



Roger Williams Park Zoo has been a Rhode Island treasure for more than 150 years and is the state's premier single-site family destination. Our mission as leaders in conservation and animal care is to create engaging experiences that empower guests to join us in conserving wildlife and wild places.

The nonprofit Rhode Island Zoological Society has operated the Zoo since 2005 on behalf of the City of Providence; and its strategic priorities include increasing purpose-driven engagement with our internal and external audiences, fostering a strong connection to our conservation mission. We also strive to elevate the overall zoo experience, enhancing satisfaction and a sense of meaning and belonging for all guests. Third, we prioritize a positive culture of trust, collaboration, and shared accountability, resulting in our people, animals, and organization thriving.

The Zoo enjoys the highest attendance of any destination in the state. Each year the Zoo welcomes more than 500,000 daytime guests and over 200,000 more to its evening Jack-O-Lantern and Holiday Lights Spectacular shows. The Roger Williams Park Zoo team includes 86 full-time employees, 165 part-time and seasonal staff and 150 volunteers. Our animal population numbers approximately 800 individuals, representing 128 species of amphibians, arthropods, birds, fish, mammals and reptiles.

Accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums since 1986, Roger Williams Park Zoo also counts membership in the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums among its many professional and conservation affiliations.

Not simply a family destination dedicated to wildlife education and conservation, the Zoo is a driver of the state's economy. In 2024, according to a University of Rhode Island economic impact study, the Zoo had a statewide impact of more than \$75,000,000, contributing to the creation of 864 jobs across a variety of sectors. Comparing the Zoo's \$18million annual operating budget to its impact on the communities we serve, that is greater than a 4:1 ratio.

The Zoo is embarking on a new surge of growth toward realizing the goals mapped out in its master plan. Having completed the magnificent Faces of the Rainforest, an animal quarantine facility, a versatile animal commissary and, most recently, the Conservation Learning Center during the past eight years, we now set our sights on four transformative projects that will carry our mission boldly into the next decade.

