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Expert: Conservation center can help ensure wild dogs'™ survival

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FAIRHOPE — Before 60-odd painted-dog experts from around the world converge on the International Conservation Center today, one of them talked Thursday about the key role the refuge will fill in the wild canines' survival.

“They are a critically endangered species, with a better than 50 percent chance the species will go extinct in our lifetime,” said John Lemon, chairman of Painted Dog Conservation Inc. in Perth, Australia.

“It’s ideal for them to be in an open-range situation that the ICC can provide – an area large enough to display naturalistic behavior in social structure right through to breeding.”

Lemon said the African painted dog has been around for a minimum of 3 million years but has suffered a 99 percent decline in population in the past 100 years due to interaction with humans. National Geographic said only about 5,000 painted dogs may remain in the wild in Africa.

Lemon termed the conservation center “a modern ark” that can breed an insurance population apart from the packs found in the wild.

The Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium created the refuge in southern Somerset County for research into and breeding of wild animals.

Lemon said much research needs to be done in terms of how the very social breed communicates, its social structures and the diseases that afflict it.

“We’ll have greater success in breeding once we learn this stuff,” Lemon said.

Painted dogs, he said, carefully nurse their young and take care of their elderly and weak: “All the traits that we preach human society should be like,” Lemon said.

But painted dogs, which are carnivores, are much more closely related to wolves than to dogs. Lemon said they run from humans in the wild and can’t really be domesticated.

“They’re hard-wired – a true wild animal,” he said from The Pittsburgh Zoo.

With the acreage available at the conservation center, Lemon said, “The species is pretty much free

to live their lives, free to be painted dogs, as they would be.”

With success in captivity, he expects some of the animals could be returned to the grasslands of Africa.

Through captivity, researchers are looking to retain about 80 percent of the genetic diversity found in the wild.

“We’ll have a genetic reserve that is viable,” Lemon said.

He and the other experts visiting the conservation center today are part of a painted dog conference now being held at The Pittsburgh Zoo.

Lemon said the Pittsburgh facility is renowned for its animal husbandry. He said the experts – depending on what they find – could be making recommendations about the conservation center in terms of infrastructure, fencing, a handling area, feeding procedures and veterinary care.

He said the refuge is built on a solid foundation.

“We’re very, very excited about the outcome,” Lemon said.

The zoo did not give a timetable for introducing the painted dogs to the conservation center but has said the initial animals could come from the zoo’s own stock. They will be the second species to be introduced to the center, after three African elephants.

Barbara Baker, zoo CEO, said, “Painted dogs are one of the species the zoo really wants to focus on because they’re declining in the wild.

“They’re such a fabulous species.”