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Endangered African penguins are thriving at Seneca Park Zoo

Zoo called leading producer of genetic lines

Rochester, N.Y. – March 24, 2015 — Seneca Park Zoo continues its role as a national leader in building the population of African penguins in conservation care. The Zoo’s recent baby boom — six chicks hatched in January — is testament to the Zoo’s exemplary successes.

“The role Seneca Park Zoo plays in the effort to save and sustain African penguins is critically important,” said Maggie Brooks, Monroe County Executive. “Birds from our facility have helped to shape the population in conservation care.”

African penguin chicks hatched at the Seneca Park Zoo have been sent to 25 accredited zoos and aquariums across North America. Since 1999, the Zoo has had 93 successful hatchlings. Currently, there are 43 penguins in the Zoo’s flock. (See supporting document for specifics on each bird.)

Accredited members of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) have built a unique infrastructure that helps endangered species through the Species Survival Plan (SSP) programs. These programs are coordinated to ensure, among other things, genetic diversity among populations and to build sustainable breeding populations in conservation care.

Steve Sarro, African Penguin SSP Coordinator and a Curator at the National Zoo, said Seneca Park Zoo is “the leading producer of demographics and genetic lines” for African penguins. The genetics of the Zoo’s colony are especially strong because its founders were imported from South Africa in 1996.

African penguins are found in coastal areas and seas off the southern tip of Africa. Once abundant in their natural range, there has been a 60% decline in population in the last 30 years. Numbers have dwindled so quickly that in 2010, African penguins were listed as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List.

Knowledge gained from the success of breeding programs in zoos is being used to help assist breeding programs in situ, where population decline is due in large part to breeding failure. The Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB), a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation of sea birds, has, for example, established The Chick Bolstering Project. The initiative is a collaborative effort to introduce hand-reared chicks back into their natural range to combat population decline.

“Zoos play a critical role in species survival,” said Pamela Reed Sanchez, Executive Director of the Seneca Park Zoo Society. “People will only protect what they love, and what they know. Our

job is to provide our guests with moments of joy and wonder so they will be moved to help save animals.”

Seneca Park Zoo supports organizations such as SANCCOB as they work tirelessly to save this magnificent bird in its natural range.

Internationally, and in our own backyard, Seneca Park Zoo plays a key role in species survival. Chartered as an educational institution in 1957 by New York State, the Seneca Park Zoo Society plays an integral role in supporting Monroe County, the owners and operators of the Zoo. Together, we are working to bring animals back from the brink of extinction.