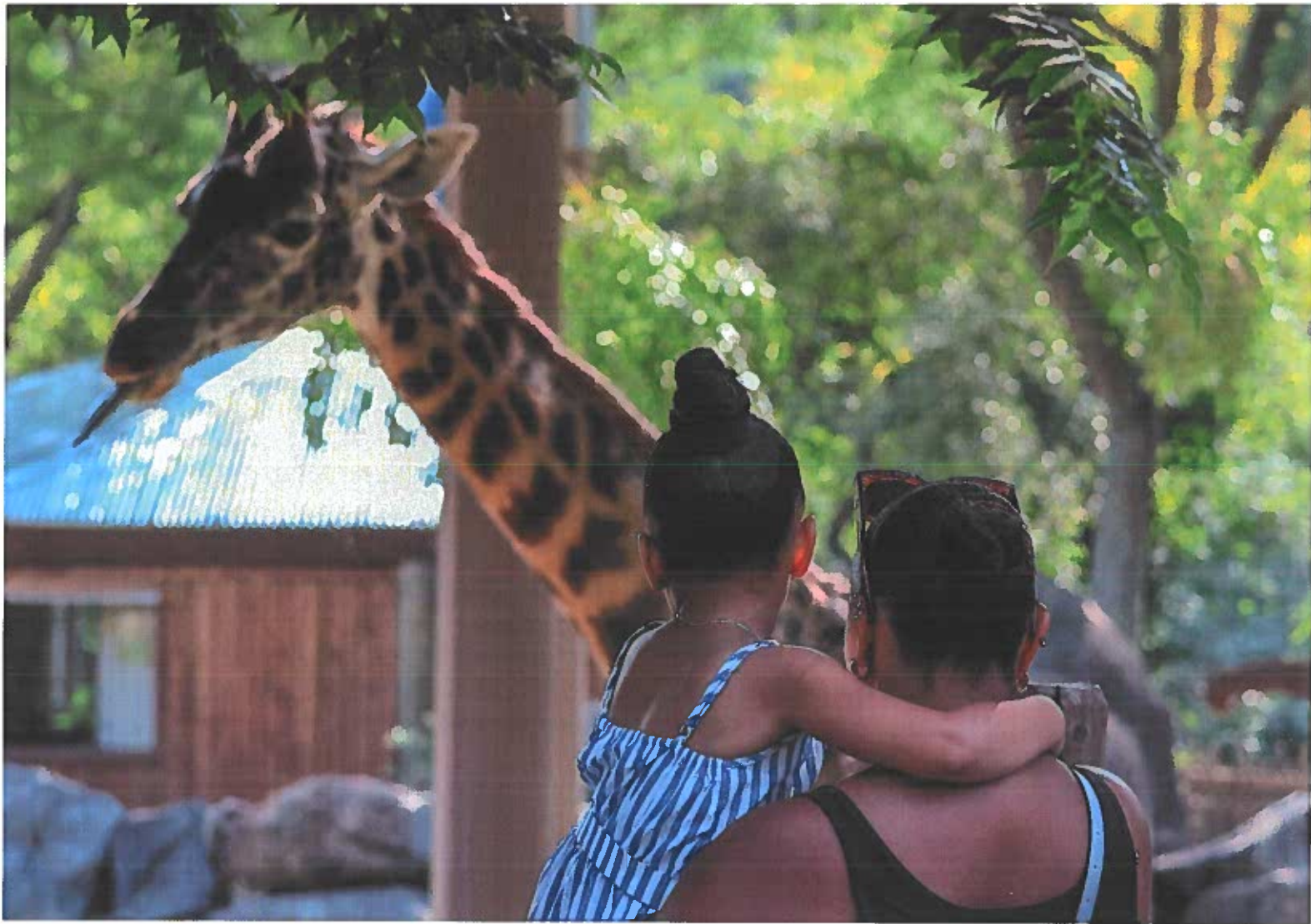


Today we ask your approval of Senate Bill 3213, authorizing an \$18million general obligation bond empowering Roger Williams Park Zoo to complete two of those habitat construction projects and begin a third. We will modify the existing large mammal facility, indoors and out, to optimize it for managing a white rhinoceros herd after the elephants' departure and construct a new habitat for a pride of lions.

It is important to tell you that we are not asking the state to fund these projects alone. Both the Rhode Island Zoological Society and the City of Providence already have fund-raising and funding plans in the pipeline for an additional major animal habitat as a capstone to the existing Faces of the Rainforest complex and to begin remodeling the former education center into a multi-species reptile and amphibian suite. Full bond approval would contribute to its completion.

The Zoo is grateful for previous generous support by the General Assembly and the people of Rhode Island. We are proud of a track record in which we converted that support into tangible results.

Bringing joy and education to Rhode Islanders is core to who we are at Roger Williams Park Zoo. Added to the fact that we contribute significantly to the state's prosperity and that we achieve what we set out to do, I hope you will acknowledge that the zoo is both an institution to be proud of and a good investment.



# **The 2024 Economic Impact Of The Roger Williams Park Zoo**

**By: Dr. Todd Guilfoos, University of Rhode Island**  
September 12, 2025

THE  
UNIVERSITY  
OF RHODE ISLAND



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## Executive Summary

The Roger Williams Park Zoo is an important contributor to the Rhode Island economy. Researchers at the University of Rhode Island worked with the Rhode Island Zoological Society to conduct a study of the economic impact of the Zoo and its associated activities in 2024.

In 2024, the Zoo attracted 801,296 visitors, including an estimated 347,308 visitors from out of state (43%). In 2024, the Zoo and its vendors had gross operating income, including gifts, \$19.3 million and 509 jobs on-site. These totals are significant increases from 2017 largely driven by the popularity of special events.

We estimate that out-of-state visitors spent an additional \$36.9 million (+/- 21.6%) on tourism while visiting Rhode Island because of the Zoo in 2024. Spillovers to other sectors of the Rhode Island economy were estimated using IMPLAN. We estimate the total economic impact of the Zoo in 2024 was \$75.4 million and 864 jobs. This impact generated \$5.2 million in state and local tax revenue. Most notably, the Zoo generated a value-added impact of \$54.4 million in 2024, representing a 12.8% increase over 2021 after accounting for inflation. Rhode Island has grown at an annual pace of 2.4% from 2021 (US Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2025). The economic impact of the Zoo has expanded to outpace the general economy in the last 3 years and significantly more than the RI economy from 2017.

## Data and Methods

We followed the standard approach in recent zoo economic impact studies in Baltimore (Maryland Department of Business & Economic Development, 2012), Cincinnati (University of Cincinnati Economics Center Research and Consulting, 2023), Columbus (Regionomics, 2022), Detroit (CSL International, 2019), Memphis (University of Memphis, 2015), and San Diego (San Diego Taxpayers Educational Foundation, 2018) by using an input and out model of economic impacts. This approach combines direct spending at the Zoo and its vendors with tourism spending by out-of-area visitors.

