



President & Chief Executive Officer
Cheyenne Mountain Zoo
Colorado Springs, Colorado

THE SEARCH

The Cheyenne Mountain Zoo (CMZoo), a renowned institution ranked among the top zoos in the country and a leader in wildlife conservation efforts, seeks an innovative and dynamic leader to serve as its next President & Chief Executive Officer (CEO). Located in the breathtaking foothills of Colorado Springs, CMZoo is the highest elevation zoo in North America and a top-ranked destination, welcoming over 800,000 guests annually. With a legacy rooted in conservation, education, and immersive guest experiences leading up to their 100th anniversary, CMZoo is poised for its next chapter of growth and regional and global impact.

The CEO will lead a mission-driven organization renowned for its excellence in animal care, conservation leadership, and community engagement. CMZoo is home to over 1,200 animals across 150+ species, including award-winning exhibits such as Encounter Africa, Rocky Mountain Wild, and the African Rift Valley. It is also internationally recognized for its giraffe care and breeding program, including the International Center for the Care and Conservation of Giraffe, which is currently undergoing major expansion with the opening coinciding with CMZoo's centennial year.

This is a rare opportunity to helm a financially sound, privately operated nonprofit that receives no local tax support and is governed by a highly engaged Board of Directors. The next CEO will guide a passionate team of over 300 staff and 200 volunteers, steward a budget of over \$20 million, and champion a strategic vision that integrates conservation, education, and innovation.

Ideal candidates will bring a bold vision, proven executive leadership, and a deep commitment to wildlife conservation. They will be compelling communicators, strategic fundraisers, and collaborative leaders capable of inspiring internal teams and external stakeholders alike. The CEO will be instrumental in building on CMZoo's successes, shaping its future, expanding its reach, and ensuring its continued role as a cultural cornerstone and conservation leader.

A six-member Board search committee has been established to conduct this search. The search committee is assisted by Isaacson, Miller, Inc., a national executive search firm. Inquiries, nominations, and applications should be directed in confidence to the search firm.

BACKGROUND

The colorful [history](#) of the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo (CMZ) began in 1926 when Spencer Penrose, philanthropist and founder of the Broadmoor Hotel, moved his small but diverse collection of exotic animals from Turkey Creek Ranch to its present site on Cheyenne Mountain. Mr. Penrose began construction on the first building in 1927, and the acquisition of animals began in earnest. With one animal caretaker and the personal interest of Penrose, the collection grew to 88 specimens in 1932. In 1938, after substantial development, Mr. Penrose deeded the Zoo as a non-profit public trust to the people of Colorado Springs. This trust was deemed “for the sole purpose of establishing and maintaining a zoological park to provide recreation, education, conservation, and scientific facilities in the field of zoology and related subjects, and to preserve the Zoo in perpetuity for the people of the Pikes Peak region.” In 1989, the Zoo created a master plan to guide its future and began an ambitious fundraising campaign to complete this plan. The first phase of the Zoo’s conservation center, a new entry complex and Rocky Cliffs, the exhibit for Rocky Mountain Goats, opened in 1990.

CHEYENNE MOUNTAIN ZOO TODAY

Today, the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo has been successful in transforming a visitor’s experience from a passive viewer to an active participant. Visitors are submerged into culture and habitat, inspiring a new respect for the preservation of wildlife through hands-on education and creating a “never to be forgotten” experience. CMZoo welcomes more than 800,000 visitors annually, ranking it among the top ten zoos in the country in attendance, and one of Colorado’s most visited and cherished cultural attractions, with 20,000+ member households in the Pikes Peak region and beyond. CMZoo is a long-standing accredited member of AZA (Association of Zoos and Aquariums), including an outstanding and rarely received “clean inspection” in 2021. Open to the public 365 days a year and an all-weather zoo, CMZoo is contained within 146 picturesque, well-maintained, and landscaped acres and has the distinction of being North America’s highest zoo in elevation (6,714 feet above sea level). It is currently home to more than 1200 animals, representing more than 150 species, organized by distinct zones such as [African Rift Valley](#), [Asian Highlands](#), [Australia Walkabout](#), [Primate World](#), and CMZoo’s award-winning exhibit, [Encounter Africa](#). It is also noted for the greatest number of giraffe births of any zoo in the world and offers a unique guest experience paired with an unwavering commitment to animal welfare. The Zoo’s unique design and animal exhibits provide up-close animal experiences, including opportunities to hand-feed giraffes from an elevated boardwalk, or close encounters with grizzly bears or orangutans. CMZoo’s Animal Care Staff also provides a program called “Defining Moments,” with the purpose of initiating a special moment for a guest that is spontaneous and unexpected, making a memory for a lifetime. The staff recognize their responsibility to care for the animal collection, as well as their responsibility to the animals to impact guests’ lives, change behaviors, and give them opportunities for connections, so they want to save the natural world.

