Call of the Wild

An Interview with Steven E. Sanderson,
President and Chief Executive Officer, Wildlife Conservation Society, New York

Steven E. Sanderson

EDITORS' NOTE *Steven Sanderson earned a bachelor's degree in history from the University of Central Arkansas in 1971 and a master's degree in political science from the University of Arkansas in 1973. He then attended Stanford University, earning a master's degree in 1975 and a doctoral degree in 1978, both in political science. He began his academic career in 1979 at the University of Florida, as an Assistant Professor of Political Science. He was tenured four years later and, in 1994, became chair of the department. In 1998, Sanderson became Dean of Emory College, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, at Emory University in Atlanta. A former Fulbright Scholar in Mexico, Sanderson has also held numerous fellowships and grants and has written extensively on international politics and the environment, including several books about poverty, development, and the conservation of wild exploited species. He was appointed to his current position in 2001.*

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) saves wildlife and wild lands through careful science, international conservation, education, and the management of the world's largest system of urban wildlife parks, including the Bronx Zoo, the New York Aquarium, the Central Park Zoo, the Queens Zoo, and the Prospect Park Zoo. With field conservation programs in more than 60 countries and with 155 Ph.D. scientists on a staff of nearly 4,000, the WCS's (www.wcs.org) scientific capacity is unique to conservation and rivals that of many scientific research institutes.*

People have heard of the Bronx Zoo, but what is it that the Wildlife Conservation Society is doing in over 60 countries across the world?

Though we are best known as the organization that runs the Bronx Zoo, WCS is a global conservation group with a long history of saving wildlife and wild places. One hundred years ago, we saved the bison from extinction by restocking reserves on the Great Plains with animals from the Bronx. Today we work with private partners and public agencies to save about 200 million acres of landscapes around the world that are important to the future of wild nature.

Are you traveling constantly, to all these various sites?

I travel as much as is appropriate. I do have to stay in touch with what we're doing in the field, but it has to be based on the best use of my time. I have obligations here in management and also on the fundraising side, as well as obligations to our board of trustees.

How do you get the money to be able to do all of this?

We have an interesting business model. We are a historic venue for the education and entertainment of our visitors. Four million people every year come to the Bronx Zoo, the New York Aquarium, the Central Park Zoo, the Prospect Park Zoo, and the Queens Zoo. And so we have operating revenue that comes from our guest experience, admissions, parking, merchandise, food, and attractions. And on top of that we raise about $60 million a year – 70 percent of that is private – for the sake of our programs in wildlife health and our field conservation activities. We have a $650 million campaign underway now called Gateways to Conservation.

Do you offer naming recognition to your contributors?

Yes, just as there is in a university or a research institute to name a lab, or to name an endowed chair.

Can you name an animal?

Yes. We have a lot of newborns at our facilities and many of them are spectacular. We have named rhinos, tigers, giraffes, and so forth after individuals.

What is it like working with all of the different types of people and organizations that contribute to your cause?

Each of these interactions is a learning opportunity. A couple of years ago, we had a terrific opportunity to work with Goldman Sachs, which donated to WCS some very significant wild lands in southern Chile. It was a very demanding exercise for a nonprofit organization, but it enriched us as an organization because we learned what the demands of an investment bank were, and the kinds of expectations the private sector has for performance. And we integrated those into our own behavior. So I think trying to learn from each of these interactions is a very valuable thing. I also try to remember that it's not about me. That enables me to approach all of this professionally instead of personally.

What can corporations do to be good conservationists?

One of the things we ask corporations to do is to identify with the values that we do, which involve protecting the earth. And I think we've had in this country a growing consensus among the private sector that there are responsible ways to behave that both serve the shareholder and the bottom line, and are also conservation-minded.

For corporations looking to help, what types of sponsorships are currently available?

I think the most powerful thing that a New York-based company could do is sponsor some of the capital improvements we're making at the Bronx Zoo and the New York Aquarium, which really are windows on the conservation world. We're doing a $60 million restoration of the historic landmark lion house where we are building a Madagascar exhibit. To be associated with the restoration of the lion house in this exhibit really speaks to a global value, but also ensures that the Bronx Zoo will be available for New Yorkers for another 50 or 100 years.

What would you recommend for a European or Asian company that wanted to do something worthwhile for worldwide conservation?

We work in 20 countries in Asia. We are the foremost technical and scientific advisor on the ground to a global program called Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants. It's under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, and it's very under-funded. So a corporation operating in Southeast Asia could help, not just us, but the world – in India, Sumatra, Thailand, and throughout Southeast Asia – in the conservation of Asian elephants. We also have a new program called Tigers Forever,

that promises to increase the number of tigers at our research sites by 50 percent in the next 10 years. So an Indian corporation could certainly invest in our protected areas management and our tiger conservation programs in India. The same goes for a company doing business in the Russian Far East with Siberian tigers. We work in all of those areas. And support for those local efforts and the local communities is invaluable. Similar efforts are underway in Africa and Latin America.

