EAZA RMG

EAZA Reproductive Management Group

THE EAZA REPRODUCTIVE MANAGEMENT GROUP

RESEARCH PRIORITIES

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THE EAZA RMG RESEARCH PRIORITIES

WHO ARE THE EAZA RMG?

Established in 2008, the EAZA Reproductive Management Group (RMG), previously the EAZA Group on Zoo Animal Contraception (EGZAC), is a working group under the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria's (EAZA's) Veterinary Committee. The EAZA RMG consists of *in* and *ex situ* researchers, veterinarians and animal managers with an interest in the reproductive management of exotic wildlife. The work of the EAZA RMG compliments that of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) Reproductive Management Center (RMC). Our vision, mission, and strategic aims are outlined below:

VISION

To support the work carried out by breeding programmes and animal managers within the European community by providing specialist advice in reproductive management.

MISSION

Our mission is to support the work carried out by EAZA *Ex-situ* Programmes (EEPs), Taxon Advisory Groups (TAGs), and animal managers at Member institutions by providing specialist advice in reproductive management. This includes ensuring the safe and informed use of contraception in exotic wildlife in human care (EGZAC Strategic plan, 2016). The EAZA RMG aims to promote a holistic approach to individual and population reproductive management in *ex situ* conservation. We identify gaps in the current knowledge on the effects of reproductive decisions (breeding/non-breeding, contraception), and advocate for the collection of data to inform current practices. More information regarding the RMG's goals can be found in our strategic plan (2016-2021).

STRATEGIC AIMS

SO 1. To ensure an excellent reputation for reproductive advice based on sound scientific data

SO 2. To identify and conduct applied reproductive research with measurable impact

SO 3. To ensure long term viability of the EAZA RMG by securing funding for a programme coordinator

SO 4. To become an integrated tool used for population management within EAZA institutions

SO 5. To form effective partnerships with programme coordinators and animal managers

To effectively meet SO 2. we have developed this document[1] to highlight the research priorities of the EAZA RMG as well as the work of our working group members and advisors. We aim to incorporate elements of these priorities in all EAZA RMG endorsed projects.

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[1] This is a living document outlining research priorities as identified by the EAZA RMG. It will be updated every 3 years. Member and research appendices will be updated annually.

EX SITU CONSERVATION BREEDING

Ex situ conservation efforts aim to maintain species outside of their natural environment (WAZA, 2013), primarily by conserving genetic resources in gene banks, or through captive conservation breeding programmes (CBPs; EAZA, 2013). As an estimated one in seven threatened species are housed in zoos and aquaria, the maintenance of healthy captive genetic reservoirs is becoming increasingly important (Fa et al., 2011). These programmes, of which there are over 400 within Europe (called EEPs; van Lint and de Man, 2016), have played an important role in the conservation of threatened species. Indeed, in a 2011 assessment, 68 vertebrate species have recently had their IUCN threat level reduced, 25% of which have been assisted by CBPs (Conde et al., 2011), including flagship conservation species such as the golden lion tamarin (*Leontopithecus rosalia*), and the Prezwalksi's horse (*Equus ferus prezwalski*)(Hoffmann et al., 2010).

POPULATION SUSTAINABILITY

Regardless of the role of the captive breeding programme, populations should be healthy and breeding to allow for the long-term success and sustainability of the programme. Ideally, populations are genetically diverse, with low levels of inbreeding, and are minimally adapted to living in captivity. To achieve the goals of the population, coordinators analyse the demographic and genetic status of their population, examine institutional constraints, and consider husbandry requirements before creating specific breeding and transfer recommendations for the individuals in their population (EAZA, 2015; Faust et al., 2019). However, not all captive populations are sustainable. In fact, a recent review of over 110,000 AZA breeding and transfer plans found that as few as 20% of recommended pairs successfully bred before a new recommendation was issued (Faust et al., 2019)[2]. While the exact cause of the low rate of reproductive success is unknown, failure to produce offspring may arise through several processes, including institutional inactivity, the death or illness of an individual, mate incompatibility, senescence, medical issues, or subfertility (Asa et al., 2011; Faust et al., 2019; Martin-Wintle et al., 2018).

An additional challenge facing breeding programmes is limiting reproduction, for example to ensure that non-recommended individuals don't breed, to reduce the number of individuals who are surplus to the population, or to maintain family groups. In such situations, identifying safe, effective, and reversible methods to limit reproduction while ensuring that population growth

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[2] No similar figures have been published for EAZA.

remains sustainable is integral to population management. Together, these two components form complimentary aspects of reproductive management.

