

## Institutional Collection Planning Guidelines

### Plan Overview

The Association of Zoos and Aquariums accreditation standards place member facilities at the forefront of best practice in zoo and aquarium management. The requirement for each member organization to establish and maintain an Institutional Collection Plan (ICP) guides the management of animal populations for individual zoos and aquariums, promotes sustainable populations across the Association in its cooperative animal management programs, and encourages prioritization of species based on objective criteria.

Section 1 of the 2025 edition of the AZA Accreditation Standards and Policies states:

“The institution must follow an Institutional Collection Plan (ICP). The ICP must be re-evaluated and updated at minimum every five years.

Explanation: The purpose of an ICP is to establish and manage a systematic decision-making process to select and sustain all the species in a facility’s animal collection. A functioning ICP should address and contain the components described in the Institutional Collection Planning Guidelines written by the AZA Animal Population Management Committee, which can be found online in AZA’s Accreditation Resource Center at [https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2332/institutional\\_collection\\_planning\\_guidelines.pdf](https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2332/institutional_collection_planning_guidelines.pdf) (you will be requested to log in using your individual membership user name and password).”

An AZA ICP should be a living document that addresses the purposes, considerations, and processes that define and inform decisions made for an organization’s living collection. Its details should reflect interaction with other institutional plans and objectives (e.g., education, conservation, research, strategic, and master plans).

The ICP should reflect the member organization’s mission and purposes for its living collection. A statement of the institutional vision and mission as they relate to living collections is recommended.

The sustainability of AZA’s cooperatively managed Species Survival Plan® (SSP) Program populations is a high priority of the Association and requires collaboration among AZA member organizations, animal program leaders, institution staff, and other partners (Accreditation Standard 1.3.2; Policy on Responsible Population Management; Accreditation Standards 1.8.1, 1.8.2, 1.8.3). Institutional collection planning decisions play an important role in program population management; while variables such as available space, institutional resources, and staff expertise are all affected by SSP participation.

### Selection Criteria

The most important goal of choosing species is to achieve the institution’s mission through its living populations. A complete ICP includes and defines selection criteria, and operational considerations that will be applied across all taxa when making decisions to add to or remove species.

Selection criteria guide decisions on maintaining, excluding, or removing a species from the collection. They answer the “What?” and “Why?” questions of managing a species. Considerations are the

variables that may be applied within each criterion. The questions “How?,” “Where?,” and “When?” are usually covered by the considerations.

The following are suggested sample criteria and considerations that may be included in an ICP.

| <b>Suggested Criteria</b>                         | <b>Example Considerations</b>  |
|---|--|
| Purpose   | Field conservation, science, education & call to conservation action, research, exhibition   |
| Available resources to acquire and manage animals | Financial, space, labor, physical facilities   |
| Husbandry & veterinary expertise                  | Within the organization, external  |
| Welfare assurance                                 | Physical environment, choice, behavior, diet, self-maintenance, life stages  |
| Conservation status in nature                     | IUCN RedList, Endangered Species Act   |
| Population in zoos/aquariums                      | Species360, TRACKS data  |
| AZA Animal Program status                         | Commitments to active participation in TAGs, SSPs, and others, particularly toward increasing their long-term sustainability and success |
| Exhibit value                                     | Charisma, history, local tradition, multispecies opportunities   |
| Organization-specific details                     | Fund-raising, site constraints, mission directives   |

### **SSP Population Sustainability**

Participation in SSP Programs is the cornerstone of managing demographically and genetically healthy populations, and all AZA-accredited organizations and certified related facilities are expected to actively collaborate in animal management.

During ICP development, organizations should consult the recommendations of Taxon Advisory Group Regional Collection Plans and the long-term goals and essential actions of SSP Programs as outlined in their SSP Sustainability Reports. These resources should be considered objectively, and provide an opportunity for an organization to become engaged in working towards SSP sustainability. The SSP Sustainability Database’s Online Search Portal and SSP Sustainability Reports can help an organization identify appropriate species given their collection planning criteria, while also assisting in aligning their specific resources with SSP Program needs.

### **ICP Development Process**

Who should be involved?

