

Welcome to Civil Discourse. This podcast will use government documents to illuminate the workings of the American Government and offer contexts around the effects of government agencies in your everyday life. Now your hosts, Nia Rodgers, Public Affairs Librarian and Dr. John Aughenbaugh, Political Science Professor.

**Nia Rodgers:** Morning Aughe.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Morning, Nia. How are you?

**Nia Rodgers:** I'm good. How are you?

**John Aughenbaugh:** I am wrapping up the spring semester, so I am in what faculty refer to as the lower regions of grading. Notice I did not swear. I did make a Hades reference. But anyways, listeners, we have another guest joining the podcast this week. Dr. Patty Sobczak is here to talk to us about the National Zoo. Nia and I are both very excited about this because both Nia and I are Zoo aficionados. I don't know how many zoos Nia you've been to? I've been to six. Even one over seas, but that's for a different broadcast. So Patty, Good morning, and a pleasure to have you join us.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Thank you. Glad to be here.

**Nia Rodgers:** I'm excited. I have been to mostly what I've been to have been roadside attraction type zoos, which are not really zoos. They're more like a guy's yard where he has a couple of llamas and a goat and because my father could not resist driving past one of those on whatever vacation we were on, "Look kids, a crocodile zoo" and so we get out and look at six crocodiles and they called that a zoo. I have never been to the National Zoo, so I'm excited to hear about that. I do want to note for the record if it's okay with everybody before we get started, we are not going to do The ethics of zoos. There are many, many, many sides to that question. It can get quite heated and emotional and we understand that. But we are taking the TAC today that the zoo is a good thing. If that is not your cup of tea, then we welcome you to come back for another episode. But we're going to treat the zoo in a positive manner. Knowing that there are arguments to be, honest arguments and good arguments to be made on all sides. Just wanted to throw that out there for people who might get a 1/3 of the way in this episode and realize they're really happy about the zoo or whatever. But what I'm most interested in, I have to say is the history of the zoo, the history of the National Zoo, not the history of zoos in general, because we didn't ask you to go back to like Greco Roman Egyptians zoos because nobody can go to those. What we're trying to cover things people could actually go to.

**John Aughenbaugh:** But before we get to the history Patty, what turns you on to zoos?

**Patricia Sobczak:** I love animals. I just like watching animals. I love watching animals in their natural habitat. I have to say that speaking of zoos, I went to the greatest zoo in the world. I went to the Galapagos Islands a couple of years ago and you talk about a natural zoo. The animals rule in Galapagos. No one can touch them. They are absolutely sacred. They like take over buildings, they walk across cafeteria floors and no one can touch them and that was the greatest experience. So that I feel like I

have been to the greatest zoo of all to see them. So yeah, just a real curiosity about animals and I always want to know what you're thinking. What are they thinking about us?

**Nia Rodgers:** So Patty, can I out you, Patty is a librarian for listeners who didn't already know that. She's been here with us before. So you might already know that, but what you may not know about many librarians is that many of them have tattoos. Patty has a rather special tattoo on her wrist, which is of?

**Patricia Sobczak:** The feet of the blue-footed booby. It's a rare bird that, actually, it's in the Pacific ocean, so it is around Hawaii, but really most of the breeds are in Galapagos. I just fell in love with him and I had his feet tattooed on my wrist.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Well done.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah.

**Nia Rodgers:** I can honestly say I've never been to any zoo where I had the thing later tattooed upon my person. So well done you Patty. The National Zoo [inaudible] Sorry.

**John Aughenbaugh:** No. I was going to ask basically the same question Nia. When we're talking about the National Zoo for our listeners, the National Zoo in the United States is located where?

**Patricia Sobczak:** In Washington DC. It is actually part of the Smithsonian Institute. So it has great support and because of its affiliation with the Smithsonian, there's a lot of wonderful aspects of that, which is that the zoo is free to go to, just like the Smithsonian museums. But it actually started. The first zookeeper, if you will, was William Temple Hornaday and I think the funniest thing about him was that he was actually the chief taxidermist at the Smithsonian. They enlist a taxidermist to run a zoo of live animals. I think that's a little dicey.

**Nia Rodgers:** For some of our listeners, a taxidermist is a person who takes a recently deceased animal, not human. That's different. That's an undertaker. A recently deceased animal, and restores it to something like its living appearance. Right there, stuffed and then mounted in ways that make them mostly, although side shows back in the day did taxidermy and made up animals and then sold them so viewing to see them as look at its in octopus bird or whatever, where they just stuck two things together, which is gross. But real taxidermist.