We obtained the Zoo's financial statements for 2024, including a breakdown of vendor incomes (retail, food and beverage), event-specific revenues, and all other operating income.

**Table 1: Spending at Zoo and Vendors**

<b>Source</b>	<b>Amount, \$M</b>
Vendor Income: Food and Beverage	\$ 1.01
Vendor Income: Retail	\$ 0.41
Vendor Income: Photography	\$ 1.41
Events (Spectaculars)	\$ 4.80
Concession Commissions	\$ 1.19
Other Zoo Operating	\$ 9.49
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 19.30</b>

For consistency with previous studies, we considered only tourism spending of out-of-area visitors, which we designated as visitors with a home ZIP code outside Rhode Island. Tourism spending was estimated via a visitor email survey using the standard methodology of asking visitors to report spending outside the Zoo during the trip, by category of expense (food, shopping, gas, rental car, etc.).

Out of 500 surveys collected from out of state visitors, we obtained 374 tourism spending observations for a response rate of 74.8%. We find statistically significant differences in tourism spending between member versus non-member visitors as out-of-state visitors spend more on their visits and are less likely to be members of the zoo. We did find substantial variability in spending per visit, resulting in a 95% confidence interval of +/- 21.6% on all tourism spending estimates.

We do not find a strong correlation between the reported importance of the trip and the spending by visitors in the survey and therefore we do not weight spending by importance, as was done in Sproul et al. (2021). Table 2 reflects the out-of-state visitor budgets.

**Table 2: Out-of-State Visitor Budgets per Day**

<b>Category</b>	<b>Amount</b>	<b>Share</b>
Food and Beverage	\$27.33	19.7%
Retail and Entertainment	\$54.57	39.3%
Lodging	\$19.26	13.9%
Transportation	\$37.82	27.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$138.97</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Roughly 47% of respondents indicated that they would still take the trip to Rhode Island if the Zoo were closed and that they would spend roughly 0.56 less days on the trip due to the Zoo being closed. To be conservative we reduce the out of state spending by 23.4% to account for spending that would have occurred regardless of the Zoo being available to out-of-state visitors in the following impacts.

In Table 3 below, the Zoo, event promoters and limited-service restaurants are all based on spending at the Zoo. Retail miscellaneous includes both spending at the Zoo and shopping and entertainment tourism spending. All other categories contain only tourism spending estimates. Any tourism spending (including part of retail) is further down weighted by the local purchase percentage (LPP) from the IMPLAN model's social accounting matrix (SAM) to account for the share of tourism demand satisfied by non-Rhode Island companies. The estimates were entered into the IMPLAN input-output model for Rhode Island to calculate economic impacts for

2024. All figures are in 2024 dollars, estimated using the latest IMPLAN modeling data for 2023.

**Table 3: Total Zoo and Tourism Spending**

<b>IMPLAN Category</b>	<b>Amount, \$M</b>	
Insurance	\$	3.30
Photographic Services	\$	2.80
Food and Groceries, Retail	\$	5.04
Gasoline, Retail	\$	1.18
Hotels	\$	5.26
Museums, Historical Sites, Zoos and Parks	\$	14.50
Real Estate	\$	6.99
Restaurants, Full Service	\$	5.74
Retail, Miscellaneous	\$	3.81
Transit	\$	2.11
Other, Misc	\$	24.72
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>75.45</b>

Note: All categories in Other are less than \$1.5 Million.

### Other Studies

Before running the input-output estimates, we checked our estimates against our own recent Zoo study, and the recent zoo economic impact studies mentioned above. The recent study for the San Diego Zoo was excluded because it is not a reasonable comparison due to the scale.

The table below shows our tourism spending estimates are lower than the estimates used in our previous study, and also lower than other independently generated estimates from recent studies. The Memphis estimate appears to be higher in part because the Memphis Zoo is one of the top tourist attractions in all of Tennessee, and it brings large numbers of overnight visitors from out-of-state.

While the per-visitor spending at the Roger Williams Park Zoo has increased at the zoo from 2021, it is in line with other studies.