THE EAZA RMG AND REPRODUCTIVE MANAGEMENT

With this in mind, the EAZA RMG's remit expanded in 2019 from a focus on wildlife contraception (as stipulated in our 2016-2021 Strategic Plan) to a wider overview of reproductive management.

In terms of reproductive management, our role in EAZA is:

1. To support EEPs and animal managers with specialist knowledge on reproductive management. Examples include evidence-based contraceptive guidelines that allow for the safe and effective use of contraceptive products, and knowledge on assisted reproductive techniques in exotic species.
2. To identify gaps in the current knowledge on the impacts of breeding decisions based on our experiences working in zoological institutions and through discussions with breeding programme coordinators.
3. To conduct research with relevant *in* and *ex situ* partners.
4. To collect data to inform best practice.

To achieve this, we are committed to using an interdisciplinary, holistic, and evidence based approach to support the EAZA community. We aim to foster collaborations internationally, between zoos, research institutions, and *in situ* partners. Outlined below are our key research focus areas.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES:

BASIC BREEDING BIOLOGY

To begin to understand the implications of breeding decisions on managed animals, an understanding of the species' basic breeding and reproductive biology is essential and should be interwoven into all aspects of reproductive management. While some exotic species can benefit from the generalization of existing research on domestic equivalents, for many species, even this base knowledge is unavailable (Melfi, 2009). As such, it is essential that zoological institutions conduct research into the basic biology of the species they manage.

Characterizing the basic reproductive biology of managed species is of paramount importance to ensure that zoological institutions are providing their animals with the appropriate husbandry required to support reproduction and positive welfare. Zoos must thoroughly evaluate factors that

contribute to reproductive success, including the overall health of the animal and its group, its reproductive history and health, its age and reproductive state, management practices, and the behavioural, social and welfare impacts of breeding recommendations.

Moreover, as species held in zoos will not respond uniformly to breeding decisions, an understanding of species physiology and reproductive biology is key to ensure that husbandry practices do not hinder long term fertility. For example, for some species, including African wild dogs (*Lycaon pictus*), Seba's bats (*Carollia perspicillata*), and stingrays, common management techniques such as separation of the sexes for prolonged periods of time may negatively impact fertility and can, in some cases be associated with severe health consequences (Asa et al., 2014; Napier et al., 2009; Penfold et al., 2014). However, without knowledge on species behaviour and physiology, it is difficult to refine management practices to the needs of the individual species.
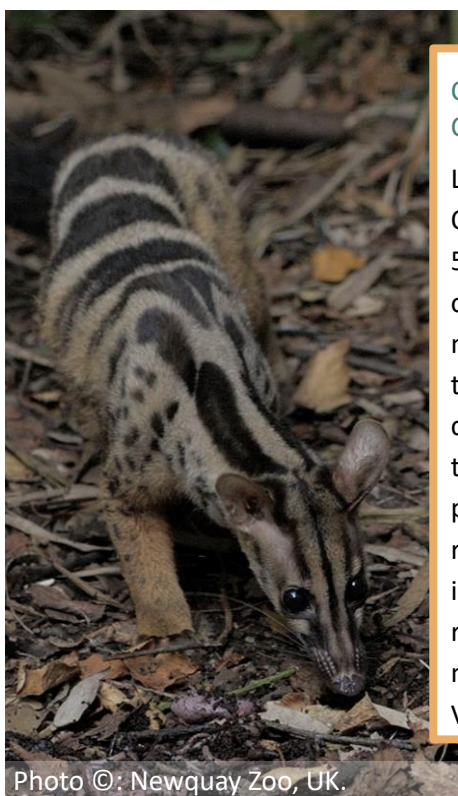

Photo ©: Newquay Zoo, UK.

CHARACTERISING THE REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY OF CAPTIVE OWSTON'S CIVETS (*CHROTOGALE OWSTONI*)

Little is known about the life history or biology of the Owston's civet, which has faced *in-situ* declines of close to 50% within the last 15 years, as well as historic low rates of reproductive success *ex-situ*. Using a combination of non-invasive endocrine and behavioural data collection, the EAZA RMG, in partnership with the EAZA Owston's civet EEP, aims to characterize the reproductive biology of this species, using data collected to inform management practices by identifying individuals who are most likely to reproduce, and by monitoring the effects of management interventions such as pair transfers and diet changes on reproduction. The EAZA RMG aims to replicate these methods in the *in situ* captive population held at Save Vietnam's Wildlife.