Producing an ICP should be driven by curatorial and veterinary staff. Other institutional leaders from departments such as development, education, marketing, maintenance and others should be involved as they will provide perspective and a more cohesive approach. Input to the ICP should be tailored to the organizational structure and personality of the member facility. The CEO/Director is ultimately accountable for the collection and all animal transactions (Accreditation Standard 6.4); it is strongly recommended that s/he endorses the ICP and ICP process prior to its implementation.

## Applying the criteria

A process which includes stakeholders and participants should be developed to assess potential species using all the chosen criteria, review their relevant details, and document decisions. The best method is appropriate for the size of the member facility and its collection, and provides clear decision pathways. While these pathways should be as objective as possible, it is important to leave room for subjective choices.

The simple answer is often best and this principle can be applied to an ICP. The goal is to establish a method that allows the organization to define and consistently assess criteria, and document the results. The process should guide the users to a reasonable outcome.

## ICP Review

Accreditation standard 1.3.1 mandates periodic review of the ICP. Regular application of the process and production of a current document are equally important. As an organizational management tool, it should be consulted and updated whenever changes are contemplated in a facility's living population. For best results, reviews should be conducted much more frequently than the standard's five-year mandate.

## Documentation

The final product, a written ICP, is most useful if it is clear and concise. Its organization and format should reflect institutional objectives and the process or format should not dictate the results. The ICP should provide adequate information for internal audiences and users. It may be helpful to provide a draft comment period for all stakeholders prior to final publication. The CEO/Director's endorsement of both process and output is important. Additionally, external audiences, such as a Board of Directors, should be kept in mind when editing the final plan.

## Conclusion

A professional ICP is a zoological best practice intended to help managers integrate their curatorial responsibilities into the organization's mission and vision. An organized process puts animal management decisions into the appropriate hands and assures a proactive approach to conservation, education, animal welfare and guest experience in AZA-accredited members and certified related facilities.

## Available Resources

- AZA Accreditation Standards  
<https://www.aza.org/accred-materials>
- AZA Board approved policies  
The Policy on Responsible Management, the SSP Full Participation Policy, and the Sustainability Considerations for Developing an Aquatic Invertebrate & Fish Collection Plan are important to consider during collection planning.  
<https://www.aza.org/board-approved-policies-and-position-statements>
- Sample ICPs in Accreditation Resource Center  
The AZA Accreditation Commission has identified and shared examples of good ICPs  
<https://www.aza.org/accred-resource-center>

- SSP Sustainability Database  
 The online tools emerging from the SSP Sustainability Database include the Online Search Portal and SSP Sustainability Reports. The SSP Sustainability Database automatically generates SSP Sustainability Reports which summarize SSP species' basic care, exhibit design, and population management considerations and priorities. This information is compiled in a searchable format, allowing collection planning users to perform searches that identify appropriate species for their collection planning criteria, while also directing resources and attention to managed species.  
<https://www.aza.org/ssp-population-sustainability>
- TAG Regional Collection Plans  
 TAGs develop Regional Collection Plans (RCPs) to recommend species for cooperative management among AZA organizations, determine the long-term sustainability goals for each recommended AZA Animal Program within its purview, identify essential actions (number of spaces, founders, etc.) needed to meet these goals, provide organizations with information relevant to their long-term collection plans, and assure adherence to AZA's animal management and conservation goals. RCPs are found on TAG pages in the AZA Animal Programs Database.  
<https://www.aza.org/animal-care-management>
- SSP Breeding and Transfer Plans  
 SSP Programs develop SSP Breeding and Transfer Plans that identify population management goals and institutional recommendations to assure the sustainability of a healthy, genetically diverse, and demographically varied population.  
<https://www.aza.org/animal-care-management>
- AZA Animal Care Manuals  
 AZA Animal Care Manuals provide a compilation of animal care and management knowledge that has been gained from recognized species experts, including TAGs, SSPs, biologists, veterinarians, nutritionists, reproduction physiologists, behaviorists and researchers. These manuals are based on the current science, practice, and technology of animal management to maximize capacity for excellence in animal care and welfare. Incorporating the information from these manuals into animal management practices at zoos and aquariums maximizes excellence in animal care and welfare, and assures member organizations are maintaining best practices.  
<https://www.aza.org/animal-care-manuals>
- Program Leaders at your organization  
 TAG Chairs, SSP Coordinators, Studbooks and other Animal Program participants make valuable resources during the ICP process, and can help further define and explain an organization's role in achieving TAG and SSP Program goals.