



Senior Vice President & Executive Director, San Diego Zoo Safari Park
San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance
San Diego, California

The San Diego Zoo Safari Park seeks an innovative and collaborative Executive Director. One of the two front doors for San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance (SDZWA), an international nonprofit conservation organization, the San Diego Zoo Safari Park offers guests the opportunity to connect with extraordinary wildlife and ecosystems—from the Australian outback and rainforests of Indonesia to the vast grasslands of Africa and Asia with immersive, authentic, adventure-oriented experiences spread across 1,800 acres in Escondido, California. With a transformative capital project in Elephant Valley coming to a successful conclusion in March 2026, the next Executive Director will lead the San Diego Zoo Safari Park at a decisive and pivotal point in its history, with expectations to advance its legacy of unmatched innovation and leadership in the field.

Since its founding in 1972, saving species has been a key part of the Safari Park's mission, and the Safari Park has played a major role in the conservation of species ranging from California condors to rhinos and elephants. Home to vital conservation efforts, the Safari Park is a one-of-a-kind wildlife park with more than 3,000 animals representing more than 300 species and an accredited botanical garden with 1.3 million individual plants. The Safari Park welcomes more than 1.5 million guests each year, providing an ideal setting for visitors to connect with nature and wildlife, while supporting the Alliance's conservation efforts worldwide.

The Safari Park's Executive Director reports to San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance's Chief Operating Officer and oversees over \$80 million in revenue, a total staff of more than 1,000, organized under a team of five direct reports, and over 600 volunteers. The Executive Director also serves as a key member of the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance Executive Team as a Senior Vice President.

For this pivotal role, the Alliance seeks an experienced and strategic leader who brings expertise in effective management of a sizable organization within a complex mission-driven global enterprise with keen conservation interests. The Executive Director must be a comfortable external representative and enthusiastic fundraiser. Additionally, the Executive Director must be an outstanding collaborator, dedicated to powerfully uniting the activities of the Safari Park with those of its sister organization, the San Diego Zoo, as well as with the Alliance's field and educational efforts worldwide.

A small search committee has been established to conduct the search. The committee is assisted by Isaacson, Miller, a national executive search firm. Inquiries, nominations, and applications should be directed in confidence to the search firm as noted below.

BACKGROUND -- SAN DIEGO ZOO WILDLIFE ALLIANCE

San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance is committed to saving species worldwide by uniting our expertise in wildlife care and conservation science with our dedication to inspiring passion for nature.

San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance is intent upon broadening and deepening its approaches to protecting and conserving wildlife around the globe. As an Alliance, it seeks to work ever more closely in partnership with individuals and organizations worldwide to catalyze action on behalf of wildlife and their habitats. The Alliance is grounded in the belief that the health of wildlife, people, and ecosystems are interconnected and linked to the health of the planet.

In addition to the Safari Park, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance operates the San Diego Zoo, which attracts 4 million visitors annually. These destinations are at the heart of the Alliance's global efforts, where connections are made between people and wildlife every day as guests develop an understanding of nature, and as Wildlife Allies, contribute to safeguarding wildlife everywhere.

Through its longstanding and esteemed field operation, the Alliance collaborates with hundreds of individuals and organizations in field projects across eight Conservation Hubs across six continents worldwide to innovate and implement full-spectrum conservation strategies. San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance veterinarians, nutritionists, scientists, and wildlife care specialists work not only at the Safari Park and Zoo, but also alongside over 200 partners to provide expertise in conservation technology. One of the Alliance's most valuable assets—the [Wildlife Biodiversity Bank](#)—serves as a resource consisting of nonliving samples and living cell lines dedicated to growing a worldwide legacy of irreplaceable reproductive, genetic, and medical materials to support a world where all life thrives.

The Alliance's most notable multidisciplinary field conservation programs include the [Hawaii Endangered Bird Conservation Program](#) in the Hawaiian Islands, a first-of-its-kind partnership with the [Reteti Elephant Sanctuary in Kenya](#), the [Los Amigos Biological Station](#) in the Peruvian Amazon, and [three field stations](#) in Central Africa's Ebo Forest. These programs promote and sustain conservation and recovery of endangered wildlife and their habitats, while providing training opportunities for scientists and resource managers.

