



*Recently, I had the opportunity to interview Christy Mazrimus-Ott, Program Manager for the Trees for You and Me campaign, a collaborative project between AAZK and Polar Bears International. Christy was recognized in 2015 with the Certificate of Merit in Conservation Award for her distinguished efforts in promoting this outstanding program since 2009.*

*Shane Good, Editor*

### What is "Trees for You and Me"?

Trees for You and Me is a tree-planting conservation program created through a partnership between the American Association of Zoo Keepers (AAZK) and Polar Bears International (PBI). Both organizations recognize a mutual passion in combatting climate change and reaching to communities to aid in greening efforts. Trees for You and Me was founded by former PBI Arctic Ambassadors from the zoo community who wished to initiate a fundraising challenge to plant trees. Funds raised by local AAZK Chapters and other conservationists from the communities are used in an annual granting program aimed to provide funding for tree-planting to areas of the world that have been devastated by deforestation.

### How did Trees for You and Me begin? How long has this program existed?

Trees for You and Me began as an idea that Zoo Keeper Alicia Shelley, Columbus Zoo and Aquarium, had when we were in Churchill, Manitoba as PBI In-Field Ambassadors. Robert Buchanan, former PBI president and CEO, was discussing the benefits of planting trees to absorb carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas. Alicia had the idea of AAZK Chapters competing against each other to raise money to plant trees. I contacted The Arbor Day Foundation to pitch them the idea and they were on board. Then, I contacted former AAZK President, Shane Good, who I met in

Churchill, and pitched him the idea and the AAZK Board approved the Trees for You and Me program back in 2009. The Arbor Day Foundation had a donation link on their site with all AAZK Chapters listed to donate funds in their name. At the end of the competition, the winning AAZK Chapter received a tree to plant in their zoo or community. The program started in 2009 and this will be the 7<sup>th</sup> year in 2016.

### How does the Tree for You and Me Grant Work, and how does someone apply?

The Trees for You and Me Grant is a forest-based carbon offset grant with funds generated by AAZK Chapters hosting Trees for You and Me fundraising events! This grant furthers AAZK's and PBI's quest to fight climate change by asking for grant applicants that will use it for reforestation and habitat revitalization.

Local AAZK Chapters can host events to raise funds for Trees for You and Me. The funds raised will go towards the Trees for You and Me Grant administered through the American Association of Zoo Keepers called the Trees for You and Me Grant. Any community that has faced deforestation on a large scale from a natural disaster is invited to apply. The application for the Trees for You and Me grant is due by May 1, 2016 and will be awarded to the recipient of the Trees for You and Me grant on December 1, 2016. Details about the grant can be found at [aazk.com](http://aazk.com).

The Trees for You and Me Committee is composed of zoo keepers from institutions that have participated in Trees for You and Me since its inception. The Trees for You and Me Committee will review the Trees for You and Me Grant applicants and send a recommendation letter to the AAZK Grant Committee for the applicants that met the grant's requirements. This will be the Trees for You and Me stamp of approval and then the AAZK Grant Committee will evaluate the applicants and choose the winner.

In 2016 Trees for You and Me is setting a goal of AAZK Chapters raising \$15,000 to go towards the Trees for You and Me Grant! The Trees for You and Me Grant must go towards planting trees or a related greening effort.

### How will the Campaign Work?

AAZK will send communications about Trees for You and Me via social media in an effort to reach out to AAZK Chapters throughout the Campaign. Chapters will report their results to AAZK; periodic e-mails

Photo courtesy of Robert and Carolyn Buchanan







from AAZK will announce the standings. Chapters may follow the progress and results on the AAZK and PBI websites. AAZK will soon have a donation site on their website for all Chapters at [aazk.org](http://aazk.org).

AAZK is also developing a Trees for You and Me educational brochure for Chapters to support their fundraiser and PBI will have supplemental educational materials to support your Trees for You and Me fundraiser too. Watch for more details on where to find these resources. Following the fundraising effort, Chapters will be reporting to AAZK through the Chapter re-chartering process.

### **When will Trees for You and Me start and end?**

Trees for You and Me will start February 27, 2016 (International Polar Bear Day) and end November 1, 2016 (Polar Bear week).

### **How can Chapters raise and gather Campaign funds?**

Each AAZK Chapter can determine the way they want to raise money. Projects in the past have included bake sales, polar plunges, miniature golf events, garage sales, silent auctions, fun runs, spaghetti dinners, car washes, recycling programs, a night at a local hangout that allows a 50/50 raffle, and more. The actual cash handling procedures will be the same you follow for other campaigns for your Chapter at your institution.