The required data can generally be collected non-invasively, for example through behavioural observations or faecal hormone monitoring, ensuring that data can easily be collected repeatedly, and that data quality is not compromised by collection protocols (Möstl and Palme, 2002; Touma and Palme, 2005). Ideally, animals are monitored routinely to ensure that baseline profiles are established, and that institutions can monitor how changes in management or breeding decisions influence the reproductive biology of their species. These data are also essential for more advanced

research, for example for the development of Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) (Jewgenow et al., 2017).

The EAZA RMG supports EAZA breeding programme coordinators with the development of practical data collection protocols to be used across collections, with the aim of understanding the basic breeding biology of exotic wildlife. EAZA RMG working group members **Dr. Franz Schwarzenberger**, Veterinary University of Vienna, Austria, and **Dr. Sue Walker**, Chester Zoo, United Kingdom (UK), are experts in the use of wildlife endocrinology to assist conservation efforts of endangered wildlife, with extensive research efforts in species such as the Eastern black rhinoceros (*Diceros bicornis michaeli*), white rhinoceros (*Cerathotherium simum*), Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*), and Przewalski's horses (*Equus ferus przewalskii*). The EAZA RMG also collaborates with the Leibniz Institute for Zoo and Wild Animal Research (IZW) Endocrinology Laboratory, Germany who specialise in felid reproductive biology.

LIMITING REPRODUCTION

As animals living *ex situ* are generally well-provisioned and have access to veterinary care, some species have been found to have higher rates of reproductive success as a result of increased fecundity, litter size, infant survival, as well as shorter inter-birth intervals when compared to their *in situ* counterparts (Anderson and Simpson, 1979; Fairbanks and McGuire, 1984; Garcia et al., 2006; Schwitzer and Kaumanns, 2009). Increased reproductive success however, can be challenging for animal managers as space and resources may be limited (Asa, 1993), and may bear additional health costs to the individual due to the physical and energetic requirements of reproduction (Comizzoli and Holt, 2019; Edes et al., 2018; Harvey et al., 1987).

In zoos, limiting the reproductive potential of animals primarily involves the use of reversible contraception, surgical sterilization, or separation of the sexes, although in some cases alternative methods such as breeding and culling are used. In any scenario, however, the impacts of the chosen techniques need to be carefully considered, and long-term effects must be holistically evaluated. For example, while separating individuals who should not breed may offer a 'simple' solution to limiting reproduction, isolating individuals may present a welfare concern, especially if they belong to a social species, and space constraints further limit the ease of separation.

Moreover, prolonged non-reproductive periods are associated with the development of reproductive pathologies and declining fertility in a variety of species including red wolves (*Canis rufus*), African wild dogs, stingrays, Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*), Seba's bats (*Carollia perspicillata*), wildebeest (*Connochaetes* sp.), and white rhinos (*Ceratotherium simum simium* and *C. s. cottoni*) (Asa et al., 2014; Hermes et al., 2006; Penfold et al., 2014), limiting the future reproductive potential of potentially genetically valuable individuals.

CONTRACEPTION

Hormonal contraception is increasingly being used in zoos to manage reproduction as it provides a theoretically reversible alternative to surgical sterilization procedures; useful for animals that may be required to breed in the future (Asa and Porton, 2005). However, contraception is not a 'one size fits all' solution as finding the right product and dose combination for species with varying physiologies can prove challenging, particularly as most products have been designed for use in domestic species or humans, rather than exotic wildlife (Asa and Porton, 2005). As such, the effects of contraceptives on exotic species are understudied, particularly with regards to fertility following long-term use (Fagerstone, 2002).

Wildlife contraception is still an emerging field, and knowledge on contraceptive use is extensive, but patchy in distribution within the global zoo community. In an effort to centralise contraceptive information, the AZA RMC and the EAZA RMG share a database (the "Contraception Database") detailing the efficacy of different contraceptive methods. The Contraception Database now contains over 45,000 contraceptive records, and is used to produce evidence-based contraceptive guidelines for a variety of species, with the aim of ensuring the safe and informed use of contraception in exotic wildlife. The database is used to identify gaps in current knowledge on the use and efficacy of various contraceptive methods, encouraging and focusing research in key areas of need. Notably, the Contraception Database has contributed to research by the **AZA RMC** that examined factors that are associated with the development of reproductive pathologies in wild canids (Asa et al., 2014), and as such progestin-based contraceptives are no longer recommended for long-term use in most carnivores.