In addition, the 50,000-square-foot [Arnold and Mabel Beckman Center for Conservation Research](#) is the largest zoo-based, multidisciplinary conservation science center of its kind in the world, and serves as home base for the Wildlife Biodiversity Bank, encompassing the [Frozen Zoo®](#) and Native Plant Seed Bank. The Beckman Center is the headquarters for San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance's Conservation Science and Wildlife Health teams, focused on eight strategic areas: conservation genetics, reproductive sciences, biodiversity banking, population sustainability, disease investigations, plant conservation, recovery

ecology, and community engagement. The Conservation Science and Wildlife Health experts have decades of experience and lead the cutting-edge science and research efforts necessary to help species around the world and recover critically endangered species from extinction.

San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance is led by President and CEO Shawn Dixon, who took on the permanent role in October of 2025 after serving as interim President and CEO for several months. Dixon is a tireless wildlife advocate who served as the organization's Chief Operating Officer since his arrival at the Alliance in 2016. He brings deep experience in hospitality and tourism, strong roots in the San Diego community, and an unwavering commitment to the Alliance's mission.

THE SAN DIEGO ZOO SAFARI PARK TODAY

Located in Escondido, California, the Safari Park was founded as one of the boldest preservation projects in history. An 1,800-acre wildlife park, the San Diego Zoo Safari Park today continues to lead the way for conservation and inspires 1.5 million visitors a year to join efforts to save, protect, and care for wildlife worldwide. More than half of the Safari Park's 1,800 acres is set aside as the Biodiversity Reserve—one of the last remaining areas of native coastal sage scrub and chaparral habitat in the region.

The Safari Park is home to over 3,000 animals representing more than 300 species and is a vast accredited botanical garden with 1.3 million individual plants representing over 3,700 species. The Safari Park offers guests the opportunity to connect with extraordinary wildlife and ecosystems—from the Australian outback to the dynamic grasslands of Africa and Asia. Among the many highlights of the Safari Park's current habitats:

- The Safari Park's state-of-the-art Tull Family Tiger Trail is a 5.2-acre experience emulating a tropical Asian rainforest. It features three separate habitats for the tigers, including rocks for climbing, water features for swimming, and deadwood trees for scratching. The trail also includes a Sumatran-style grass hut and a longhouse with native carvings. Tiger Trail plays an integral role in the conservation of Sumatran tigers, with dozens of Sumatran tigers born at the Park.
- Walkabout Australia transports guests to the Land Down Under to discover Australia's remarkable wildlife and come face-to-face with some of the most mysterious animals on Earth, including two platypuses. Located in the Nelson M. Millsberg Platypus Habitat, these are the only platypuses in the world currently being cared for outside of Australia. In addition to witnessing these one-of-a-kind freshwater wonders, guests can explore grasslands with Western gray kangaroos, experience Matschie's tree kangaroos up close, and interact with Australian wildlife ambassadors.
- By March 2026, the Safari Park will complete the largest and most transformative project in the Alliance's 110-year history, the all-new [Denny Sanford Elephant Valley](#). Elephant Valley reimagines the heart of the Safari Park, turning the current elephant habitats into a dynamic savanna and a place of exploration. This immersive new experience for elephants and people will offer opportunities for guests to be surrounded by elephants on multiple sides, including from

below via an overhead walkway with views of the herd passing through. Here, guests will learn about the crucial role elephants have as architects of the ecosystem, about their intricate social dynamics, and about the importance of coexistence between people and wildlife across the savanna. The rich plant life in Elephant Valley has been carefully curated by a team of expert horticulturists and arborists to authentically reflect the sights, sounds, and smells of the African grasslands. This dynamic new experience will offer new opportunities for the herd of elephants by introducing several innovative features that align with seasonal variations from the African savanna year-round. Elephant Valley will highlight San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance's world-changing partners and celebrate the vibrant cultures and local communities where people and elephants coexist.

