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THE PROTECTING LOCAL ZOOS ACT OF 2026: A COLLABORATIVE EFFORT TO SAFEGUARD RESPONSIBLE ZOOLOGICAL INSTITUTIONS

CONCHOS PUFFISH RECOVERY PROJECT: SAVING A LITTLE FISH IN A BIG STATE



Where Institutional Memory Lives: The Zoo & Aquarium Video Archive

By Mark Rosenthal - Executive Director & Cofounder the [Zoo & Aquarium Video Archive](https://zooaquariumvideoarchive.org)
Link to the website: <https://zooaquariumvideoarchive.org>

Photos courtesy of David Monk, Louie DiSabato, Bud Bertog

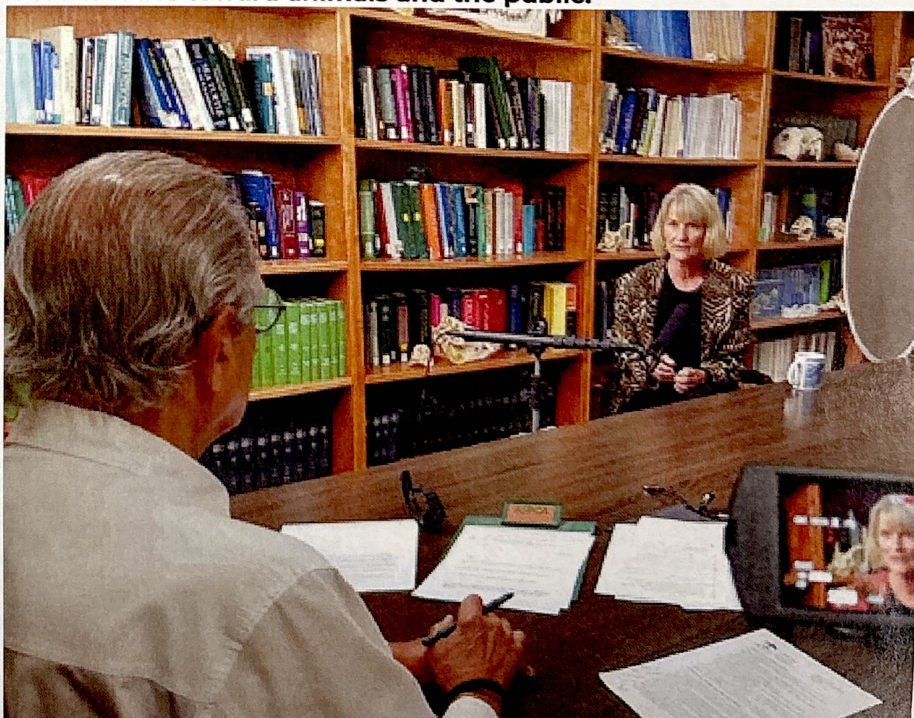
The Zoo & Aquarium Video Archive® (ZAVA) stands as one of the most quietly powerful resources in the zoological world—a living repository of professional memory, institutional history, and the evolution of animal care philosophy across nearly a century. For zoo and aquarium professionals, it offers something rare: not just documents or images, but the voices, faces, and firsthand accounts of the people who built the modern zoological profession. Its value lies not only in what it preserves, but in how it connects today's practitioners with the lineage of ideas, innovations, and hardwon lessons that shaped the field.

The Zoo & Aquarium Video Archive began with a simple but profound realization: the founders of the modern zoo profession were aging, and their stories—along with the knowledge embedded in their lived experience—were at risk of being lost forever. In the late 20th century, as the profession shifted rapidly toward conservation science, behavioral enrichment, and welfare centered management, many of the pioneers who had guided zoos through earlier eras were retiring or passing away. Their insights, often undocumented, represented a body of knowledge that could not be reconstructed once gone.

The project's founders recognized that traditional archives—paper files, photographs, and institutional reports—captured only part of the story. **What was missing were the human elements: the motivations behind decisions, the interpersonal dynamics that shaped institutions, the improvisation required in an era before standardized protocols, and the evolution of attitudes toward animals and the public.**

Thus, the Archive began as an oral history initiative. **Early efforts focused on recording longform interviews with directors, curators, veterinarians, keepers, exhibit designers, and conservation leaders.** These were not short sound bites; they were deep, reflective conversations that captured decades of professional experience. Over time, the project expanded to include historical documents, rare photographs, correspondence and eventually video footage from early television programs that introduced the public to wildlife long before the age of streaming.

What started as a preservation effort grew into a comprehensive historical and educational resource—one that continues to expand as new generations of professionals contribute their stories.



Dr. Barbara Baker, Director Emeritus, Pittsburgh Zoo

The strength of the Zoo & Aquarium Video Archive lies in the breadth and rarity of its materials. Many of its holdings simply do not exist anywhere else, making it an irreplaceable resource for researchers, historians, and practitioners.