**Table 4: Per-Visitor Spending Comparison with Recent Studies**

<b>Spend Category</b>	<b>This Study (2024)</b>	<b>RWP Zoo (2021)</b>	<b>Baltimore (2011)</b>	<b>Detroit (2017)</b>	<b>Memphis (2014)</b>
Zoo and Vendors	\$ 24.08	\$ 25.24	\$ 43.72	\$ 39.85	\$ 27.93
Other Tourism	\$ 138.97	\$ 102.54	\$ 120.32	\$ 146.27	\$ 369.55
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$ 163.05</b>	<b>\$ 127.78</b>	<b>\$ 164.05</b>	<b>\$ 186.13</b>	<b>\$ 397.48</b>

\*All values are adjusted to 2024 dollars. Memphis estimates count out-of-area visitors as any visitors from outside of the Memphis MSA. All others use out-of-state visitors only. RI sales tax of 7% is not included for spending at the Zoo and vendors in the present study (but it is included for tourism), nor are zookeeper payroll and benefits, utilities support per visitor, or Zoo fundraising and gifts per visitor. It is unknown whether the comparison studies include fundraising and/or sales tax.

## Results

Economic impact estimates are presented below. Output estimates are similar to gross sales, but they are adjusted to avoid double-counting in retail and wholesale (Jeong and Crompton, 2015). Value Added estimates are the contribution to Rhode Island Gross State Product (*aka* state-level GDP).

**Table 5: Total Zoo Economic Impact Estimates (2024)**

<b>Effect Type</b>	<b>Jobs</b>	<b>Value Added, \$M</b>	<b>Output, \$M</b>
Direct Effect	674.4	\$ 32.4	\$ 38.9
Indirect Effect	80.2	\$ 8.9	\$ 16.1
Induced Effect	109.8	\$ 13.1	\$ 20.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>864.4</b>	<b>\$ 54.4</b>	<b>\$ 75.4</b>

Direct Effects are attributed directly to total Zoo and vendor spending, and tourism. The Output Effect is \$75.4 million in total spending (in Table 3). Indirect Effects are estimated impacts on upstream suppliers to the Zoo and its vendors, and suppliers to all firms receiving tourism spending. Induced Effects are economic impacts across the broader economy arising from the spending of labor income (i.e., wages) and proprietor income (Lindall and Olson, 2008). In 2024 the Zoo generated 864 jobs, almost \$54 million of gross state product, \$75 million of economic output, and \$5.2 million of state and local tax revenues. This analysis suggests that Zoo contributes over \$54 million to the gross domestic product to the Rhode Island economy.

Roger Williams Park Zoo has generated substantial extra operating income and economic impact by investing in new attractions and events. We analyze special events and attractions below.

### Event Results – The Dragon and Mythical Marvels Spectacular

The Dragons and Mythical Marvels (DMM) is a new event offered by the Zoo that replaced the Asian Lantern Spectacular. It garnered 80,939 visitors in 2024. It is important to note that these visitors purchased tickets to DMM as an add on to regular zoo tickets.

Event specific impact estimates are presented below. Jobs estimates are based on Zoo and vendor employment. Event vendor employment was unavailable, included only via the IMPLAN model. These estimates are particularly conservative as we assume that the addition of the event only generated revenue through the zoo and not additional tourism from out-of-state visitors. This assumption was made due to it being an additional ticket rather than a stand-alone visit to the Zoo.

We estimate that this event alone created \$1.37 million of value added for the Rhode Island economy, as well as \$90,000 of state and local tax revenues.

**Table 6: Economic Impacts of the Dragons and Mythical Marvels (2024)**

<b>Impact</b>	<b>Jobs</b>	<b>Value Added, \$M</b>		<b>Output, \$M</b>	
Direct	24.0	\$	0.79	\$	0.79
Indirect	2.1	\$	0.22	\$	0.40
Induced	3.0	\$	0.37	\$	0.57
<b>Total</b>	<b>29.1</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>1.37</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>1.76</b>

## Event Results – The Holiday Lights Spectacular

The Holiday Lights Spectacular (HOLS) is a new event offered by the Zoo each Winter since December 2020, with 55,647 visitors in 2024.

Event specific impact estimates are presented below. Jobs estimates are based on Zoo and vendor employment, as well as tourism, proportional to the visitor counts (out of state only for tourism).

We estimate that this event alone created \$3.8 million of value added for the Rhode Island economy, as well as \$394,000 of state and local tax revenues.