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS OF CONTRACEPTIVE USE IN FEMALE TIGERS, WITH A FOCUS ON AMUR (*PANTHERA TIGRIS TIGRIS*) AND SUMATRAN TIGERS (*P.T.SUMATRAE*)

The historic use of progestin-based hormonal contraception in captive exotic felids has been associated with the development of uterine pathologies. In more recent years, it has been recommended that GnRH agonists such as deslorelin acetate implants (Suprelorin®) are used, preceded by oral megestrol acetate to suppress the initial stimulation period. However, studies in domestic cats, African lions, and tigers demonstrate that deslorelin is long lasting and may take 30 months or more to reverse in some animals. As reproductive rates in the Amur and Sumatran tiger EEP have decreased in both male and female tigers, the EAZA RMG, in collaboration with the EAZA Amur and Sumatran tiger EEP, seek to understand the historical and current use of contraceptives in tigers. We hope that this information will help guide management decisions and promote sustainability of captive tiger populations. This project will initially use historic data from the joint AZA RMC and EAZA RMG Contraception Database as well as additional surveys to EAZA holders.

In addition to research involving the Contraception Database, several working group members and advisors are researching the use of contraception in sanctuary and *in situ* populations. **Dr. Henk Bertschinger**, University of Pretoria, South Africa is researching the effects of contraception in *in-situ* African mammals, and **Dr. Imke Lueders,** GEOlifes, Germany, is researching the impacts of Improvac use in *in-* and *ex-situ* elephants. Evidence provided by this research is used to inform and refine contraceptive protocols that are used within the EAZA zoo community. Moreover, several EAZA RMG advisors are involved in the development of contraceptive products, and the use of contraceptive products in novel contexts: **Kim Frank**, Science and Conservation Center Zoo Montana, United States of America (USA) is leading on research on the use of the Porcine Zona Pellucida vaccine in captive and free ranging wildlife, and **Dr. Giovanna Massei**, Animal and Plant Health Agency, UK, is investigating the use of GonaCon in free living wildlife populations.

ENHANCING REPRODUCTION

A general assumption is that animals that receive breeding recommendations are fertile; however, trends towards decreasing reproductive success have been reported in several species *ex-situ* (Clubb et al., 2009; Farquharson et al., 2018; Lockyear et al., 2009). This may stem from a multitude of factors including a lack of basic knowledge of species reproduction, inappropriate husbandry and social housing, stress, inbreeding, or a genetic adaptation to captivity (Comizzoli and Holt, 2019; Farquharson et al., 2017; Holt et al., 2014; Levallois and Desvaux de Marigny, 2015; Nuss and Warneke, 2010; Wildt et al., 2010). As inappropriate management can contribute to poor welfare (Chang et al., 1999; Clarke et al., 1982; Ross et al., 2011; WAZA, 2015), reproductive success (Comizzoli and Holt, 2019; Farquharson et al., 2017; Holt et al., 2014; Wildt, 1989; Wildt et al., 2010), and health (Plowman, 2014; Videan et al., 2009), it is imperative that evidence-based practices and breeding recommendations are implemented within the zoological community to ensure the effective conservation of endangered species (Clay et al., 2011; Melfi, 2009).

The EAZA RMG promotes a holistic approach when investigating factors that may contribute to decreased reproductive success. We assess reproductive failure at both the population level as well as at an individual level, using practical methods that can be used across institutions. Working closely with EEP coordinators, we help identify trends between management and reproduction with the aim of fine-tuning best practice in captive animal care.

REPRODUCTIVE PATHOLOGIES IN KOMODO DRAGONS (*VARANUS KOMODOENSIS*)

Little is known about the reproduction of captive Komodo dragons and, in spite of the advances in the husbandry of the species there remains a significantly high rate of mortality among reproductive females. Many of these deaths have been attributable to reproductive pathologies, which have not been reported in wild individuals. In collaboration with the EAZA Komodo dragon EEP, the EAZA RMG is trying to identify whether there are any associations between captive husbandry techniques and female reproductive pathologies.

Photo ©: Chester Zoo, UK.