The Archive contains letters, memos, seminal published articles and personal communications between some of the most influential figures in zoo and aquarium history. These documents reveal:

- How early zoo leaders collaborated across institutions
- The challenges they faced in animal acquisition, exhibit design, and public engagement
- The evolution of professional ethics and standards
- The personal relationships that shaped the direction of the field

For professionals today, these materials offer insight into how foundational decisions were made and how institutions navigated crises, opportunities, and shifting public expectations

The Archive's photographic collection captures moments that would otherwise be lost:

- Early exhibit construction and design experiments
- The first generations of zoo veterinarians at work

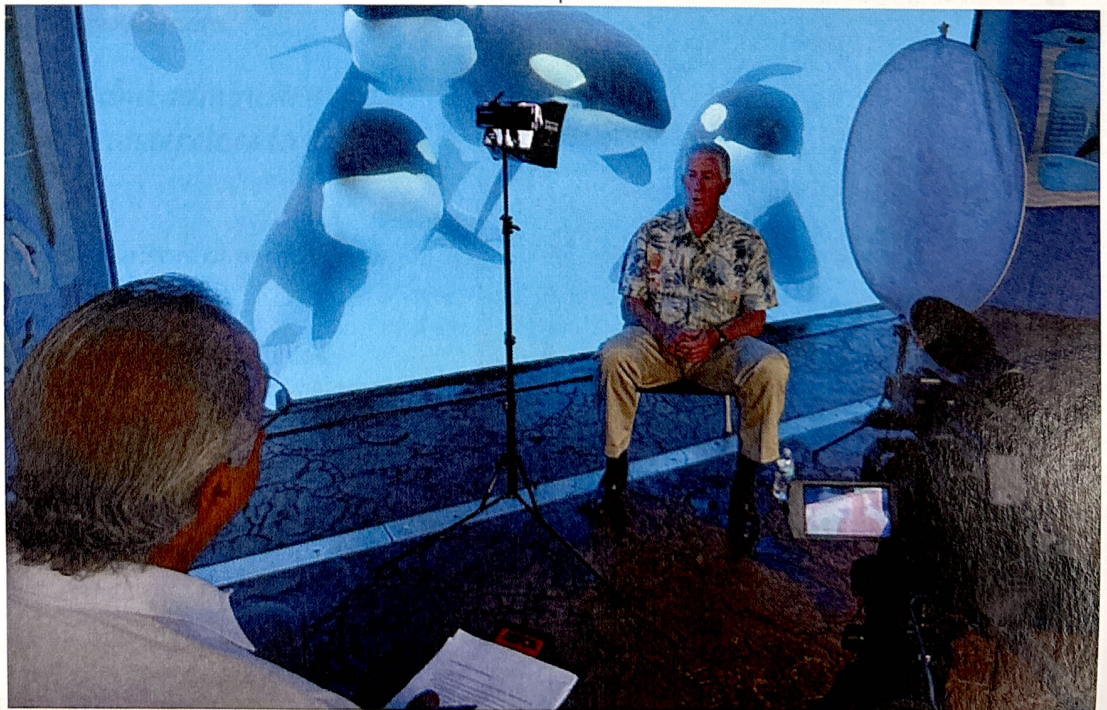
- Behind-the-scenes glimpses of animal care in the mid-20th century
- Portraits of influential figures whose names appear in textbooks but whose faces are rarely seen

These images help contextualize the profession's evolution, illustrating how far zoos and aquariums have come in terms of welfare, safety, and scientific grounding.

One of the Archive's crown jewels is its collection of episodes from *Zoo Parade*, the pioneering television program hosted by Marlin Perkins. Marlin was the only zoo director to ever be featured on the cover of Time magazine. Airing from 1950 to 1957, *Zoo Parade* was the first regularly broadcast wildlife program in American television history. Long before *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*, *The Crocodile Hunter* or *Jack Hanna's Animal Adventures*, Perkins used the medium of television to introduce audiences to animals, conservation issues, and the work of zoos.

The Archive's holdings include:

- 131 full episodes of *Zoo Parade*
- Behind-the-scenes footage
- Correspondence related to the show's development



Brad Andrews being interviewed at Sea World, Florida

For zoo professionals, these materials are more than entertainment. They document the origins of public wildlife education in mass media and show how early zoo leaders shaped public understanding of animals. They also reveal how storytelling, interpretation, and public engagement strategies have evolved over time.

Modern zoological institutions operate in a complex landscape of conservation science, public expectations, regulatory oversight, and ethical scrutiny. In this environment, historical context is not a luxury—it is a strategic asset. The Zoo & Aquarium Video Archive provides that context in several essential ways.

1. Preserving Institutional Memory

Many zoos and aquariums struggle with the loss of institutional knowledge as staff retire or move on. The Archive captures the voices of those who built the profession, offering:

- Firsthand accounts of major decisions
- Explanations of why certain practices emerged
- Lessons learned from successes and failures
- Insights into how institutions adapted to change

This helps current leaders avoid repeating past mistakes and understand the rationale behind long-standing practices.