**Table 7: Economic Impacts of the Holidays Lights Spectacular (2024)**

<b>Impact</b>	<b>Jobs</b>	<b>Value Added, \$M</b>		<b>Output, \$M</b>	
Direct	47.0	\$	2.3	\$	3.0
Indirect	6.1	\$	0.7	\$	1.2
Induced	7.5	\$	0.9	\$	1.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>60.6</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>5.6</b>

## Event Results – The Jack-O-Lantern Spectacular

The Jack-O-Lantern Spectacular (JOLS) is an enduring, popular event offered by the Zoo each Fall, with 176,322 visitors in 2024, a slight increase since 2021. The event generated \$13.4 million in sales for the Zoo and tourism spending to Rhode Island (an increase since 2021). The economic impact for JOLS was are not directly comparable to in 2021 as this report includes a portion of Zoo salaries relative to the number of visitors to the Zoo. Further, vendor employment and income were not available in 2001 but were available for this report.

Event specific impact estimates are presented below. Jobs estimates are based on Zoo and vendor employment, as well as tourism, proportional to the visitor counts (out of state only for tourism).

We estimate that this event alone created \$15.9 million of value added for the Rhode Island economy, as well as \$1.8 million of state and local tax revenues.

**Table 8: Economic Impacts of the Jack-O-Lantern Spectacular (2024)**

<b>Impact</b>	<b>Jobs</b>	<b>Value Added, \$M</b>		<b>Output, \$M</b>
Direct	178.3	\$	9.4	\$ 13.5
Indirect	27.0	\$	3.0	\$ 5.4
Induced	29.7	\$	3.5	\$ 5.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>235.0</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>15.9</b>	<b>\$ 24.4</b>

## Acknowledgments

This study was produced by Dr. Todd Guilfoos (Professor) in the Department of Environmental & Natural Resource Economics, College of the Environment & Life Sciences, University of Rhode Island.

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### **Photography Credits**

All photos courtesy of The Roger Williams Park Zoo.

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# We are Roger Williams Park Zoo

We are here to improve the future for wildlife and people. Together.



**We are  
stewards of  
wellbeing**

We dedicate ourselves to the highest standards of animal welfare, ensuring the health, happiness, and dignity of every creature under our care, and are equally committed to the wellbeing of our staff, guests, supporters, and our community.



**We are  
purveyors  
of hope  
and joy**

We are passionate about what we do, inspiring curiosity and sparking joy in each other and every guest who walks through our gates.



**We are  
cultivators of  
connection**

We believe in fostering connections between all living things, cultivating empathy and understanding for each other and the diverse species that share our planet.



**We are  
advocates  
for  
conservation**

We are advocates for conservation, working tirelessly to safeguard endangered species and their habitats for generations to come.



**We are a  
destination  
for all**

We provide an experience of recreation, fun, and natural beauty amidst the daily rush, where guests discover peace and connection with the natural world.



**We are  
sustainability  
champions**

We lead by example by sustainably managing financial, natural, and material resources to ensure their longevity and promote environmental responsibility.



**We are the  
spark for  
change**

We meet people where they are and provide the entry point where pro-environmental behaviors are embraced and normalized.



# The Economic Impact of

# The ROGER WILLIAMS PARK ZOO

**801,296**

VISITORS  
IN 2024

**\$75.4 MILLION  
+ 864 Jobs**

FOR THE  
RI ECONOMY

**\$5.2  
Million**

STATE & LOCAL  
TAX REVENUE



The value of the Roger Williams Park Zoo goes beyond its natural surroundings and the revenue it brings in from ticket sales. The Zoo is an important contributor to the Rhode Island economy, attracting new people and new businesses to the state who in turn visit beaches, restaurants and other attractions.

In 2024, the Zoo generated \$38.9 million in direct economic impact. In addition, the total economic impact of the Zoo, including spending of labor income and suppliers of the zoo, was over \$75 million.

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*Photos courtesy of  
the Roger Williams Park Zoo. Study by Dr.  
Todd Guilfoos at the University of Rhode  
Island.*





# The Economic Impact of The Holiday Lights Spectacular

**55,647**

**VISITORS  
IN 2024**

**\$5.6 MILLION  
+ 60 Jobs**

**FOR THE  
RI ECONOMY**

**\$394,000**

**STATE & LOCAL  
TAX REVENUE**



Each Winter, the Holiday Lights Spectacular brings visitors and tourism to Rhode Island from around the world.

In 2024, the Zoo generated \$3 million in direct economic impact from the Holiday Lights event. In addition, the total economic impact of the Zoo, including spending of labor income and suppliers of the zoo, was over \$5 million.