Conservation Efforts

At the core of the Safari Park's mission is a commitment to conservation, and it serves as a sanctuary for many endangered species. Programs to save and protect the burrowing owl, California condor, and other endangered species are headquartered at the Safari Park, along with the state-of-the-art Paul Harter Veterinary Medical Center. Successful conservation efforts include:

- With nearly 200 calves born at the Safari Park, the park has one of the most successful breeding programs for rhinos in the world.
- The Safari Park's California Condor breeding and reintroduction program has played a pivotal role in increasing the population from just 22 individuals in the 1980s to more than 560 today.
- With a \$2 million grant and in collaboration with local fire departments and government agencies, an [innovative helicopter water tank](#) at the Safari Park has bolstered wildfire response capabilities at the Safari Park and in the region.
- In 2023, more than 70 endangered mountain yellow-legged frogs bred at the Safari Park and reared by partners were introduced into a lake in the San Bernardino Mountains, helping restore sustainable populations.
- The Safari Park cares for North America's last 23 surviving milky storks. While small milky stork population pockets exist in Asia, the team has been working to aid birds previously living in wildlife facilities throughout North America to produce new chicks.

Organizational Structure and Finance

The governance of San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance consists of an eleven-member [Board of Trustees](#). The Executive Team, of which the Executive Director is a member, consists of [ten key leaders](#) who work together to guide all areas of the organization.

Reporting to the Chief Operating Officer of San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, the Executive Director of the Safari Park has five direct reports, including the Vice President & Deputy Director, Vice President of Wildlife Care, Director of Retail Operations, Director of Safari Experiences, and a Senior Office Manager. A dedicated and highly talented team of more than 1,000 professionals work within these units.

The new Executive Director will work closely with San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance's President and CEO, Chief Operating Officer, and the Executive Director of the San Diego Zoo to plan and prioritize for the capital future of the Safari Park and Zoo. The Alliance is finalizing a comprehensive master plan to cover the entire organization, and the Executive Director will be a key leader in developing priority projects and addressing deferred maintenance.

Overall, San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance operates from a healthy financial position. In fiscal year 2024, revenue totaled \$445 million, with \$203 million derived from Admission and Membership, \$138 million derived from In-Park Revenues, and the remaining from Donations and other revenue streams. Expenses totaled \$423 million, with Animal and Plant Care, Conservation Projects, Education Programs, Facilities Maintenance, and Zoo and Safari Park Operating Costs comprising \$366 million and the remainder from Management, General, and Fundraising costs.

ROLE OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The Executive Director of the San Diego Zoo Safari Park reports to the Chief Operating Officer and serves as a key member of the Alliance's Executive Team. The Executive Director has oversight of all the Safari Park's activities and provides leadership in furthering the Safari Park's mission as a world-class facility focused on conservation. The specific areas for which this position is responsible include all departments related to the 1,800-acre facility: guest services, retail operations, facilities, horticulture, wildlife care, team engagement, team development, experiences, and community relations. Additionally, the Executive Director collaborates closely with the Executive Team, especially those overseeing the Zoo and Conservation Science and Wildlife Health.

The San Diego Zoo Safari Park is a complex enterprise within a uniquely complex global organization. Its mission of combining the highest quality wildlife care, serving as a leader in conservation, education, and engagement, along with action on behalf of protecting species in their native habitats, requires a deft balancing of priorities and allocation of resources. The Executive Director must effectively integrate programmatic and business imperatives to ensure that the Safari Park is well-aligned with and furthers the vision and goals of the Wildlife Alliance.

The Executive Director will represent the San Diego Zoo Safari Park locally, nationally, and internationally as it relates to wildlife health and welfare, conservation, and the role zoos play in addressing these critical concerns. The Safari Park's leader should be visible in government and policy settings and be an effective spokesperson and fundraiser for the Safari Park and Alliance in all arenas.

The broad objectives for the Safari Park's new Executive Director are as follows:

- Ensure effective leadership and management throughout the Safari Park, promoting high morale and a sense of shared purpose. Delegate effectively to a cohesive leadership team and model and promote transparent and accessible internal communication and collaboration so that Safari Park team members are well-informed and aligned.

