

Saving Two at the Zoo

By LaVelle Gardner

Migratory birds in Guatemala and spotted frogs in Idaho aren't the only creatures whose chances of survival are being impacted by members of the BSU community.

While several BSU faculty and students are involved in projects to preserve the habitat of a small handful of critters indigenous to North America (see accompanying stories), Boise College alumnus Dan Wharton is involved in the survival of two exotic, captive — and imperiled — species.

Wharton, 47, is the director of the Central Park Wildlife Center in New York City and a member of the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums, an organization in which he chairs committees devoted to the propagation of the gorilla and the snow leopard.

Heading what is called a Species Survival Plan (SSP) for the gorilla and snow leopard, Wharton says his job is to "present wildlife to the zoo-going public in a way that inspires greater interest in wildlife and an understanding of the current need to care about the fate of the wild." This is done, he explains, by making the small, captive population of gorillas, snow leopards and other endangered species in North American zoos "wildlife ambassadors."

Despite some opinions to the contrary, zoos "are very much a part of the wildlife conservation movement," says Wharton. Noting that there are species of animals that have remained alive in captivity while disappearing altogether in the wild, he states that zoos can serve as "a backup for extinction in nature" for a number of large vertebrate species.

"We are unique in our ability to provide intensive protection to captive populations. So in the process of creating [these] stable populations, we enhance the educational potential of the zoological garden," he says. "Also, any conservation strategy that is employed is ultimately about stabilizing habitat and species population in nature. But conservation is a new science and there are no guarantees. Populations of endangered species in zoological gardens are a 'miraculous insurance policy' — so if all efforts fail in a species' environment, a backup population exists in zoos. Obviously zoos cannot maintain all endangered species but can work with enough to make zoological gardens uniquely useful in species preservation programs."

And while neither the gorilla nor the snow leopard is currently on the verge of extinction, their population numbers are low in their natural surroundings. There are currently 30,000 western lowland

gorillas — listed as a "threatened" species, which is one step below "endangered" status — living in the wilds of western Africa and approximately 330 of the great apes are in captivity in North America. The snow leopards' numbers are even more worrisome. There are only about 5,000 of the large cats roaming upland central Asia, making them an official endangered species. And of the 600 snow leopards in captivity worldwide, 260 are part of Wharton's SSP;

most of the remainder are part of a similar program in Europe.

One of his and other conservationists' biggest concerns is educating people about the wildlife crisis and how it affects everything on the planet. "There is a crisis going on right now in all areas where species are being lost at a greater and greater rate due to human activity," he says. Wharton says education is the key and he and his colleagues hope to see a clear international consensus and body of law that will help reverse the current trend in species endangerment and extinction.

A Middleton High School graduate, Wharton spent 2 1/2 years at BC from 1966-68 and finished his last year at the College of Idaho with a bachelor's

degree in psychology. After completing two years with the Peace Corps, he enrolled in a master's degree program with an emphasis in administration of environmental organizations at the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vt. The program included an internship in Nairobi, Kenya, where he worked on a United Nations symposium on environmental programs.

After finishing his master's degree, Wharton began working in 1974 at Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, a job that successfully combined his interest in animal husbandry and administration.

He was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to Germany from 1976-77 where he worked on a study of population genetics, and in 1979 was selected as a curatorial intern with what is now called the Wildlife Conservation Society in New York. He earned a Ph.D. in biology from Fordham University in 1990. Over the years, he moved up through the ranks to his current position.

Wharton believes that zoos are an important part of the conservation movement. "The mission of the zoological garden is to help people understand wildlife issues. The best way to do that is to be able to present wildlife in ways that are reflective of the tremendous importance of the wildlife," he says. "The well-run zoological garden invests very heavily in programs and messages that say 'we care and so should you.'" □



Former Boise College student Wharton's work is helping preserve the snow leopard and the gorilla.