Your fund raising efforts can include an educational event that invites others to take part in additional conservation behaviors. Planting trees in urban areas has distinct benefits, but the most important is that it brings people together in a green activity. Community engagement – citizens working collaboratively, through inspired action and learning, to create and realize bold visions for their common future – is a critical step in creating movement to stop our dependence on fossil fuels and stop climate change.

There will soon be a donation link for Trees for You and Me on the AAZK website so donations to Trees for You and Me can go directly to the individual AAZK Chapters.

### **How will the leading AAZK Chapter be announced and matched?**

We invite teams to report the amount of funds raised to AAZK by November 1, 2016 at the latest.

AAZK will report on the status of the different Chapters through an e-mail sent to the AAZK Chapters, on its website and through social media.

PBI will report on the status of the different Chapters on its website and through social media.

PBI loves people who help to plant trees and save polar bears, so they most certainly show their gratitude! PBI will match the winning Chapters funds up to \$500 towards the Trees for You and Me grant recipient. Winners will be announced through PBI and AAZK social media by December 1, 2016.

### **How will reporting work?**

Each participating AAZK Chapter is responsible for following AAZK National's requirements for reporting on funds raised for conservation as outlined in the re-chartering packet.

### **How Does Planting Trees Help Polar Bears?**

Sea ice losses from climate change are the biggest threat to polar bears and the reason the bears are listed as vulnerable on the red list of endangered species. Gases in the atmosphere act like a blanket that traps heat around the earth. When we burn fossil fuels like coal, oil, and gas, we pump extra CO<sub>2</sub> into the atmosphere, thickening the blanket, and disrupting our global climate. Just as a hot summer day melts the ice in a glass of water, a warming planet melts arctic sea ice. Melting sea ice from these warming conditions is a direct threat to polar bears that depend upon the ice to hunt, breed, and den. Reducing the build-up of carbon in the atmosphere is necessary to reverse climate change. Less carbon in the atmosphere means better conditions to retain arctic sea ice and improve polar bear habitat and survival.

Conservation actions that reduce the production of greenhouse gases are the most impactful efforts to save polar bears. Planting trees is one of the few tools that we have to sequester carbon. Trees act as "carbon sinks" that absorb CO<sub>2</sub> from the air. They store this carbon in roots, trunks, stems, and leaves while they grow and in wood products after they're harvested. Saving tropical rainforests is even more impactful for sequestering CO<sub>2</sub>. As an individual and group you can make a difference: Don't buy products with palm oil, purchase shade-grown coffee, eat less meat or purchase local meat rather than meat produced in deforested tropical rain forests





### Why should AAZK Chapters participate in Trees for You and Me?

The original concept of Trees for You and Me was to make it a little friendly competition amongst AAZK Chapters to raise the money to plant trees for polar bears, similar to Bowling for Rhinos. Planting trees not only helps polar bears but all species. If all AAZK Chapters competed in Trees for You and Me and raised a minimum of \$145 each Trees for You and Me would reach the goal of \$15,000 set for this year's competition.

### We don't have polar bears at our zoo; why should our AAZK Chapter participate?

Polar Bears are not the only species being affected by climate change; all species are. Climate change is a serious environmental issue; 2015 was the warmest year on record. If each AAZK Chapter participated in Trees for You and Me, reached out to their local community, discussed climate change and educated them on why planting trees is a start to reducing our carbon footprint, AAZK Chapters could be the leaders in the fight to reduce carbon emissions and save the planet!

### Any idea how many trees have been planted since the program began?

This is a hard question to answer. The first three years are a little easier to figure out how many trees were planted but once AAZK Chapters started doing local planting and donating to tree conservation organizations, I don't have the exact number of trees planted. So this is a rough estimate of trees over the last six years which is 100,000 to 150,000 trees.

### What are you most proud of in regards to Trees for You and Me?

There are a few things I'm proud of regarding Trees for You and Me. One is that it is still around after seven years and that there are a handful of AAZK Chapters that consistently participate in Trees for You and Me even with all the changes over the years. Second, in the third year of the Trees for You Me competition a very high goal of \$25,000 was set and AAZK Chapters not only met the goal but surpassed it and raised over \$26,000. My final proud moment was when my peers honored me at the 2015 AAZK Conference in St. Louis as a recipient of a Conservation of Merit Award for Trees for You and Me. 🐘







Good, Shane. 2016. "[interview with Christy Mazrimus-Ott]." *Animal keepers' forum* 43(3), 82-84.

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