**John Aughenbaugh:** We are only a few minutes into the podcast and Patty is already given us our title or at least our subtitle. It's a little dicey. I mean that juxtaposition of a person who was a trade taxidermist becoming the head of our National Zoo and like, "Yeah, that would be a little dicey." But anyways.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Anyways. So yeah, he became the first head of the department of living animals at the Smithsonian, I think they had to put the word living in there just to make sure he knew exactly what he was going to do. He actually brought 15 Northern American species to live on the National Mall in Washington, and that would later become the National Zoological Park. In 1889, President Grover Cleveland officially signed the act of Congress and the law and created the National Zoological Park for

the Advancement of Science and instruction and recreation of the people. So Frederick Law Olmsted, he was a premier architect of the day and he actually designed the zoo within the Rock Creek Park in Northwest Washington DC and the zoo officially opened in 1891, so it's 130 years old. So that's pretty amazing that it's been around that long.

**Nia Rodgers:** There are parks all over that Olmsted Designed. There's one in North Carolina that he designed. I guess he just went around designing mostly parks and outdoor settings. I think he was really big into landscape architecture and all that other stuff. But so let me just get this straight in my head, it was on the mall.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah.

**Nia Rodgers:** That is hilarious to me. You're just walking along and there's a herd of bison on the mall.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Hey, you got to start somewhere.

**Nia Rodgers:** Yeah, I guess. It would be fun to put it there now. That would certainly be interesting. So how many animals?

**Patricia Sobczak:** Back then 185.

**Nia Rodgers:** One hundred and eight five species.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Just 185 animals. Yeah. Didn't specify how many species. So when it opened in 1891, they had 185 animals.

**Nia Rodgers:** I notice on your list that one of them is prairie dogs. Can I just say, I think that's hilarious. Prairie dog and on the mall. Did you hear that? What was that? I love when they do that, they're adorable. It sounds like if it's 1891 and of all of the animals that you have on the list here lynx, bison, badgers, prairie dogs, foxes, deer. Well, the foxes and deer would have been in the East, but the other stuff would not. So they would have brought them, I guess, from the West, which would have been really cool for Americans in the capital. Like you probably never went very far west at that point.

**Patricia Sobczak:** To the prairie, yes. They had never seen the prairie.

**Nia Rodgers:** To see a giant bison, that would have been really, I don't know. That would have been really cool.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah. I agree. Shocking.

**Nia Rodgers:** Yeah. You're walking along and there's bison, and they're huge. Bison are huge. Who's in charge of the National Zoo?

**Patricia Sobczak:** Well, the Smithsonian owns it. The animals are taken care of by the Department of Wildlife Health Sciences. These are federal workers that go and take care of the animals, and they also work on breeding programs and also work with endangered species. These are really talented people that are just really there for it. The word is really conservation, conservation of the species, and care and feeding of the species. They do an amazing job of that. They did it all from COVID. Even though the zoo closed in November 23rd, 2020, people that work there, the Department of Wildlife Health Services came to the zoo every day and took care of the animals. Their job did not stop. They were in essence essential working. You can't walk away and not feed a lion for three months. I mean, you're not going to have a lion when you come back.

**Nia Rodgers:** And if you open the cages, you'll have only a lion when you come back.

**Patricia Sobczak:** That's right. Absolutely.

**John Aughenbaugh:** I was fascinated by that, Patty, because I think a lot of Americans don't understand how federal government workers get labeled essential versus non-essential. Both Nia and I are backgrounds in part of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness. From our perspective, essential workers are those that are providing, if you will, for national or homeland security or respond specifically to a crisis. What a lot of Americans don't understand is government at all levels have definitions of who are or are not essential government workers. As you pointed out, once the government creates a program like a zoo, and you have living creatures that depend on government employees to live.

**Nia Rodgers:** I like to think of them as other employees because they're also employees of the zoo.

**John Aughenbaugh:** But yeah. It can't go ahead and say that somebody is not essential simply because they don't provide a national security purpose or a public safety purpose. Once the government makes an affirmative obligation to provide X, then the question is, if X exists, who then needs to go ahead and provide it? When I was reading your notes, it's like, but of course, that makes sense. But a lot of us don't understand what is an essential government worker.

