



Tapirs

A Flagship Species for Wildlife Conservation
in the Neotropics

BY BILL KONSTANT

At a time when we need to pull out all the stops to preserve Earth's biological diversity, every endangered species needs a champion. A few – pandas, tigers, elephants, whales and sea turtles – already have significant conservation support structures in place, brightening the prospects for their survival. The majority of the world's threatened plants and animals, however, receive minimal attention by comparison.

Tapirs fall into the latter category, despite being large creatures that are relatively common in zoos, have cute babies, and are ecologically important. Significant chunks of tapir habitat disappear every year and wild populations decline in regions where they are hunted for food, causing all four species to be threatened with extinction. Still, none have the same "sex appeal" of the animal favorites listed above, so tapirs are desperately in need of champions to ensure their survival. Fortunately, a number of AZA zoos and aquariums – institutions represented on the Tapir Taxonomic Advisory Group (TAG) – are stepping up to the plate. The Houston Zoo is one such member, its Naturally Wild conservation program having taken up the cause of tapir conservation in a serious way.

Three of the world's four tapir species are found in the Neotropics and a fourth in Southeast Asia. Baird's tapir (*Tapirus bairdii*) ranges from southern Mexico through Panama and into northern Colombia, the mountain tapir (*Tapirus pinchaque*) has a more restricted distribution in the high Andean regions of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, and the Brazilian or lowland tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*) is widely distributed throughout South America's Amazonian, Atlantic forest, Cerrado and Pantanal regions. The Houston Zoo currently maintains a pair of lowland tapirs, but its overall commitment to tapir conservation extends well beyond this one species.

Zoo Director Rick Barongi has a long history with members of the mammalian order *Perissodactyla*, to which tapirs belong along with rhinos and horses.

"Tapirs certainly aren't the most charismatic members of this group," he admits, "but they deserve special attention from a conservation standpoint because of their crucial role in tropical forest ecology."

In 1990, while employed as a curator at the San Diego Zoo, Rick was part of a team that traveled to Panama following the overthrow of General Noriega. The zoo-led mission set out to rescue and relocate five Baird's tapirs that had been abandoned on the former Panamanian dictator's estate. All were recovered safe and sound. Rick also traveled deep into Panama's inhospitable Darién region to rescue another tapir that was being raised by campesinos for meat. The Noriega tapirs were delivered safely to a private zoo

in central Panama and the Darién animal was sent to the Summit Zoo and Botanical Gardens, a major national tourist attraction located just outside Panama City. Recently the tapir colony at the Summit Zoo was the focus of a special Naturally Wild conservation project.

Late in 2004, at the request of the Panama City mayor's office, a bi-lingual team of construction and maintenance personnel was assembled at the Houston Zoo and dispatched to Panama. Their task was to build a more suitable facility for the tapirs in residence, complete with a spacious holding area and breeding compound, large freshwater pools in the exhibit area, a raised wooden viewing deck for the public, and interpretative graphics for both Panamanian and foreign visitors. Jim Brighton of AZA commercial member PJA Architects contributed the design for this facility. Field biologist Charles Foerster, who studies Baird's tapirs in Costa Rica's Corcovado National Park, offered both his knowledge of wild tapir behavior and his strong back to the project. Continental Airlines donated a number of complimentary flights to help us keep the budget down. Alberto Mendoza, Houston Zoo's Coordinator of Latin American Conservation Programs, supervised work on the ground.

According to Alberto, "Our staff was so excited to be part of this project because they could see with their own eyes what a difference it was going to make for the tapirs, the keepers, and visitors to the Zoo."

Construction spanned several months (including part of the rainy season) and involved a few trips back and forth to the states for some crew members. Despite a few minor delays, work was completed just in time for the Second International Tapir Symposium, held in Panama City in January 2005. This allowed dozens of tapir enthusiasts from the United States, Europe and Asia to attend the unveiling.