CMZoo saw many achievements in 2024 including being ranked as #2 Best Zoo in the country, in USA TODAY's 10Best Readers' Choice Awards. In addition to achieving their highest ranking ever, CMZoo earned the #2 spot for Best Zoo Membership and CMZoo's home for animals native to the Rocky Mountain region, Rocky Mountain Wild, was voted #2 Best Zoo Exhibit. Among many other important conservation achievements, the black-footed ferret (BFF) breeding program saw a record number of 37 kits born.

International Center for the Care and Conservation of Giraffe

The [International Center for the Care and Conservation of Giraffe](#) (the Giraffe Center) was established in 2022 as a concerted initiative by Cheyenne Mountain Zoo to consolidate resources and enhance educational endeavors, with the overarching goal of elevating the standard of care and enriching the lives of giraffes worldwide. CMZoo is recognized as a leader in the professional field of giraffe care and boasts a rich heritage of nurturing a diverse and interactive herd of giraffes, actively engaging guests through all-day feeding sessions, conducting weekly hoof care routines, and pioneering a myriad of voluntary husbandry and medical procedures. With over 200 giraffe calf births, the team is dedicated to continuous learning, teaching, and fostering a global network aimed at advancing giraffe welfare.

To reflect the team's expertise in providing world-class care to giraffes, CMZoo has made significant progress on a [\\$40 million project](#), funded through Zoo revenue and donations, to increase the herd's outdoor space by 25% and expand their indoor space with a 12,000-square-foot giraffe barn. On schedule to open in spring of 2026, giraffes will have opportunities to interact with guests in new and exciting ways and engage in enriching activities in their habitat independent of keepers and guests.

Conservation

In the last decade, zoo staff have worked with conservation partners in seven countries and across the US and have taken more than 100 trips to support global and local conservation. One of the most impactful ways Cheyenne Mountain Zoo and its guests help wildlife conservation is through its [Quarters for Conservation \(Q4C\) program](#). Since 2008, those quarters and coin donations have raised nearly \$6 million for field conservation. By collecting quarters and other coins, CMZoo funds new and existing wildlife conservation projects, provides an opportunity to engage its staff and community in the effort, and significantly expands contributions to wildlife conservation in Colorado and around the globe. Seventy-five cents from every admission, along with \$25,000 in membership revenue, funds long-term projects represented on guest-interactive kiosks at the CMZoo entrance.

In 2024, CMZoo's Q4C program celebrated a conservation milestone: \$1 million donated to its African elephant and black rhino conservation partner, Tsavo Trust, since establishing a partnership in 2016. Tsavo Trust was founded in 2012 to help protect the last of the 'Super Tuskers' – African elephants with tusks so large they nearly scrape the ground. It is estimated that 25 Super Tuskers remain, and the majority of these individuals reside in Tsavo National Park, in Kenya, where Tsavo Trust is based. In addition, elephant

and rhino feeding opportunities, offered daily in the summer months, raise around \$75,000 annually for Tsavo Trust. In 2024 and 2025, CMZoo and Tsavo Trust launched a new initiative for wild Eastern black rhinos. This effort aims to expand existing black rhino territories and secure new habitats where these critically endangered animals can safely grow their numbers. CMZoo has committed \$300,000 to this project, funding critical infrastructure and tools — including a helicopter — to help get the Tsavo West region of Tsavo National Park fully rhino ready.