**Nia Rodgers:** But even within that agency, the person who takes your ticket at the front of a zoo probably didn't work. They were probably sent home. But the vets and the people who take care of the animals are considered essential. Even within one agency, you might have partial essential and partial not essential, a tiered system of doing that.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah, and think about this. They have over 2,700 animals of 390 different species. That's a lot of mouths to feed. That's a lot of work to be done. Someone had to do it, and the zoo was closed. They were still there. Because the zoo is actually opening up again on May 21st. They have to have a zoo there and they have to have animals in the zoo, so someone had to take care of them.

**Nia Rodgers:** Well, and is it all paid? Is everyone who works at the zoo paid?

**Patricia Sobczak:** Not at all. Actually, they have a huge volunteer corp, but since they shut down for COVID, they haven't had any volunteers. But normally, in a normal year, volunteers put in over 90,000 hours of work. There's a ton of volunteers. They have a few requirements; they have to be over 18. They have to make a time commitment of a year. They have to actually fill out an application and get hired, and even have some vaccinations, which is interesting to be a volunteer. But yeah, there's a huge volunteer corp, but that all went away when COVID hit because they didn't want to have any risk factors there. So they sent all the volunteers home and they just operated off of their care team. That's huge.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Patty, you mentioned the volunteers need to get or at least demonstrate proof of certain vaccinations. What would be an example of a vaccination that a volunteer would have to have?

**Patricia Sobczak:** Well, it doesn't really specify, but it depends on where you're going to work. I think if you're working with exotic animals that may have come from different countries, there may be a need to get certain vaccinations for that. They just said proof of certain vaccinations. I think it really depends on where you end up working. Again, if you're working in the gift shop, chances are you don't need a vaccination. But if you're working with a Gila monster, you might need a special vaccination.

**Nia Rodgers:** I'm assuming that the vaccinations you're talking about protect both you and the animal. Is that both way, kind of, please don't give our animals some kind of cold that they then die from? Because I know that zoo systems exchange animals and they breed animals to try to broaden the DNA so that there's lots of strains of animals and it's not just one pair that do all the breeding or whatever. Which is one of the problems, I know you're going to talk about pandas later, but it's a big problem with the pandas because there's only so many to start with. Also, I would assume that kind of stuff, that level of work is not done by volunteers. That level of work is done by the paid staff that are ongoing and long-term. What we're talking about with volunteers is probably fleet feeding and cleaning and the things that can be done with basic training. I'm assuming you come in and they train you how to be around the animal or not be around the animal and clean up and all the other stuff. If somebody's interested in doing that, it's not super likely that they would put you in any dangers. You're more in danger from the tourists probably than you are from the animals.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Right. Then the other thing too, there's also a second campus at the zoo. There's the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, which is actually where some of this other work, when they think about breeding programs and also helping endangered species. They're actually located in Front Royal, Virginia. On this land, they not only have animals, but they have trees and shrubs and plants and everything else. It's a really interesting place, but they do a lot of experiments there. They do a lot of care for endangered species. That runs hand in hand with the zoo. That's where they do. I'm sure that all of these decisions about moving an animal to a different location, those are probably not random decisions. I think there's a lot of thought that goes in there because they have to make sure that the animal is going to a place that can actually take care of it and have the right care and the right expertise to hold that.

**Nia Rodgers:** Yeah, I may want to have a tiger, but I can't really take care of one.

**Patricia Sobczak:** No.

**Nia Rodgers:** So National Zoo sending a tiger to my apartment is probably a bad idea.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Tell that to some people. Some people don't realize this.

**Nia Rodgers:** That's the other thing, is I know that some zoos come to their animals from people who can no longer care for exotic animals. Just as a side note, if you're a person right now who owns an exotic animal and you're thinking about giving it to a zoo, please do that rather than putting it out. Because Florida has discovered that if you can no longer handle your 50-foot python, just throwing it out the backyard is a terrible idea. Because apparently, pythons lay lots and lots of eggs and they make lots and lots of baby pythons, and now they're all over. I mean, it's like a thing. Because your average animal from Florida has never laid eyes on a python, and the last thing it sees before it dies is a python, and it probably says, what was that, as it's dying. Not so good. I'm sorry, I watched a documentary just a bit ago on carp in the Mississippi River, and now I'm all about, keep your invading species someplace else because that's a terrible thing. I'm sorry, go ahead.