REPRODUCTIVE VIABILITY ANALYSIS

Reproductive Viability Analysis (RVA), developed by the **AZA RMC**, identifies how biological and reproductive factors correlate with reproductive success (Bauman et al., 2019). Using historic breeding recommendations, studbook data, data from the Contraception Database, and additional information provided by programme coordinators, RVA provides objective insight into variables that influence reproductive performance in their population and provides evidence for breeding recommendations. These analyses have so far been carried out on fennec foxes (*Vulpes zerda*) and Mexican wolves (*Canis lupus baileyi*) by the AZA RMC and the EAZA RMG has plans to trial these analyses with EAZA EEP programmes in 2020. For programme coordinators implementing RVA, it will also be essential to evaluate how changes to breeding recommendations resulting from these analyses influence reproductive success.

MATE CHOICE

Breeding recommendations *ex-situ* are primarily carried out in order to achieve the genetic and demographic goals of the population (Chargé et al., 2014). As such, opportunities for mate choice are limited *ex situ*, which may alter natural breeding strategies and ultimately reproductive success (Asa et al., 2011; Junge et al., 2009; Martin-Wintle et al., 2018; Wedekind, 2002). As mate choice can significantly affect mating success, offspring production, and fitness (Martin and Shepherdson, 2012; Wedekind, 2002), understanding the ecological drivers for mate choice in species managed

ex-situ may have significant positive effects on reproductive success among recommended pairs (Martin and Shepherdson, 2012). Currently however, there are few successful protocols for evaluating and providing mate choice in *ex situ* conservation breeding programmes (Martin-Wintle et al., 2018). The EAZA RMG aims to support programme coordinators with identifying the role of mate choice in their species and in integrating mate choice in their breeding recommendations, where appropriate.

USE IT OR LOSE IT?

For certain species, fertility must be established by a breeding event upon reaching sexual maturity (Yordy and Mossotti, 2016), and then must be maintained by regular pregnancies throughout the individual's lifetime. For females specifically, extended periods of non-breeding have been associated with increased risk of infertility in certain species, and pregnancies can also carry a protective function for uterine health, decreasing the risk of developing reproductive pathologies (Penfold et al., 2014). Termed 'use it or lose it', this phenomenon has been identified in various species (Penfold et al., 2014). Determining which species are susceptible to 'use it or lose it' and how husbandry and management contribute to a loss of reproductive potential requires the evaluation of breeding biology, historic studbook records, and management techniques. The EAZA RMG aims to support programme coordinators with identifying how breeding history and breeding recommendations influence fertility.

Colleagues at the **AZA RMC**, in partnership with the AZA PMC, are developing statistical models to assess the genetic and demographic impacts of different breeding recommendations. Termed Lifetime Reproductive Planning (LRP), these models will enable programme coordinators to map an individual's reproductive life, ensuring that fertility is established and maintained in individuals who should be contributing to the population, while ensuring that the demographic and genetic goals of the population are maintained, and that the production of surplus offspring is limited.

ASSISTED REPRODUCTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

Assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) encompass a suite of techniques used by humans to enhance reproduction in animals (Jewgenow et al., 2017). These technologies include, and are not

limited to, gamete recovery and cryopreservation, artificial insemination, embryo transfer, and semen sexing (Jewgenow et al., 2017). By using these techniques, deceased, post-reproductive, or individuals incapable of breeding are able to contribute to the population and females can be fertilised without the transfer of males (Jewgenow et al., 2017).

Methods underpinning ARTs have predominantly been developed for use in domestic species, such as dogs or cats, therefore extensive research is required to refine methods for more exotic species. EAZA RMG working group members **Dr. Katarina Jewgenow** and **Dr. Robert Hermes,** Leibniz IZW, Germany, and **Dr. Imke Lueders,** GEOlifes, Germany, are global leaders in developing ARTs for use in exotic wildlife who have carried out pioneering work on ARTs in species including the Iberian lynx (*Lynx pardinus*), Persian leopards (*Panthera pardus tulliana*), African elephants (*Loxodonta africana*), and Northern white rhino (*Ceratotherium simum cottoni*).

Furthermore, together with the **EAZA Population Management Centre (PMC)** and the **EAZA Biobank**, the EAZA RMG aims to support EAZA breeding programme coordinators with guidance for establishing ARTs in their species.

