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Trampled by elephants

Congress cut zoos out of the stimulus and that's just wrong

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By Jim Maddy and Barbara Baker

An old African proverb says, "When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets trampled."

The newly signed stimulus law trampled zoos and aquariums with one little-noticed provision, which prevents "any casinos or other gambling establishment, aquarium, zoo, golf course or swimming pool" from receiving stimulus funding to create jobs.

Others can speak for themselves, but the notion that zoos and aquariums belong on this list is wrong.

Many of America's finest zoological institutions were built by federal infrastructure and jobs programs. When President Franklin D. Roosevelt looked to put people back to work 75 years ago and since that time, the federal government has helped to establish a network of public institutions that the American people still enjoy today. From the Work Projects Administration to the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, zoos and aquariums have always been worthy of federal jobs investments.

All across America, zoos and aquariums are ready to put people to work, building education centers and habitats for some of the most threatened and endangered animals on the planet. How is a job building a polar bear habitat any less stimulative than a job pouring concrete for a sidewalk? How is a job saving coral reefs any less important than a job building a car? The construction of the Pittsburgh Zoo's \$18 million Waters Edge exhibit alone employed more than 50 people.

In addition, when analysts calculate the nation's most livable cities, the presence of an accredited zoo or aquarium is one of the factors used. Most importantly, when children and families from all walks of life want to connect with nature, it often happens at the zoo or aquarium.

Even if conservation or the quality of life for American families are secondary concerns to the critics who think zoos and aquariums are undeserving, all they have to do is look to places like Pittsburgh to see they are anchors for tourism and economic development.

Nearly 450,000 of the 1 million people who visit the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium come from outside of Allegheny County. They spend their money not only at the zoo, but

at local gas stations, hotels, restaurants and other cultural institutions when they visit this region.

Accredited zoos and aquariums generate \$8.4 billion in economic activity and support more than 100,000 jobs. The Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium and Service Systems Associates, its food and gift partner, employ more than 140 people year-round and 400 from May through August. It is one of the largest employers of youth in the region.

Is it not important to save endangered species in the ark of zoos and aquariums? I suspect critics haven't visited a zoo or aquarium lately. If you haven't been to one in 25 years, you've missed a lot. These institutions have transformed themselves into centers of scientific excellence and leaders in environmental education.

Zoos and aquariums provide tremendous public benefits. A just-released National Research Council report found "abundant evidence that these programs and settings contribute to people's knowledge and interest in science" and that they can "significantly improve outcomes for individuals from groups that are historically underrepresented in science."

Congress and the president should follow the tradition of President Roosevelt and the WPA, which left us a legacy of great zoological institutions across America. Many of those Depression-era buildings still stand today. Why not erect green buildings alongside them, to build on this legacy of conservation?

In the rush to pass the stimulus legislation, accredited zoos and aquariums got trampled, but it's not too late to correct the mistake. We're ready to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and put people to work. Most of all, we are ready to stand up to the public scrutiny and the common-sense test that should be applied to any federal stimulus project: Does it put people to work right away? And will the project produce lasting public benefit?

Zoos and aquariums met that test 75 years ago and they meet that test today.

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