How about wealthy individuals? How can they make a difference, either by themselves or through their foundations?

The new philanthropists that we are seeing are interested in understanding and engaging with the mission of the organizations they support. And they want to be a part of the progressive change in either public policy, or conservation practice or education. I think the next wave of our engagement with the private donor community will be one in which we open a dialogue so that private individuals help us shape the value proposition and the deliverables that will get their philanthropic support. And so I see it as a much more engaged kind of philanthropy than we have seen in the past.

What's your greatest challenge?

I think the two greatest challenges are global climate change and emerging infectious diseases. Part of our uniqueness, because of our history as a wildlife management organization and a manager of protected areas, is that we're on the ground and able to assess how much we will have to adapt to the effects of climate change in the landscapes that we're protecting. On the infectious disease side, we have the only worldwide veterinary program. Our people are in Mongolia testing wild birds to see if they're carrying avian flu. We also operate the Global Avian Influenza Network for Surveillance, which is a cooperative venture with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], U.S. Department of Agriculture, and other partners. We are very worried that these emerging infectious diseases, not just avian flu, but ebola, and bovine tuberculosis, brucellosis, and any number of diseases, will wipe out fragile wildlife populations. So our veterinary staff is dedicated to fighting it, but of course it's a fabulously difficult issue to tackle. Seventy percent of infectious diseases that affect humans are zoonotic, which means they cross over from animal to human populations. And so we partner with CDC, the World Health Organization, the Food and Agricultural Organization, Cargill, and other big private sector actors to address these urgent problems.

The real question for us over the next 10 to 30 years is, will the habitats and animals that we're dedicated to protect have a place to be? The perfect example is the Andean flamingo. It lives and reproduces in high-altitude, shallow lakes in the Andes at 16,000 feet above sea level. Those lakes are likely to disappear because of glacial melt and the changes in moisture at that elevation. In the future, the test will be, and what we're trying to conduct research on, is, whether wildlife will find alternative places to reproduce and live. So we need to be thinking forward, not only about the areas that we are protecting, but the areas that we have to protect in the next 10 to 25 years.

Tigers Forever has pledged to increase the tiger population in captivity by 50 percent in the next 10 years.

What's your greatest frustration?

That we have failed in our community and in the world to build on the great momentum that was there at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, when the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biodiversity, and many other initiatives were really put down. That should have been the launching pad for decades of conservation efforts and greater presence in the public mind. But we've lost attention. The global attention has moved away from these issues in ways that jeopardize the future of wild animals and these beautiful landscapes that people have cherished since they first started painting animals on rocks. And so we have to reclaim that ground. Even in the global climate change discussion, the primary focus these days is on the energy question. But there are so many other powerful issues at hand. So I'm frustrated not to have people know about, appreciate, and understand the power of what we're trying to do. But I understand that the responsibility to make that case rests with us.

What is currently being done to bring this to the attention of decision makers around the world?

My own kind of cockeyed optimism leads me to feel that most leaders want to accomplish something good. But you have to compete for their time and attention, and get your mission to the top of their priority list. It's not an indictment of a public company that they have to pay attention to shareholders, stock prices, and operational obligations. So we need to speak to those companies in ways that encourage and respect profit, but also represent something that is powerful beyond that purpose.

For world leaders, we have to fill a role that has never been filled. In the Congo Basin, we play a very powerful role as conservation agents where there isn't an effective park service. That way, we build our value to the government rather than trying to persuade nations that are economically poor, or bureaucratically weak. As for the U.S., I'm writing a piece now on "two-track diplomacy," which argues that conservation in places of extreme political difficulty is not only possible, but often essential. We've had people in North Korea trying to work toward the extension of the range of the Amur tiger. And we have had for many years an engagement with Iran to protect the Asiatic cheetah. And we recently led a very exciting relocation of an orphaned snow leopard from Pakistan where we were involved alongside the President of Pakistan and the Department of State in this very complicated international matter. So the trick is to find these opportunities and to be pragmatic about them. There is so much to be done and there are so many opportunities to do more. There are so many success stories that we see conservation not as some dark conversation about what has been lost, but rather as a forward-looking conversation about what we can do. Humans and wildlife can live in reasonable harmony. But it takes a lot of hard work.

You only do good deeds around the world. Do you ever receive any criticism?

Absolutely. There are people who think zoos shouldn't exist. And in the case of some zoos, they're right. But they attack all zoos. They have a position that is hostile to the management of animals in captivity. But we think we're providing something positive for New York and the world on behalf of animals. Besides, we don't use any coercive tactics. We bring our animals into our facilities, we check them out, and we spend a great deal of effort to make sure it is all done stress free. We have 20,000 animals around the city, and the clinical health, the exhibitory, and the well being of the animals require over 1,000 experts who only care about the animals' welfare. There are others who believe foreigners should not intrude upon the management of landscapes and wild animals in other countries, and we are careful to be respectful of local customs and laws. So I'd love to think that everybody loves us, but it's a risky, difficult organization to operate. ●