After a year of specialized care, Luna the harbor seal made her return to the wild. Last May, Mystic Aquarium found Luna, an abandoned pup with severe dehydration and eye problems. Luna stayed at the Aquarium's Animal Rescue Clinic, where seals, sea turtles and other marine mammals are rehabilitated.

AZA SAFE: Saving Animals From Extinction is a new, collaborative effort by AZA-accredited facilities to save species in the wild through conservation efforts and public awareness. With 180 million annual visitors, AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums have an incredible opportunity to engage and educate the public about these critical species. SAFE harnesses the expertise of AZA’s animal care and conservation specialists to design plans that will protect habitats and re-establish healthy populations in the wild.

In its inaugural year, AZA SAFE is focusing on 10 species: African penguins, Asian elephants, black rhinos, cheetahs, gorillas, sea turtles, sharks, vaquitas, Western pond turtles and whooping cranes. These species are some of the most endangered, and their inclusion in SAFE represents zoos’ and aquariums’ dedication to conservation programs for these animals. AZA will add 10 species to the program each year for at least a decade, continually expanding collaboration and conservation efforts.

AZA has been working to identify species facing the highest risk, and AZA-accredited facilities already give more than $160 million each year to field conservation projects, resulting in the restoration of more than 30 species’ wild populations. However, SAFE is the first large-scale collaborative effort across AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums to save vital species. Through SAFE’s visitor education and public awareness goals, as well as the collaboration with scientists and conservationists, AZA hopes to continue to save critical species and restore environments for future generations.

In a span of just five days, the Knoxville Zoo celebrated the births of two Western lowland gorillas, the first ever born at the facility and the first born in Tennessee in 30 years. Moms Hope and Machi moved to Knoxville from Disney’s Animal Kingdom and Zoo Atlanta as the result of recommendations of AZA’s Species Survival Plan® (SSP).

Due to extreme habitat loss, commercial hunting and Ebola outbreaks in its native Equatorial Africa, the Western lowland gorilla is a critically endangered species, and the gorilla is now part of the AZA SAFE: Saving Animals From Extinction program. These births indicate a great success in recent conservation efforts for the species.

“I don’t think you can have a better week than this,” said Lisa New, executive director of Knoxville Zoo. “We now have two gorilla babies who are part of the future of gorilla conservation worldwide. It’s a moment Knoxville can be proud of.”

Mystic Aquarium Rehabilitates Harbor Seal

After a year of specialized care, Luna the harbor seal made her return to the wild. Last May, Mystic Aquarium found Luna, an abandoned pup with severe dehydration and eye problems. Luna stayed at the Aquarium’s Animal Rescue Clinic, where seals, sea turtles and other marine mammals are rehabilitated.
Student groups to the Tennessee Aquarium will soon experience a new way to learn about the diversity of species in the Conasauga River. In collaboration with Tennessee Tech University’s (TTU) BusinessMedia Center, the Aquarium is developing a program using the Oculus Rift, which are responsive goggles that immerse users into a 3D virtual reality.

Thaddeus Taylor, one of the Aquarium’s educators, was looking for a way to teach kids about their local river without having to take the 1.5 hour trip and still inspire them to be environmental activists. That is when Liska, the project team from TTU, was trying to use this new technology for education.

“Virtual reality allows us to place them in a healthy ecosystem and then create different pollution events for the students to actually experience,” said Taylor. In the game, students will explore the river and make decisions to help restore and protect their local watershed.

A trial of the program in March was successful, and Liska plans to share the game on the Oculus website for educational and personal use. “Making this project publicly available for classrooms and homes across the nation is really exciting because it may help encourage waves of students to value and protect river systems.”

Animals Vanish for Endangered Species Day

May 15 marked the 10th annual Endangered Species Day, when we “officially” celebrate conservation efforts and remember that everyone can make a difference in protecting the environment. AZA-accredited aquariums and zoos participated by holding special events, as well as joining in the launch of the AZA SAFE: Saving Animals From Extinction initiative, during which many endangered animals at these facilities “vanished.” By temporarily closing exhibits, AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums reminded guests about disappearing habitats and diminishing wildlife populations. Denver Zoo temporarily kept its African penguins off exhibit to help visitors understand this important conservation message. Curator of birds John Azua noted that their disappearance in the wild would suggest an unhealthy ocean. “Thankfully, we’re not there yet,” he said. “We’re asking our visitors to pause and consider what extinction looks and feels like so they might join us in securing a better world for animals through human understanding.”

Philadelphia Zoo Creates Elevated Transportation System

Philadelphia Zoo is taking its exhibits in a new direction—up. Its project “Zoo360” is a network of elevated mesh trails that give the animals more freedom to move through the Zoo. The recently opened Gorilla Treeway is 300 feet long and raised 12 feet above the visitor path, allowing guests and the Zoo’s five Western lowland gorillas to see each other from a new angle. The pathway also has an elevated platform, which enables animal keepers to work with the gorillas within the exhibit. Opened in May, this pathway is the fourth phase of Zoo360. The first was Treetop Trail, which opened in 2011 for monkeys and lemurs and extends up to 37 feet high. The project also includes the Great Ape Trail and Big Cat Crossing.

The elevated pathways stimulate animals physically and mentally, as they have more access to see other animals, as well as the events at the Zoo below. The animals’ independence to move around freely, and the constantly changing environments, create dynamic and enriching experiences for both the animals and the visitors.