EdVenture

Cheyenne Mountain Zoo's EdVenture Department is the heart of its educational outreach, offering immersive, hands-on experiences that connect people of all ages with wildlife, conservation, and the natural world. The team is composed of educators who guide guests of all ages through interactive programs designed to inspire curiosity and stewardship. Their mission is to foster learning through exploration, animal encounters, and conservation education. Programs often include live animal presentations, giraffe feedings, and guided tours tailored to specific themes. Examples of EdVenture programs include [Zoo Explorations](#), [Teen Programs](#), and Virtual [ZOOMobile programs](#).

Strategic and Master Plans

CMZoo is guided by a set of principles, “We Believe” statements, that focus on the Zoo’s culture, community, education efforts, and business and shape the evolution of the Zoo’s Strategic Plan. CMZoo’s “We Believe” statements outline the core values and strategic priorities for the zoo and are an integral part of the future planning and staff culture. Originally created in 1989, CMZoo’s Master Plan allows the Zoo to make changes and improvements by replacing deteriorating exhibits and buildings and improving visitor accessibility, convenience, and safety. Over the past two decades, more than \$30 million has been raised from community individuals, foundations, and corporations and invested to replace or repair outdated Zoo facilities and exhibits. Master Plan improvements made at CMZoo include: [Asian Highlands](#) (1996), [Lions Lair](#) (1997), [My Big Backyard](#) (2001), [African Rift Valley](#) (2003), [Rocky Mountain Wild](#) and [Mountaineer Sky Ride](#) (2008), the Front Entry Plaza and [Grizzly Grill](#) (2010), [Wilgren Elephant Center](#) (2011), [Scutes Family Gallery](#) (2012) and [Encounter Africa](#) and [The Overlook](#) (2013), [The Loft](#) (2014), [Australia Walkabout](#) (2015), [Goat Playground](#) (2016), [Pizza with a View and Cozy Goat](#) (2018), [Water’s Edge: Africa](#) (2020). The next major improvement is within Primate World, which is currently in the planning stage.

Governance, Organizational Structure, and Finance

Cheyenne Mountain Zoo is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation governed by a highly engaged 22-member Board of Directors. There is a four-member executive staff that includes the CEO, Executive Vice President, Vice President of Animal Care, and Vice President of Finance. Under this team is a diverse team of over 300 full-time and part-time staff, supported by 200 volunteers.

CMZoo is currently one of only a handful of accredited zoos in the nation that operate without local tax support and depend on admissions, membership dues, corporate sponsors, donations, and grants for funding. In May 2024-April 2025, CMZoo's operating revenue was \$27.8 million, comprised of \$15.2 million in admission fees; \$3.8 million in membership fees; \$7 million in visitor services and programs; \$1 million for operating contributions; and \$670,000 in other income.

THE ROLE OF THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Reporting to the Board of Directors, the CEO provides leadership for the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, overseeing all its activities, and is responsible for its financial success. The CEO will lead and affirm strategic direction, ensure the institution has the appropriate organizational structure and staff in place to meet its goals, and delegate authority.

The overarching external challenges for the next CEO of CMZoo include building on the institution's unique strengths to communicate and implement a vision and strategy for the future, to continue to elevate CMZoo's regional, national, and global profile; to integrate conservation into every aspect of its messaging and programming; to maintain and enhance CMZoo's strong relationships locally with public officials and other cultural leaders; and to ensure that CMZoo's funding sources match its accomplishments, ambitions, and substantial potential.

CMZoo is a complex enterprise and must continue to be well structured and managed internally. Its mission of combining the highest quality animal care and public education, along with research and action on behalf of conserving animals in the wild, will require a deft balancing of priorities and allocation of resources. The CEO must effectively integrate programmatic and business imperatives and ensure that the institution is well aligned around its vision and goals and continues to operate profitably.