- Collaborate with the Director team to ensure that the Safari Park provides a world-class guest experience and remains a vibrant and influential cultural destination whose facilities, team members, exhibits, programs, and services appeal to visitors, volunteers, students, and collaborators as exciting sources of education, inspiration, and entertainment. Create innovative programs that drive increases in audience engagement and revenue.
- Work with strategic partners to create annual operations and revenue budgets. Collaborate with the Deputy Director to frame the capital strategy, which includes developing and prioritizing projects and spending over a five-year horizon.
- Partner across SDZWA to ensure effective capital and site planning across the organization, balancing new projects with addressing deferred maintenance.
- Serve as a conduit to the Executive Team and advocate for Safari Park team members while promoting an internal culture that champions the Alliance as an entire multi-faceted enterprise.
- Serve as a primary spokesperson for the Safari Park's vision, mission, achievements, and conservation relevance to key constituencies and internal and external stakeholders.
- Build strong relationships with board of trustee members, serving as the liaison between board and Safari Park team members and ensuring appropriately high engagement of board members.
- Represent the Safari Park in the community with strategic partners, including government entities, in matters that impact the Safari Park, including operations, planning and development, and community relations.
- Leverage the Safari Park's work through strategic alliances with appropriate partners at the local, state, national, and international levels. Forge ever-stronger collaborations with other conservation and cultural organizations locally, nationally, and internationally.
- Working closely with colleagues in Philanthropy, play a lead role in cultivating and soliciting donors, and in broadening and diversifying the Safari Park's philanthropic base.
- Engage as a leader in AZA programs and committees to ensure strong partnerships with the association that support SSPs, TAGs, and conservation projects that further the relevancy of zoos in local communities and in conservation work around the world.

QUALIFICATIONS & EXPERIENCE

For this pivotal role, the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance will search broadly for a leader and spokesperson who embraces the Alliance's mission and values. Leadership in a zoological setting is preferred.

The successful Executive Director will be highly knowledgeable about conservation issues and have a deep appreciation for the value of zoos and the importance of conservation education. A strong appetite and well-developed aptitude for fundraising, marketing, and public and media relations are essential. The Executive Director must be an agile leader with low ego, adept at working within a complex organizational structure. Additionally, the Executive Director will be a gifted public communicator with infectious enthusiasm and the ability to relate to a wide range of audiences.

While no one candidate will meet all the desired criteria, the successful candidate will bring most of the following qualifications and attributes:

Experience

- Track record of providing visionary and innovative leadership and effective management of a complex and sizable zoological, theme park, or related organization, preferably one with keen conservation interests.
- Experience with non-profit governance, including success leading in an organization governed by a board of directors.
- Track record of building and sustaining innovative partnerships and working with diverse stakeholders, including community members, public officials, and professional colleagues.
- Outstanding demonstrated skills in team building and employee development.
- Proven business acumen—discipline and focus in setting realistic priorities, meeting or beating goals, and running a fiscally sound operation.
- Fundraising and marketing ability, including experience raising funds from a variety of sources.

Attributes

- Public presence, exceptional communication and media skills, and the ability to be a persuasive spokesperson and ambassador for the Safari Park.
- A positive personality and strong interpersonal skills to work effectively with the full range of constituents.
- Imagination, tenacity, gracious self-confidence, flexibility, good humor, high energy, as well as high emotional intelligence and impeccable integrity.
- Passion for conservation and for the leadership role of zoos worldwide.

COMPENSATION

While final compensation will be determined based on final candidate qualifications and experience, the salary range is expected to fall between \$380K-\$400K.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Screening of complete applications will begin immediately and continue until the completion of the search process. Inquiries, nominations, referrals, and CVs with cover letters should be sent via the Isaacson, Miller website: <https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/san-diego-zoo-wildlife-alliance/executive-director-safari-park>. Electronic submission of materials is strongly encouraged.

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At San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, we thrive on celebrating our differences. Diversity is vital for the benefit of our employees, our guests, our community, and our wildlife.

SDZWA is an Equal Opportunity Employer. SDZWA will consider all qualified applicants for employment without regard to race, color, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, national origin or ethnicity, disability status, genetics, protected veteran status, marital status, parental status, or any other characteristic protected by federal, state, or local laws.

This document has been prepared based on the information provided by the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance. The material presented in this leadership profile should be relied on for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this information, the original source documents and information provided by San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance would supersede any conflicting information in this document.