Most of the attendees were members of the World Conservation Union's Tapir Specialist Group (TSG), an all-volunteer group of almost one hundred members. One way in which TSG members maintain a strong international network is to hold a symposium every two years. These meetings bring together experts on tapir ecology, behavior, evolution and conservation, and provide excellent opportunities to refine strategies for tapir survival. Brazilian field biologist Patricia Medici chairs the TSG, whose members represent 25 countries worldwide. Supervising this network is an incredibly time-consuming task, considering that Pati and her colleagues also conduct a full-time lowland tapir field research program in Brazil's Morro do Diabo State Park. When Pati took over

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leadership of the TSG several years ago, the Houston Zoo decided to lend a hand, offering logistical support, helping to maintain communication within the international network, planning symposia and conservation workshops, and assisting in the overall fundraising effort.

"I can't thank my colleagues in Houston enough for what they've done to help me keep things running smoothly and effectively," Medici states. "In fact, it's largely due to assistance from zoos and aquariums in the United States and Europe that the Tapir Specialist Group functions as well as it does."

Five Houston Zoo staff members currently serve on the TSG: Rick Barongi, Alberto Mendoza, Kelly Russo (Conservation Program Assistant), Jennifer McLain (Registrar), and myself. Our focus at the moment is putting out the next issue of the *Tapir Conservation* newsletter, helping to plan a conservation workshop for Baird's tapir in Belize this August, and finalizing arrangements for the Third International Tapir Symposium, which is scheduled for Buenos Aires in January 2006.

In addition to such assistance, the Houston Zoo also provides financial support for field research and public awareness efforts that focus on tapirs. Medici's studies in Brazil offer an excellent example of how much we still stand to learn about these obscure creatures. She refers to them as "landscape detectives" and looks to their behavior for a better understanding of tropical forest ecology. By fencing off small forest patches – enclosure plots – she and fellow researchers keep the larger herbivores – tapirs, peccaries and deer – from feeding on the plants within. Plant composition and growth are then measured both inside and outside these plots, allowing predictions to be made regarding changes that occur when keystone species like tapirs are eliminated from the landscape, as they tend to be in heavily hunted regions. Kelly Russo and hoofstock keeper Corinne Kendall both traveled to Brazil last summer to work on this project, helping to construct 25 enclosure plots during their stay.

"We did our share of the work, that's for sure," says Russo, "but the experience was so rewarding. I learned so much more about tapirs and their relationship to the forest than I could ever have read in books."

The Disney Wildlife Conservation Fund is a major supporter of the Morro do Diabo research effort, which is tied to comparative studies in other countries. In Costa Rica, for example, the Houston Zoo supports Charles Foerster's research efforts in Corcovado National Park, which includes the enclosure plot protocol and is the longest ongoing study of wild tapir populations. Eventually, similar studies will be launched in Colombia and Argentina, as soon as new sources of funding are identified.

In Venezuela, the Houston Zoo collaborates with a small non-governmental organization, Fundacion AndigenA, that has launched public awareness programs focused on tapirs and spectacled bears. Modest grants from the Zoo have helped to produce t-shirts, posters, stickers and other materials that draw the attention of schoolchildren to the plight of these endangered species, especially in rural villages where people live in close association with tropical forest wildlife.

Tapirs are likely to remain a focus for the Naturally Wild conservation program well into the future. Our goal is to remain a staunch supporter of the Tapir Specialist Group and also to put the talents of Houston Zoo personnel to use in as many tapir research and conservation projects as possible. At least one staff member will return to Brazil this summer and, in Panama, our work with tapirs at the Summit Zoo has launched a full-scale master plan process for that institution, an effort that will ultimately benefit many more species. You might say the bottom line is this: tapirs not only deserve more attention than they currently receive, but they also are an excellent flagship species for wildlife conservation throughout the Neotropics. Projects that result in the protection of tapir habitats in Central and South America also benefit wild populations of parrots and macaws, jaguars and ocelots, howling and spider monkeys, and myriad other species.

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