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OF RHODE ISLAND**

*Photos courtesy of  
the Roger Williams Park Zoo. Study by Dr.  
Todd Guilfoos at the University of Rhode  
Island.*



# The Economic Impact of The Jack-O-Lantern Spectacular

**176,322**

VISITORS  
IN 2024

**\$24.4 MILLION  
+ 235 Jobs**

FOR THE  
RI ECONOMY

**\$1.8 Million**

STATE & LOCAL  
TAX REVENUE



Each Fall, the Jack-O-Lantern Spectacular brings visitors and tourism to Rhode Island from around the world.

In 2024, the Zoo generated \$13.5 million in direct economic impact from the Jack-O-Lantern event. In addition, the total economic impact of the Zoo, including spending of labor income and suppliers of the zoo, was over \$24 million.

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Island.*



# Rhode Island Zoological Society

## Conservation Overview

### A Local Connection

Roger Williams Park Zoo is committed to providing the highest quality of care for the animals in its collection and seeks to serve the local and regional community as a responsible environmental steward. In this vein, the Zoo participates in fieldwork in several sites throughout New England as part of five important conservation projects aimed at saving endemic endangered species: New England cottontail rabbit, timber rattlesnake, Eastern box turtle, Eastern spadefoot toads, and American burying beetle. The Zoo also continuously develops and teaches environmental education programs that reach a variety of different audiences with a message of conservation to inspire action and involvement..

### Conservation Partnerships

In 2006, Roger Williams Park Zoo and seven other New England conservation organizations formed the New England Zoos and Aquariums Conservation Collaborative (NEZACC), the first such conservation-orientated collaboration group in New England. The group continually works together to explore how to make a greater impact on the region's environment by forming new partnerships for ongoing conservation efforts.

### A Global Reach

Conservation Research Funding: On the national and global level, Roger Williams Park Zoo has consistently been a participant in and supporter of large-scale partnerships, collaborations and organizations that work to promote wildlife and habitat conservation. In addition to our own conservation and research initiatives, Roger Williams Park Zoo also supports fieldwork in conservation and environmental education by annual donations and others through the Sophie Danforth Conservation Biology Fund (SDCBF). The Fund awards annual grants to conservation projects around the world. Since 1989, the SDCBF has awarded over \$300,000 to worthwhile projects, many of which have continued to grow and succeed.





## EDUCATION OVERVIEW

### Our Method

- Our programs are inquiry-based & experiential, encouraging discovery, deep knowledge gains, and emotional resonance
- We understand the power of a 'profound experience' and the importance of helping our participants make memories that last a lifetime
- Lessons are grounded in science, but multi-disciplinary, cutting across curricular lines
- Our focus is on authentic content, utilizing our unique resources including our collection, zoo campus, and field conservation initiatives
- We provide participants with do-able conservation actions that have real impact on our world, empowering our community to see themselves as part of the solution, and weaving them into the mission of Roger Williams Park Zoo
- We draw on several proven pedagogical approaches including Reggio Emilia and Constructivism
- We encourage and foster a growth mindset; it is okay to fail, and often our best lessons come from failure paired with continuing to try, thus growing our understanding
- We emphasize social learning (whether in a classroom setting or in a family visit)
- Ambassador Animals are always presented respectfully, encouraging understanding, empathy, and awe
- We believe in the power of play, and foster a fun atmosphere that supports this important aspect of learning

