



Chief Operating Officer
San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance
San Diego, California

THE SEARCH

The San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance (SDZWA), one of the world's largest international conservation organizations, seeks a mission-driven and dynamic leader to serve as its next Chief Operating Officer (COO). As the internal leader of SDZWA, the COO position represents an extraordinary opportunity to advance impactful conservation on a global scale by enhancing operational excellence, leading the deliberate use of technology to support conservation and guest experience, and facilitating a culture of cohesive mission focus across the large and complex organization.

SDZWA seeks to be the most effective wildlife conservation organization for the world by prioritizing partnerships, transdisciplinary solutions, and the interconnectedness of people and nature. From running one of the world's most successful white rhino breeding programs, with over 100 calves born at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park, to hatching more than 250 California condor chicks after the species population dropped to just 22 in 1982, SDZWA has a nearly unmatched history of species conservation success. SDZWA also oversees the [Arnold and Mabel Beckman Center for Conservation Research](#), the largest zoo-based, multidisciplinary conservation science center of its kind in the world, which serves as home base for the Wildlife Biodiversity Bank, encompassing the [Frozen Zoo®](#) and Native Plant Seed Bank. The San Diego Zoo and San Diego Zoo Safari Park make the mission, conservation work, and partnerships possible, while SDZWA's global conservation work demonstrates the importance and impact of saving wildlife, as well as provides powerful stories to share with audiences.

The San Diego Zoo and San Diego Zoo Safari Park together welcome 5.5 million visitors annually, are responsible for \$203 million in revenue from admission and membership and \$138 million from in-park revenues, and employ more than 3,000 employees. In addition to ensuring the operational excellence and cultural health of these organizations, the COO oversees the execution of the organizational strategic and master plans, will lead efforts for marketing, communications licensing, sales, and business development, oversees expanding education efforts, and plays a leading role in advancing local partnerships and developing new strategic efforts, including the organization's partnerships with the local biotech community to sequence genetic material in the Frozen Zoo and efforts to license intellectual property developed at SDZWA.

For this pivotal role, the Alliance seeks an experienced and strategic leader who brings experience enhancing organizational culture and expertise in effective management within a complex, mission-driven global enterprise. The next COO must be a comfortable external representative, an outstanding collaborator, and combine a keen business savvy and creative approach to business development with a passion for advancing the mission of SDZWA.

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.

San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance operates the San Diego Zoo and the San Diego Zoo Safari Park. 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 located on 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.

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 COO is a member, consists of [ten key leaders](#) who work together to guide all areas of the organization.

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. His early foci in the CEO role include enhancing a culture of cohesiveness; completing a master plan that supports SDZWA's goal to build a sustainable zoological population; and pursuing technology enhancements with an eye toward efficiency, effectiveness, and the future.

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 CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

The Chief Operating Officer reports directly to the CEO and serves as a key member of the Alliance's Executive Team. They will collaborate closely with this team, ensuring cross-functional engagement for key strategic decision-making. The role provides enterprise-wide oversight of operations, stewarding the performance and guest experience of the San Diego Zoo and San Diego Zoo Safari Park while advancing a portfolio of innovative, science-driven wildlife conservation and education initiatives. The COO translates strategy into action, ensuring the organization's vision is operationalized with clarity, accountability, and a deeply human-centered approach. In addition to these internal responsibilities, the COO represents SDZWA locally, nationally, and internationally. Along with the CEO and CFO, the COO is an officer of the

organization. They should be visible in government and policy settings and be an effective spokesperson and fundraiser for SDZWA in all arenas.

The COO has a team of seven direct reports, including the Vice President of Wildlife Education Programs, the Vice President of Construction & Architecture, the Vice President & Head of Business Development, the Vice President of Merchandising & Warehouse Operations, the Chief Marketing Officer & Senior Vice President, the Senior Vice President & Executive Director, San Diego Zoo, and the Senior Vice President & Executive Director, San Diego Zoo Safari Park.

The essential functions for the Chief Operating Officer are as follows:

- Lead efforts for marketing, communications, sales, publications, licensing/sponsorships, and broadcast production, which dovetails with the organization's strategic plan.
- Define and drive SDZWA's mission and plans in relation to intellectual property and maximize returns on existing intellectual resources.
- Support execution of merger and acquisition activities further supporting organizational financial sustainability.
- In partnership with IT and the CFO, lead SDZWA's pursuit of sustainable and effective technology use to enhance conservation science, guest experience, and guest engagement. Ensure SDZWA is operating with current best practices and anticipate and implement updates.
- Ensure SDZWA's message is communicated across all channels, including governmental and community efforts, and to targeted audiences, making impactful contributions to the organization's mission.
- Direct and implement organization goals, budgets, and objectives, and all San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance operations.
- Ensure the design and implementation of a long-range strategy in order to maintain financial health and create sustainability in a time of growth and scaling.
- Direct and participate in negotiation and administration of contracts for major services, labor union bargaining agreements, and capital construction.
- Collaborate with San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance Board and CEO on long-term plans for corporate growth and evolution.
- Act on behalf of the CEO as needed.

QUALIFICATIONS & EXPERIENCE

The successful COO will bring ten or more years of executive-level general management experience leading complex, mission-driven, or service-oriented organizations, including major zoos or theme parks. A Bachelor's degree is required, and a Master's Degree is preferred. While no one candidate will meet all the desired criteria, the successful candidate will bring most of the following qualifications and attributes:

- Strong aptitude in decision-making and problem-solving.
- Demonstrated ability to understand and interpret complex data metrics.
- Knowledge of industry marketing best practices.
- Ability to negotiate contracts and develop deep partnerships in a mission-driven ecosystem.
- Demonstrated ability to lead strong and cohesive teams and drive healthy and productive organizational cultures. A hands-on leadership style that drives connection across the organization.
- A demonstrated ability to collaborate across a complex organization to drive cross-functional goals.
- Demonstrated ability to communicate effectively orally and in writing, and to deliver presentations to large groups of diverse audiences.
- Knowledge of organizational planning and proven success in executing large-scale organizational strategic priorities, preferably in a mission-driven environment.
- Ability to research new business ventures and be creative in developing and maximizing revenue streams in a large, complex organization.
- Familiarity and comfort with rapidly advancing technology and how to leverage new technology to drive efficiency and effectiveness both programmatically and in internal operations.
- 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 \$497K-\$525K.

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/chief-operating-officer>.

Electronic submission of materials is strongly encouraged.

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

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.