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Zoo Celebrates Diversity in W.I.L.D. Program

August 19, 2016-- *Jacksonville, FL* – Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens (JZG) announces a new venture which provides youth from under-served communities with leadership training and employment opportunities in the new W.I.L.D. Program funded through the Mayor's Jax Journey grant. The W.I.L.D (Wildlife Immersion and Leadership Development) program currently has 10 W.I.L.D. Stewards enrolled in the program and will increase by 10 stewards annually.

W.I.L.D. Program employees are all 18 years or younger, and reside in or attend church or school in segments of the community who have been traditionally less involved with the Zoo. By breaking down barriers, the Zoo is building the stewards' knowledge of zoology, animal and plant conservation, and career opportunities in mission-driven environmental organizations.

Under the guidance of W.I.L.D. Program Coordinator, Chris Conner, youth in the program practice team building and leadership development through a range of projects and learning opportunities. They might spend a day helping the horticulture team pull invasive species of plants at the beach or staffing an educational table at Global Tiger Day, interacting with guests and presenting animal biofacts. Conner says, "What's really significant is that these teens are not only poised to become exceedingly influential within their own respective careers, but ultimately become conservation heroes advocating for the preservation of our natural world."

The group works together to learn about the animals at the Zoo and how to best teach others about them, with the ultimate goal of developing and presenting W.I.L.D. Outreach Programs throughout their own community. They will have the opportunity to speak about the Zoo in churches, schools and civic centers of their own choosing, free of charge. They study "interpretation," the discussion and messaging of all facets of the Zoo to the public. Traditional interpretation techniques used in the Zoo are modified and enhanced by the unique perspectives of the teens in the program. Participants in the program have remarked that they already feel a boost of confidence in public speaking and have gained new insight into the role of zoos, not only in conservation, but as a resource to their community.

"I'm thrilled that Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens was awarded a portion of the Jax Journey grant through the City of Jacksonville," said Rachel Vitti, Chair of the JZG Education Committee. "Each organization has made an explicit commitment to

expand access to, and opportunity for, meaningful learning for our community's teens. This is a comprehensive example of the conscious, purposeful decision making that will reap a magnitude of benefits for years to come. I look forward to sharing the success of the Zoo's initiative with the rest of the City, so that other organizations may use this as a model to provide expansive opportunities for our youth to be active and engaged citizens."

Photo credit: Christina Dembiec, Community Education Manager

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