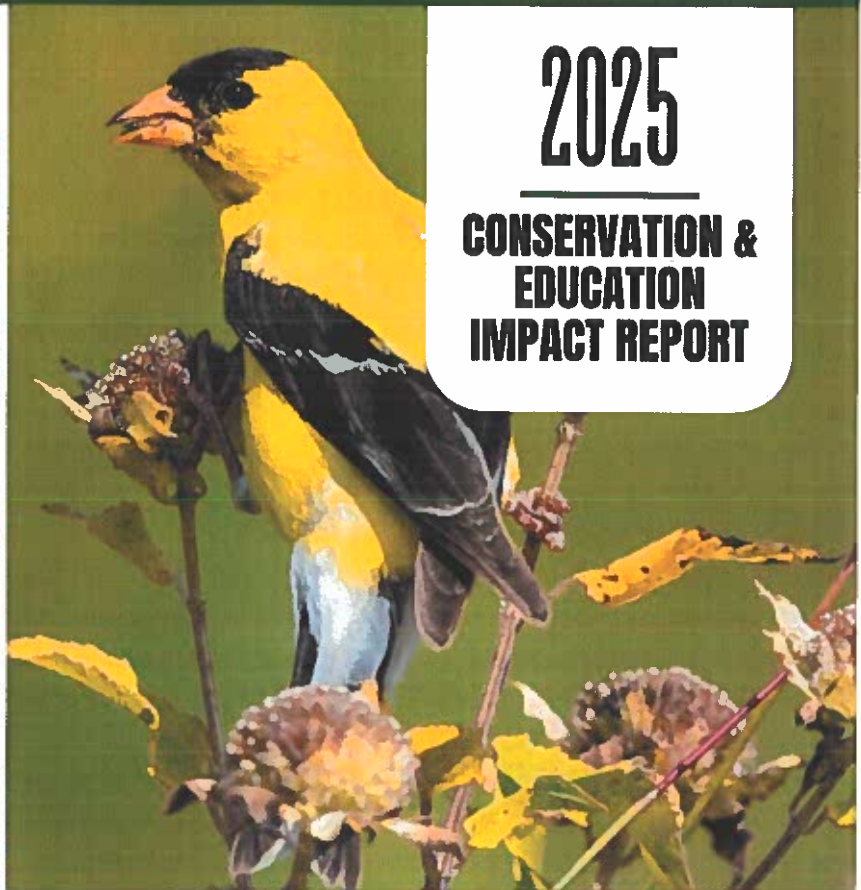


### Understanding our Audiences

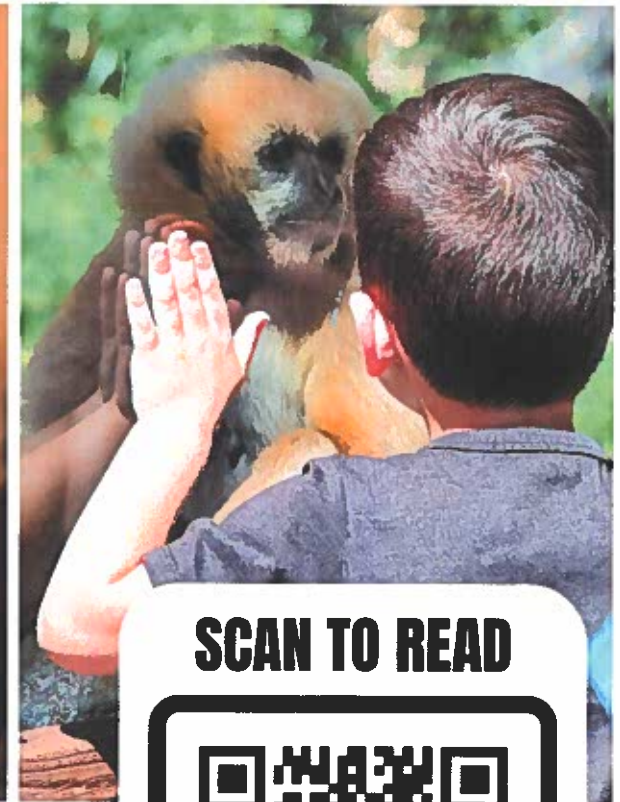
- We scaffold our lessons based on age appropriate content and approaches; building empathy and understanding with our youngest learners; emphasizing exploration, discovery, and global context with our elementary-aged students; delving into stewardship and responsibility with our older participants
- Our programs strive to understand participants' expectations and needs, while encouraging them to find meaning relevant to their personal experience
- Our staffing structure allows us to specialize in specific audience sector needs and priorities, with area managers for school programs, family programs, general visitor programs, and early learner play-based programs
- We prioritize inclusive program design, taking into account a diversity of learning styles and needs, and respecting diverse cultural experiences that inform participants' learning

### Quality

- Our efforts are always evolving and are informed by current best practices from disciplines including conservation psychology, play study, visitor studies, and pedagogical research
- Our programs are developed and assessed using specified outcomes determined by our mission and audience needs. We use the findings of these assessments to constantly improve our efforts
- Programming is aligned with the Next Generation Science Standards, and we work closely with the Rhode Island Department of Education, colleagues in higher education, districts, and classroom teachers to ensure we meet the most pressing needs of schools and students



**2025**  
**CONSERVATION & EDUCATION**  
**IMPACT REPORT**



**SCAN TO READ**

