

Facilitator Insights from an Orientation Session for the Zoo Community

Benazir Kabaeva (Kyrgyzstan)

I was excited about the opportunity to help conduct a brief workshop at the 2024 Conference of Zoos and Aquariums Committing to Conservation, held in Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. I was also a bit overwhelmed because I knew that our participants had chosen our workshop over a fun field trip that included kayaking. Jennifer, my co-lead, reminded me that we were not teaching people or saying that "this is the right way to do conservation" but rather we were going to facilitate conversation about our challenges, best practices, highs and lows.

During the workshop, I was learning as much as any other participant. Once again, I was reminded that even though we might live on different continents, conserving different species, we all face challenges, sometimes similar and sometimes different, and we try different ways to overcome those challenges. This workshop showed that by sharing our thoughts, ideas, practices, wins and losses we can learn from each other, we can shift our mindsets, and we can come up with solutions. I was happy to hear that for some people with more than 10 years of work experience, it was the first time they had ever had a conversation about the intricacies of working with communities with such a group of people. Sometimes working with communities might feel isolating, lonely, sad, or overwhelming. Having an avenue to connect, talk and receive validation by learning that we all share similar struggles can be very helpful. This workshop, I believe, is also a good reminder to everyone and myself, that local communities are our greatest allies and partners and we should always respect and be empathetic towards them. One of the things that was brought up during the workshop was "Listen to the quiet ones in the community". This kind of stuck with me. As I said, I was learning so much myself. So I am actually grateful to the participants for being vulnerable and sharing their experiences. I am glad that participants gave us positive feedback. Now we are discussing further workshops for their teams. When people reach out to you after the workshop to request further information and training, it is the best possible feedback.

About the author: Benazir Kabaeva works with communities in Kyrgyzstan to protect snow leopards and their high mountain ecosystems