ACCESSIBLE AND PRACTICAL EVALUATIONS

The EAZA RMG aims to promote a holistic approach to reproductive management. To ensure the welfare of our animals and to remain at the forefront of best husbandry practices, a proactive approach evaluating the behavioural, social, physiological, health, and pathological effects of breeding decisions is integral. We work with programme coordinators to develop projects with multiple levels of involvement, depending on the capacity of the involved institutions. Moreover, we aim to use data that are already available, for example studbook data, for preliminary retrospective analyses that may identify initial trends, as well as the knowledge acquired by programme coordinators and animal care staff. We also provide bespoke support to EAZA breeding programme coordinators with identifying the cause of reproductive failure using individual- and pair-based

assessments using the EAZA RMG Reproductive Checklist (Appendix 2) to provide a basis for further evaluations.

The EAZA RMG benefits from having several veterinarians as members and advisors to the working group including **Dr. Tai Strike**, Zoological Society of London, UK, **Dr. Yedra Feltrer-Rambaud**, EAZA RMG, UK, **Dr. Hester van Bolhuis**, Stichting AAP, the Netherlands, **Dr. Tobias Knauf-Witzens**, Wilhelma The Zoological and Botanical Gardens, Stuttgart, Germany, **Dr. Cyriel Ververs**, Sharjah Equine Hospital, United Arab Emirates, and **Dr. Johanna Painer**, Veterinary University of Vienna, Austria who support the EAZA RMG with their extensive knowledge on wildlife contraception and animal reproduction and health. Moreover, the EAZA RMG are supported by two veterinary pathologists, **Dr. Maja Rütten**, PathoVet, Switzerland, and **Dr. Mark Stidworthy**, International Zoo Veterinary Group, UK. We also have links to the EAZA Welfare Working Group through **Dr. Holly Farmer**, Paignton Zoo, UK, and to EAZA (including the EAZA Population Management Centre and the EAZA Biobank) through the EAZA Reproductive Biology Coordinator, **Dr. Veronica Cowl**, Chester Zoo, UK, and EAZA, the Netherlands.

BALANCING POPULATION MANAGEMENT WITH REPRODUCTIVE MANAGEMENT

The effects on fertility of non-breeding and repeated breeding need to be carefully balanced with the genetic and demographic requirements for sustainability. The EAZA RMG collaborates with the **EAZA PMC** to support programme coordinators with future planning for their populations, while taking into account the contraceptive options available to them. Furthermore, EAZA RMG working group members and advisors **Dr. Holly Farmer**, Paignton Zoo, UK, **Dr. Maria-Teresa Abello**, Barcelona Zoo, Spain, and **Sarah Forsyth**, Colchester Zoo, UK bring experience in population management to the RMG through their experience managing EEPs and through their work in EAZA Taxon Advisory Groups (TAGs).

The extensive knowledge within the EAZA community, provides us with a unique opportunity for collaboration across institutions and regions for the continued improvement of best practice in the management of exotic species. Tools such as the Zoological Information Management System (ZIMS) and the Contraception Database allow for the systematic collection of vast amounts of data across zoological collections, enabling the analysis of trends across populations and the continued advancement of best practice. However, it is essential that data entry is standardized across these platforms to ensure that data are comparable across institutions. The EAZA RMG aims to improve the standardization of data entry relating to reproduction through workshops targeted towards key

stakeholders, for example, the BIAZA and EAZA Records Working Groups, and delegates at the EAZA Annual Conferences.

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APPENDIX 1: INDIVIDUALS AND INSTITUTIONS SUPPORTING THE EAZA RMG

EAZA RMG WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

Chair: Sue Walker [1]

Vice-chair: Yedra Feltrer [2]

EAZA Executive Office Liaison: Veronica Cowl [1,3]

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Hester van Bolhuis [5]

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Cyriel Ververs [23]

INSTITUTIONS SUPPORTING THE EAZA RMG

[1] Chester Zoo
[2] EAZA RMG
[3] EAZA
[4] University of Pretoria
[5] AAP Rescue Centre for Exotic Animals
[6] Zoological Society of London
[7] Wilhelma The Zoological and Botanical Gardens, Stuttgart
[8] IZW
[9] AZA RMC, Saint Louis Zoo
[10] Autonomous University of Barcelona
[11] EcoLifes
[12] Paignton Zoo

[13] Wuppertal Zoo
[14] Science and Conservation Centre, Zoo Montana
[15] University of Edinburgh
[16] Tynedale Farm Vets
[17] GEOlifes
[18] AHVLA
[19] Nature's SAFE
[20] University of Veterinary Medicine, Vienna
[21] PathoVet
[22] International Zoo Veterinary Group
[23] Sharjah Equine Hospital

