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SOMERSET

More than 60 experts from around the world are visiting the International Conservation Center in Fairhope today as part of the African Painted Dog Conference being held at the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium.

Dr. Barbara Baker, president and CEO of the Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium, said the zoo plans to bring painted dogs to the ICC sometime this year, but no definite date has been set.

“We’ve tried to really put a focus on the painted dog, that’s why we’ve brought together the leading experts in the world,” she said. “African painted dogs are a very endangered species but so little information is available about them. The opportunity to work with experts from around the world to share and learn information is a major step forward in the work to protect these wonderful but endangered animals. Painted dogs face many threats, from poaching and domestic dog disease to being killed by cars as Africa’s population expands.”

John Lemon, chairman of the Painted Dog Conservation Project in Perth, Australia, said in a telephone interview that painted dogs have disappeared from 25 of the 39 countries where they used to exist. The species has been around for at least 3 million years but could go extinct in our lifetime.

“They are unique creatures, as unique as the Tasmanian tiger,” he said. “They are the most social carnivore in the world.”

Painted dogs are very distantly related to domestic dogs; they are more closely related to wolves. They are not hyenas. They are also called African wild dogs. They don’t bark; they chirp, sometimes sounding like birds, and they use low-pitched growls. Painted dogs look after the weak members of the pack, Lemon said. They let the pups eat first. They regurgitate food to feed the new mothers, puppies and weak or injured dogs.

“They take care of each other,” he said. “We could take a leaf out of their book. They are also very efficient predators.”

The experts are going to look at the site and make recommendations for what should be done before the painted dogs are brought in. There is a fenced area for them, but a night time and bad weather enclosure will be needed. Painted dogs will dig and climb so the enclosure must be secure. Living at the ICC will be

very enriching for painted dogs, he said. If they see deer outside their enclosure, it will be enriching for them. It will stimulate the pack behaviour of a hunt except for the final kill.

“The Pittsburgh Zoo has been very successful with breeding, husbandry and the welfare of the painted dogs,” Lemon said. “Painted dogs live in large open spaces. The Pittsburgh Zoo had the forethought to purchase the ICC — we have to take our hats off to them. This will improve the painted dogs’ social structure and well-being.”

The painted dogs will be kept separate from the three elephants already living at the ICC, Baker said, but the animals co-exist in the wild. When the painted dogs are at the ICC, more research will be done in their care and pack dynamics.

“This will be the insurance population to keep the species from extinction,” Lemon said. “It’s like a modern Noah’s Ark.”

The conference attendees were introduced to the zoo’s newest litter of painted dog pups on Thursday. The litter of five males and three females, born Jan. 13, is the zoo’s second successful litter.

“Since the mortality rate for pups in both zoos and the wild is very high, this is a great opportunity for us to share what we have learned from both of our litters since one was hand-raised and the second litter is being raised by mom,” Baker said.

The Pittsburgh Zoo & PPG Aquarium is partnering with the African Painted Dog Project in Zimbabwe.

Workshop sessions included presentations by Lemon; Dr. Greg Rasmussen, founder and director of Painted Dog Conservation; and Dr. Tico McNutt of the Botswana Predator Conservation Trust as well as veterinarians and keepers on the most up-to-date accomplishments and developments in animal behaviour, husbandry, veterinary care, research and conservation.¿