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Zoo Wins International Conservation Award for Okapi Conservation Project

October 18, 2018-- *Jacksonville, FL* – It is fitting that on World Okapi Day, Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens (JZG), in partnership with several other AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums, announces it received Significant Achievement for the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) 2018 William G. Conway International Conservation Award for the Okapi Conservation Project (OCP). Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens led an impressive group of organizations including Columbus Zoo & Aquarium, Dallas Zoo, Disney's Animal Kingdom, Houston Zoo, Nashville Zoo, San Diego Zoo Global, and White Oak Conservation Center.

This annual award recognizes exceptional efforts toward regional habitat preservation, species restoration, and support of biodiversity in the wild. Winning projects are recognized as models of zoo-driven global conservation movements.

“With conservation as our mission, AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums directly contribute to the survival of hundreds of imperiled species in nature,” said AZA President and CEO Dan Ashe. “Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens and its partners are global leaders in the field and this award recognizes the 30 years of protecting okapi as an outstanding example of the contributions zoo and aquarium professionals are making through research and field conservation projects.”

OCP's staff support and assist the efforts of the Institute in Congo for the Conservation of Nature (ICCN) to protect, manage, and secure the Okapi Wildlife Reserve (OWR) which OCP helped create in 1992 in partnership with other NGOs and the Congolese government. OCP also manages highly successful programs to address threats to okapi habitat and forest resources through education programs that promote local understanding of, and appreciation for, okapi, their habitat, and the importance of the OWR. OCP promotes model programs in sustainable agricultural practices that reduce the need to convert rainforest into agricultural land, and invests in capacity building of Congolese staff, ICCN rangers and communities around the OWR to support the goal of steadfast stewardship of okapi conservation. OCP assists local communities with developing sustainable ways to coexist with endangered wildlife, while still addressing their own aspirational needs.

“We (OCP) have maneuvered through many challenges over the last 31 years, and the consistent presence of zoo support, including Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, through difficult times has helped us build a strong foundation of trust within the communities and the Congolese government which has protected the region's biodiversity and the survival of the largest population of okapi in one of the most difficult conservation environments on earth,” said John Lukas, President of Okapi Conservation Project. “We appreciate the generous support and commitment JZG has made to support this important work and direct this award application.”

“We are so proud to support the Okapi Conservation Project,” said Tony Vecchio, Executive Director of the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens. “They were one of the first to make the connection between what is happening in the field and the role zoos play in protecting animals in the wild.”

About Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens

For over 100 years, the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens has aimed to inspire the discovery and appreciation of wildlife through innovative experiences in a caring environment. Starting in 1914 with an animal collection of one red deer fawn, the Zoo now has more than 2,000 rare and exotic animals and 1,000 species of plants, boasting the largest botanical garden in Northeast Florida. **The Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens is a nonprofit organization and a portion of every ticket sold goes to the over 45 conservation initiatives Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens supports around the world, and here in NE Florida.** JZG is proud to be an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. For more information, visit jacksonvillezoo.org.

About Okapi Conservation Project

Taking a holistic approach to protecting wildlife, OCP is founded upon three pillars of wildlife conservation including wildlife protection, community assistance and conservation education. In 1992, OCP helped create a protected area twice the size of Yellowstone National Park in the heart of Africa to ensure the protection of okapi and many other threatened species including the largest populations of forest elephants and chimpanzees in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Due to the okapi's biological and cultural importance, it is a flagship species revered by the Congolese people and its continued presence in the Ituri Forest ensures the protection of many other threatened and endangered species that share its habitat.