APPENDIX 2: REPRODUCTIVE CHECKLIST FOR IDENTIFYING THE POINT OF REPRODUCTIVE FAILURE

REPRODUCTIVE CHECKLIST FOR CLINICAL HISTORY OF PRESUMED INFERTILITY

This tool was originally developed by the AZA Reproductive Management Center (RMC) in 2014 as part of an RMC-sponsored workshop on diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of infertility in zoo animals. The RMC later shared this worksheet with EAZA's Reproductive Management Group and the two groups co-developed it further. The goal of this worksheet is to stimulate conversation and fact-finding in cases of presumed infertility in zoo & aquarium animals that have been given the opportunity to breed but have not successfully produced offspring despite those opportunities. While not a diagnostic tool itself, this questionnaire should be useful in prioritising resources for diagnosis and remediation of cases of presumed infertility. The questionnaire should be completed for each individual in a pair.

GENERAL

Species Reproductive Biology

1. Is the species seasonal in terms of breeding?
2. What is the normal age of sexual maturity for the species in males and females?
3. What is the age of reproductive senescence for the species in males and females?
4. What is the species' mating system/reproductive strategy?
5. What is the typical litter size of the species?

Individual History

1. Age
2. Number of facility transfers to date
3. Did this animal come from another country or a non-AZA/EAZA facility?
4. Was this individual parent-reared (if applicable) or reared by other means. Please describe.
5. If the individual was hand-reared:
   a. Is this individual imprinted on humans?
   b. Does this individual demonstrate normal sex-specific reproductive and social behavior?
6. What is the individual's demeanour/temperament?
   a. Is this compatible with their potential mate?
7. Is there a history of aggression towards potential mates?

Individual Health

1. Weight
2. Body condition score
3. Vaccination and deworming history
4. Do they have any chronic conditions? Could any of these interfere with normal reproductive processes?
5. Have they received any of the following treatments?
   a. Assisted Reproductive Technologies?
   b. Glucocorticoid treatments?
   c. COX2 treatments?
   d. Contraception?
6. Do they have any skeletal abnormalities? Could any of these interfere with normal reproductive processes?
7. Has an infectious disease screening been carried out?
8. Does this individual have any known congenital abnormalities?

Individual Reproductive History

1. Has this individual produced offspring previously? Provide dates.
2. What was the age of first reproduction for this individual?
3. What are the results of past reproductive examination(s)?
   a. Is there a history of reproductive disease?
4. What type of mate access do they have and how long have they had mate access?
5. Have appropriate reproductive behaviours been observed?
   a. Copulation dates?
   b. What other reproductive behaviours have been observed?
   c. On what dates was the reproductive behaviours in (b) observed?
6. What types of breeding have been attempted in the past (natural vs. artificial)?
7. If behaviour has been appropriately monitored, has the animal been observed refusing to mate? If so, when?
8. If hormone analyses have been conducted to assess reproductive function, what were the results?
9. If applicable, has this individual demonstrated normal species-specific parental care previously?
   a. Has this individual shown evidence of killing or otherwise harming offspring?
10. Does the animal have a record of producing offspring that are stunted or show any congenital abnormalities?
11. Does the animal have a record of producing offspring who suffered neonatal deaths?
12. Are there any necropsy data from neonatal death/placentas?

Husbandry

1. Is the diet species-specific and nutritionally sound?
   a. Are they fed on a natural feeding cycle? This could mean carcass fed, intermittent feeding (e.g. 'fast days'), seasonal changes in diet, or other practices meant to approximate natural dietary dynamics.
   b. Are they fed supplements? Concentrates?
2. What is the enrichment they are given?
3. Do any potential stressors appear to be impacting the animal? For example:
   a. Presence of predators?
   b. Social stress?
   c. Stress from the public?
4. Are they in a single or mixed-species exhibit?
5. Do they have indoor/outdoor access?
6. Do they have access to UVB lighting, if needed?
7. Do they have access to heat source, if needed?
8. Is a natural light cycle being simulated?
9. Do they have access to a nest box, if needed?
10. Are hiding/escape areas provided?
11. What substrates do they have?
12. Does the enclosure have the appropriate humidity conditions?
13. Are the right environmental cues to induce mating/courtship provided?