2. Supporting Professional Development

For new keepers, curators, and administrators, the Archive functions as a masterclass in the history of their field.

Watching interviews with past directors or early veterinarians provides:

- A sense of professional lineage
- Exposure to diverse management philosophies
- Context for how animal welfare standards evolved
- Inspiration from the passion and dedication of earlier generations

This grounding strengthens professional identity and fosters a deeper appreciation for the responsibilities of the role.

3. Enhancing Research and Scholarship

Historians, graduate students, and researchers use the Archive to study:

- The development of zoo medicine
- Shifts in exhibit design philosophy
- The history of conservation messaging
- The role of zoos & aquariums in American cultural life

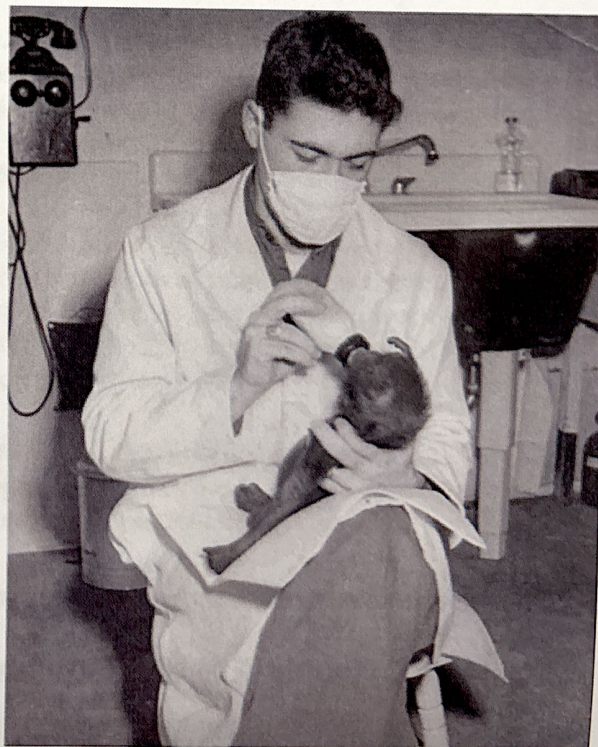
Because the Archive includes both visual and written materials, it supports interdisciplinary research across history, anthropology, media studies, and environmental science.

4. Informing Public Engagement Strategies

By examining early public-facing efforts like *Zoo Parade*, professionals can trace how zoos have communicated with audiences over time. This helps institutions:

- Understand what messaging resonated in the past
- Identify outdated narratives that need revision
- Develop more effective, ethical, and inclusive communication strategies today

The Archive becomes a tool not only for looking backward, but for shaping the future of public education.



Louie DiSabato with first captive born gorilla in the world, Columbus Zoo 1957

5. Documenting the Evolution of Animal Welfare

Perhaps most importantly, the Archive provides a clear record of how attitudes toward animal care have changed. Interviews and historical footage show:

- The transition from menageriestyle exhibits to naturalistic habitats
- The rise of behavioral enrichment
- The development of modern veterinary practices
- The increasing emphasis on conservation and welfare science

This historical arc helps professionals articulate why today's standards matter and how they emerged from decades of learning and refinement.

One of the Archive's most powerful contributions is its preservation of personal stories.

The interviews capture the humor, humility, frustrations, and triumphs of people who devoted their lives to animals and public service.

These narratives reveal:

- The improvisation required in early zoo medicine
- The challenges of acquiring animals ethically in different eras
- The creativity behind exhibit innovations
- The emotional realities of working with wildlife

For professionals today, these stories offer mentorship across time. They remind us that the field has always been shaped by individuals willing to experiment, adapt, and advocate for better practices.

As the zoo and aquarium community continues to evolve, the Zoo & Aquarium Video Archive becomes even more essential. It provides a foundation for:

- Training future leaders
- Strengthening institutional continuity
- Supporting historical research
- Preserving the profession's cultural heritage
- Inspiring innovation grounded in past experience



Jim Hurlibit and Marlin Perkins filming Zoo Parade

In an era when digital media often feels ephemeral, the Archive stands as a deliberate, curated, and enduring record of a profession that has transformed dramatically over the past century.

The Zoo & Aquarium Video Archive is not a static collection. It continues to expand as new interviews are recorded, and additional historical materials are donated. Each contribution enriches the narrative of the profession and ensures that future generations will have access to the wisdom of those who came before.

The Archive's ongoing growth reflects a shared commitment across the zoo and aquarium community: a belief that history matters, that stories matter, and that the lessons of the past can guide the challenges of the future.

The Archive's value lies not only in what it preserves, but in what it makes possible. As you think about how this resource might support your own work, what aspects of the Archive's history or materials would you like to explore more deeply?

"If you don't know history, then you don't know anything. You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree." Michael Crichton

Click the link below to access **The Zoo & Aquarium Video Archive® (ZAVA)**

<https://zooaquariumvideoarchive.org/>