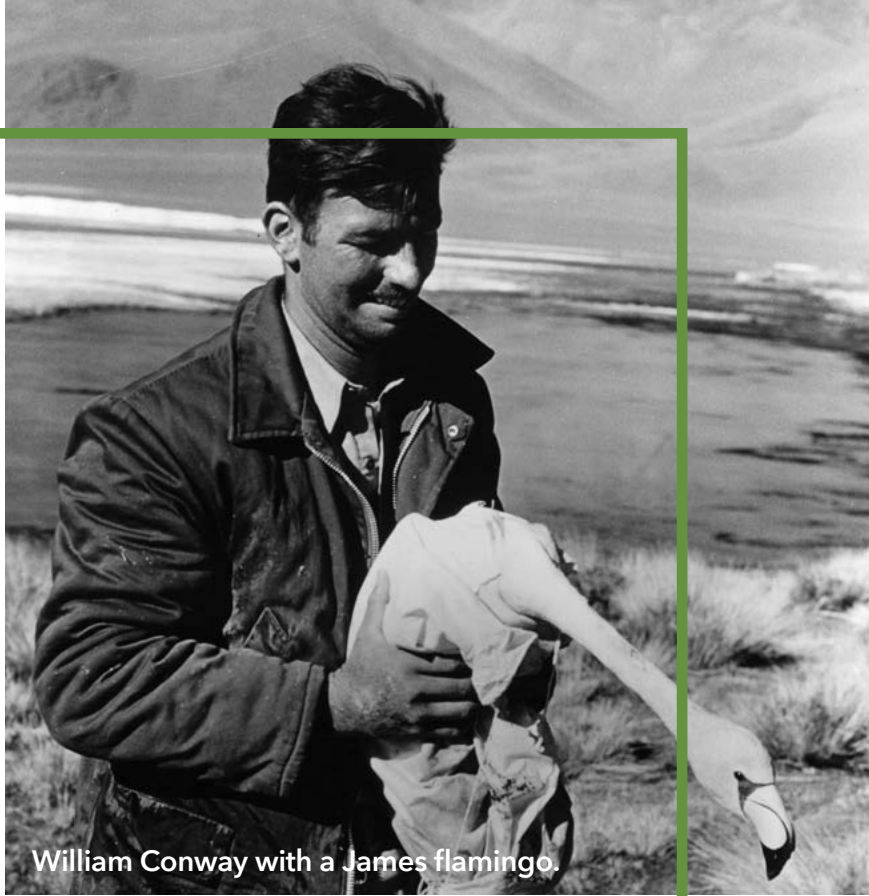
Robinson said that Conway believed a focus on research was the way we should contribute to conservation and today, the conservation program of WCS reflects that vision with conservationists working in the field in almost 60 countries.

"WCS differs from most conservation organizations, in that it's very field based," he said. "It focuses on implementation rather than policy. Bill taught me to have a huge amount of respect for the field staff. As an organization, we defer to local knowledge, field-based perspectives, and we tend not to believe that leadership knows what's going on. I learned a lot from Bill."

Cristián Samper, current WCS president and chief executive officer and a former field biologist, also appreciated Conway's expertise and approach. "I learned a lot from him about the evolution of zoos and aquariums and the role they play and how you could connect that to the work we do in the field. When he started hiring people like George Schaller



William Conway and Brooke Astor.



William Conway with a James flamingo.



William Conway releasing a flamingo.

“He was an eloquent presenter and he knew we needed to be more efficient and strategic about our animal management programs. He acknowledged that managing animals is difficult and requires putting community needs above the needs of individual zoos and aquariums.”

and John Robinson, he created an environment that allowed the field component to flourish.” Having been a part of creating the William G. Conway International Conservation Award, he adds, “There was always pushback if we wanted to focus on him, but I’m very happy we did this, and that the award exists today. It’s a way to recognize people in the field who are following in his footsteps.”

Conway’s support and advocacy of global conservation included relying on his fundraising prowess with patrons including Brooke Astor and Laurance Rockefeller.

“He created a huge endowment for conservation and a giant international program,” said Kevin Bell, retired executive officer emeritus at the Lincoln Park Zoo in Chicago, Ill. “Major New York philanthropists trusted Bill. They opened their pocketbooks and made major commitments to conservation. That was his magic.”

Impact on AZA

Over several decades, Conway contributed his knowledge and expertise to numerous initiatives, including helping to write the first zoo accreditation program, which was adopted by AZA in 1973.

Breheny recalled Conway’s often heard statement, “If you’re going to keep animals, keep them well,” and emphasized the importance of accreditation in helping institutions achieve that goal.

“The accreditation process has credibility in the outside world because it demonstrates and reinforces our ability to self-police. As we gain more knowledge about what species need, we have an obligation as individual institutions and as a community to constantly re-evaluate how we keep animals and how we can keep them well. It’s important to the core of what we do.”

Conway was also one of the architects of the Species Survival Plan® program, and strongly advocated for its adoption, he said.

“When Bill Conway spoke, everyone listened,” said Maruska. “He led us in the direction of having a strong animal management program because he saw that if we didn’t manage our animals correctly, we would lose them.”

Although members that preferred having complete control over the animals in their collections needed to be convinced,

Conway challenged them to embrace a new way of thinking, according to Vehrs.

“He was an eloquent presenter and he knew we needed to be more efficient and strategic about our animal management programs. He acknowledged that managing animals is difficult and requires putting community needs above the needs of individual zoos and aquariums.”

Conway remained a thoughtful and engaged participant and speaker in AZA for years after his retirement.

“When you knew Bill was going to do a keynote, you would actually anticipate listening to him and hearing something you hadn’t heard before,” said Bell. “He was always one step ahead of us.”

Vehrs agreed. “He was so intellectually stimulating and so far above us on what we were thinking zoos and aquariums could and should be. Even in his later years, he was still continuing to question, poke, prod, and ask, ‘Isn’t there a better way?’”

Even years after retiring from WCS, Conway remained a source of support for the organization he had led. “We used to have lunch three or four times a year, and I always felt there was a lot I could learn from him,” said Samper. “He was a transformative leader who laid the foundation of who we are today ... and I really valued the fact that he was always there to give advice and counsel when I needed him.”

Bell remained in close touch with Conway and said that until very recently, Conway was sending him articles about conservation issues and worrying about global warming and the impact it would have on the survival of species around the world.

“Today, I feel a bit of a void. It’s just very sad. I don’t feel that there’s any one person to fill his shoes. I hope several people will step up, or maybe small groups since the only way to get things done these days is through partnerships and collaborations.”

We may not be able to fill his shoes, but we can follow in his footsteps. We can honor him by doing what he would do: think outside the box, hold ourselves to the highest standards, always seek a better way, and passionately advocate for the well-being of all animals, everywhere.

This will be the legacy Bill Conway deserves.

Mary Ellen Collins is a writer based in Saint Petersburg, Fla.