Social Considerations

1. What is the typical social group for this species in the wild?
2. Does the social structure the target animal(s) live(s) in resemble natural history?
   a. Solitary, paired, grouped, harem, multi-male, multi-female?
3. What conspecifics are housed with the individual?
4. Has this individual typically lived in species-appropriate social groups?
5. Where is this individual in the group's hierarchy, if relevant?
6. Have new individuals been introduced recently that may have caused social disruption or may have introduced a pathogen?
7. If relevant, is the social unit the animal lives in generally compatible or are social issues like atypical levels of aggression present?

SEX-SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

FEMALES

Natural History

1. How long is the oestrous cycle for this species?
   a. How long are females receptive to mating during the oestrous cycle?
   b. What are the signs of receptivity?
   c. Has this female demonstrated receptivity? If so, when?
2. Are females of this species induced or spontaneous ovulators? Both?
3. What is the normal inter-oestrous interval?
4. What is the normal inter-birth interval for this species?

Individual Reproductive History

1. Has ovulation been confirmed in this female? If so, how and when?
2. Does the female have a record of spontaneous abortion?
   a. Are there any necropsy data for aborted foetuses?
3. Does she have a history of dystocia?
4. Does she have a history if stillbirths?
5. How are pregnancy and parturition monitored and diagnosed in this individual?
6. Does she have a history of false pregnancies?
7. What is the length of her inter-birth interval?
8. Have this female's previous litters been of typical size for the species?
9. What is the female's lactational history (i.e. has she lactated normally or experienced complications or insufficient lactation)?
10. Has she ever suffered from mastitis?

MALES

Natural History

1. Do we know what the normal range of testosterone concentrations is in breeding males of this species?
2. Do we know what normal semen characteristics look like in this species?

Individual Reproductive History

1. Is this male a proven breeder? If so, when?
2. Has this male had a formal fertility assessment with semen analysis?
   a. If so, what were the results?

APPENDIX 3: RESEARCH LOG

The following list details current and historic EAZA RMG endorsed research projects. The list does not include projects that are solely carried out by our working group members and advisors.

Current projects:

- Investigating the efficacy of Regumate when milled into feed as a contraceptive in banteng.
- Ovarian stimulation in captive Owston's civets (*Chrotogale owstoni*).
- Evaluating the effects on reproductive health and welfare of long-term contraception in chimpanzees and other great apes.
- Characterizing the reproductive tract of chimpanzees.
- Investigating the use of contraception as a behavioural management tool in spider monkeys (*Ateles fusciceps*) (EEP project).
- Investigating factors contributing to reproductive failure in bush dogs (*Speothos venaticus*) (EEP project).
- A review of the use of GnRH vaccines in exotic wildlife: what do we know, and where are the gaps?
- A review of etonogestrel implants in zoo managed animals.
- Investigating the use of contraceptives for therapeutic management.
- Investigating subfertility in captive tigers (*Panthera tigris* sp.) (EEP project).
- The influence of contraception and surgical sterilization on longevity.

Historic projects:

- Investigating the efficacy of Regumate when milled into feed as a contraceptive in giraffes. Assessing the efficacy of deslorelin implants when placed in alternative placement sites.
  - Investigating the efficacy of contraception in captive Rodrigues fruit bats (*Pteropus rodricensis*).
- A review of contraception used in EAZA ungulates, with a focus on bovids.
- A review of etonogestrel implants in Old World primates.
- Understanding the impacts of contraceptive use in European and North American female tigers using data from the Contraception Database.
- Identifying factors that contribute to the development of reproductive pathologies in captive Komodo dragons (*Varanus komodoensis*).

APPENDIX 4: RESEARCH WISHLIST

The following projects comprise a non-exhaustive list of research projects that the EAZA RMG has identified. We aim to begin research on these projects in the coming years.

Future projects:

- Monitoring and evaluating the behavioural, pathological, and endocrine effects of progestin-based contraceptives in Old World monkeys.
- Identifying the role of social factors in reproductive suppression of cooperatively breeding animals.
- Investigating causes of egg infertility in rockhopper penguins (*Eudyotes chrysocome*) (EEP project).
- Investigating causes of reproductive failure among some pairs of striped hyena (*Hyaena hyaena*) (EEP project).
- Investigating causes of reproductive failure among some pairs of cotton-top tamarins (*Saguinus oedipus*) (EEP project).
- Using Reproductive Viability Analysis in EAZA populations.
- Understanding the welfare implications of breeding and non-breeding recommendations.
- Investigating how reproductive success varies between wild-caught and captive-born animals using data in the ZIMS database.
- Evaluating the role of contraception on social and learnt behaviours involved in reproduction i.e. maternal behaviours, with a focus on primates.