The broad objectives for CMZoo's new CEO are as follows:

- Lead the continued refinement of an inspiring strategic plan that moves CMZoo into its next phase with input and engagement from the various constituencies.
- Advance CMZoo's position and visibility as a leader in animal care and conservation of animals, locally, regionally, and globally. Advance CMZoo as a vibrant, accessible cultural destination whose facilities, exhibits, programs, and services are ever more satisfying to guests and other audiences as sources of education, inspiration, and entertainment.
- Serve as a primary spokesperson for CMZoo's vision, mission, achievements, and potential to external constituencies.
- Oversee fundraising strategy and galvanize volunteers and staff in its support. Play a lead role in personally cultivating and soliciting donors and in broadening and diversifying CMZoo's philanthropic base, including foundations, corporations, and individuals.

- Reinforce and build strategic alliances with partners in the scientific, educational, and business communities. Pursue creative entrepreneurial opportunities that will help to earn income and optimize attendance. Continue sound financial discipline that allows for ongoing infrastructure and programmatic investment.
- Ensure effective leadership and management throughout the organization. Delegate effectively to a high-performing executive leadership team. Model and promote transparent and accessible internal communication.
- Work closely with the Board of Directors on major policy and strategic matters. Help identify, recruit, and onboard new Board members.
- Expand and upgrade CMZoo's use of technology in its programming, communications, exhibits, and operations.
- Retain, attract, and develop the highest quality staff.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

For this pivotal role, the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo will search broadly for a leader and spokesperson who embraces CMZoo's mission and believes firmly in its distinctive purpose of conservation locally, nationally, and across the globe. The successful CEO will be visionary, strategic, tactical, and fluent in the work and issues of conservation, with a deep appreciation of the importance of conservation and the value of zoos in this space.

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

- Informed and demonstrated passion for nature and wildlife and a sense of urgency about their protection.
- Boundless curiosity, enthusiasm, and ambition for the varied, multi-faceted work of CMZoo.
- Successful track record of providing visionary leadership and effective management of a complex and sizable private or public organization, preferably one with conservation, educational, or research interests.
- Experience managing institutional growth and change. Strong team-building skills.
- Track record of developing and executing large-scale capital projects with animal care and guest experience as driving factors.
- Public presence. Exceptional communication skills and experience as a persuasive, outgoing spokesperson for CMZoo and conservation issues in general. Experience dealing with the media and the press.
- A flair and genuine appetite for fundraising. Experience and success raising funds from private and public sources.
- Proven business acumen. Discipline and focus in setting realistic priorities, meeting or beating goals, and running a fiscally sound operation.

- A keen sense of marketing.
- Entrepreneurial spirit and drive. An eye for strategic opportunities and innovative partnerships.
- Experience with non-profit governance required. Experience reporting to a board preferred.
- Excitement about CMZoo's role as a vital presence in Colorado Springs's cultural and civic life. A history of engagement in local society.
- Strong interpersonal skills to work effectively with the full range of constituents.
- Imagination, intelligence, tenacity, gracious self-confidence, good humor, and high energy.

COMPENSATION

This position offers a hiring salary range of \$250,000-290,000. The final salary will be based on education, experience, skills relevant to the role, and internal equity.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Review of candidates will begin immediately and continue until the position is filled. Inquiries, nominations, and applications, including a resume and letter of interest, should be directed electronically in confidence to:

Natalie Leonhard, Partner
Hayden Lizotte, Managing Associate
Kendra Moleé, Senior Search Coordinator
Isaacson, Miller

<https://www.imsearch.com/open-searches/cheyenne-mountain-zoo/president-and-chief-executive-officer>

The Zoo is dedicated to the principles of equal employment opportunity in any term, condition, or privilege of employment. We do not discriminate against applicants or employees on the basis of age 40 and over, race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, color, religion, creed, national origin, ancestry, veteran status, disability, military status, genetic information, or any other status protected by state or local law. This policy applies to all employees, including managers, supervisors and co-workers.

The Zoo will make reasonable accommodation for qualified individuals with known disabilities and employees whose work requirements interfere with a religious belief unless doing so would result in an undue hardship or direct threat to the organization. This policy governs all aspects of employment, including selection, job assignment, compensation, discipline, termination, and access to benefits and training. Employees needing such accommodation are instructed to contact their supervisor or the Human Resources office immediately.