Conservation spells good business for Wildlife Reserves

Now in its 10th year, parks group has seen business shift with tie-ups and funding projects

BY GRACE CHUA & IRENE THAM

Conservation is not just a matter of principle. It also makes for good business at WRS, as visitors are "more sophisticated and enlightened," said WRS chairman Chia Ching, and are now demanding more.

All that, Ms Chiang said, makes for a better visitor experience. "We've showing Generation X and Y and Millennials that we are commercially viable, yet we are able to focus on the non-financial "life" care for animals and their environments, reducing carbon footprint, being family friendly, and encouraging education and entertainment."

As the wildlife parks group – which manages the Singapore Zoo, Night Safari, Jurong Bird Park and the upcoming River Safari – celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, it has also seen its business shift. It ramped up its efforts in the past few years, signing tie-ups with the United States-based Wildlife Conservation Society, which runs several New York zoos, and with the Singapore National Parks Board to study and reintroduce hornbills into the wild.

Last year, WRS set up its $1 million conservation fund for field projects in Singapore. Twenty cents from the sale of each park ticket goes to the fund.

It also receives sponsorship – Thai Beverage recently contributed $50,000. The company has given $410,000 since 2006, with the money going to help Asian elephants.

WRS also has money from grant applications: it is giving $500,000 over five years to the National University of Singapore's (NUS) Ah Meng Memorial Conservation Fund, which supports student and faculty research on endangered native wildlife.

The first study to benefit from the Ah Meng fund was on the banded leaf monkey. It found that the population was triple what was previously recorded. More importantly, there are few genetic differences between the monkeys found in Johor and Singapore, suggesting that there could be breeding or reintroduction opportunities to increase the local population.

Said Associate Professor Rudolf Meyer, an evolutionary biologist at NUS: "Each study would not have been possible if not for the funding from Wildlife Reserves Singapore."

Funding to the past had been ad hoc, before Ms Fumio Lai took over as WRS group chief executive officer. "Now, there's more integrated and sustainable efforts to fund conservation research in Singapore and the region," said Prof Meyer.

Professor Peter Ng, director of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, also believes that WRS is taking a step in the right direction with its conservation efforts. "It will substantially increase our knowledge base as well as help encourage a new generation of young naturalists," he said.

But he added that WRS can do more to spread its business model and beliefs across Asia. "At the end of the day, long-term research and conservation efforts need a good business base," he said.

And this business base is expanding. WRS is aggressively pursuing opportunities in the wedding and special events segments, conventions and exhibitions, or MICE, industry. Specifically, it is targeting the huge tourist markets of China and India. WRS has hosted themed weddings since 2004, and organises about 30 weddings a year.

But even among the number of foreign visitors grows, WRS wants to keep its parks affordable for all Singaporeans and visitors to compete with the integrated resorts and new attractions. The approach has kept visitor numbers up: in the past financial year, the Singapore Zoo had 4.6 million visitors, the Night Safari 1.1 million and Jurong Bird Park 700,000.

But as WRS' parks age, so do their stable of keepers and veterinarians. To cure this, the park's board of stewards are retiring, and must pass on their institutional knowledge. And the Parks' breeding and conservation achievements must be archived and recorded.

WRS has about 3,600 staff across three parks, and is looking to recruit some 200 more for the River Safari, which will be Asia's first and only river-themed wildlife park when it opens in 2012.

A programme in animal management with Ngee Ann Polytechnic that WRS launched last year, with a diploma in veterinary biosciences, could help plug the problem of a vet supply crunch, as qualified specialists have always been hard to find.

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