**Patricia Sobczak:** No, I just wanted to say that you're right, that there are a lot of places that take in animals that they're struggling. One place that I'm very familiar with is Bearizona in Williams, Arizona. They started it as a bear refuge. They were there to bears that were struggling in the wild, so they took them in. It's just a beautiful place. But the funniest story, so I went there a couple of years ago, and it's like, I don't know if you've ever heard of Lion Country Safari, but you actually stay in your car and you drive through these areas where the animals are running wild. It's really cool. I mean, sometimes they jump on your car, not so cool. They stick their noses on your window and that's not so good either, especially if they have teeth. But anyway, so we're driving through there and it was really cool. It was like a two-mile thing, and they have all North American animals. Bears and bison and wolves and badgers and all kinds of stuff. Anyway, so we were talking to some of the people and we said, "Hey, the bears look all fat." I mean, they were not aggressive at all because they were very well fed. You could tell they were sitting there, looking at us like, "Hey, there's another tourist." We said, well, have you ever lost a bear? Has anyone ever left? She goes, "Actually, we ended up having a bear that came in." They go out to count the bears one day and there's one extra. A bear actually snuck in to the refuge. They're pretty smart. This is pretty good.

**Nia Rodgers:** This looks good. Free food, I can watch the tourists go by so there's entertainment.

**Patricia Sobczak:** I thought that was hysterical, anyways.

**Nia Rodgers:** I have to admit. Sometimes I wonder when I'm standing at a zoo if the animals perceive me as entertainment. If they're going to give me like, "Well, that's an interesting outfit or nice purple hair you got there."

**John Aughenbaugh:** Please forgive me. Reflecting the fact that I've got a nine-year-old daughter, but that's part of the original plot of the Madagascar movies. For those of you who are not familiar, check out the Madagascar movies, because you're talking about a zoo in New York City where the zoo animals have certain impressions of the public that comes to view them. Whereas my daughter was enjoying,

"Oh hey, look at the cute little animals." I was really enjoying the commentary of the animals about the public. I was just like, "Yeah, I wonder, do they have these kinds of thoughts of all of us who just standing there being entertained by them, feeding their faces or scratching their butts?" Whatever the case may be.

**Nia Rodgers:** Right.

**John Aughenbaugh:** But the idea that a bear, who was not part of the preserve, this is like, "Yeah, I'm tired of where I'm living, and the grass is greener over there and look at how fat and happy those bears are, yeah, I'm out of here."

**Nia Rodgers:** I could struggle out in the wild. All right. Go ahead.

**John Aughenbaugh:** I'm voting with my feet.

**Nia Rodgers:** Exactly. I could struggle in the wild or I could go over there and hang out. Why would I stay here? That just doesn't make any sense at all. Run with the bear. Does it cost to get in to visit?

**Patricia Sobczak:** No, actually it's free. Again, part of the Smithsonian Institute. The museums are free, it's free to go to now in the post-COVID as they reopen again, on May 21st. They are asking people to actually go online, and get an entry pass because they're trying to manage how many people are coming in. Then if you drive to the zoo, you have to pay \$30 for parking, but that's for the whole car. So if you have 25 people like a clown car, that's a pretty good deal.

**Nia Rodgers:** That would be awesome. I can't remember what the cars are called. Miata pulls up, and 47 people get out of it and I'm like, "Holy cow."

**Patricia Sobczak:** That's still \$30. They're trying to manage how many people come in, but it is free, yes.

**Nia Rodgers:** But you can take the metro out there if you didn't want to pay \$30 to park. Does the metro go to the zoo?

**Patricia Sobczak:** It gets close.

**Nia Rodgers:** Okay.

**Patricia Sobczak:** It gets very close to the zoo. A lot of people do that, a lot of locals end up taking the metro because they don't want to pay for parking but yeah, they're trying to manage, they're reopening, it's like anything else, like Disneyland or anywhere else, they're trying to manage the crowd. So they're trying to figure out how many people and really, I don't think they have any numbers figured out yet, but they're taking reservations. So you have to have a reserve pass to get in, but it doesn't cost anything.

**Nia Rodgers:** For listeners who are thinking about museums, I happened to be in North Carolina recently and the North Carolina Museum of Art is doing the same thing. So you might want to consider that if

you're going to a free museum or park or something like that, you may need to go to their website and make sure that you don't have to at least reserve an entry pass, which I did have to reserve for the museum because they're only letting a certain number of people in it one time to help with distancing. Also, even though mask requirements are being relaxed, the institution you may be going to, may not be relaxed. So you would also want to check that?

**Patricia Sobczak:** Right?

**Nia Rodgers:** Just as a side note for anybody who may be traveling this summer, we're in that weird position or in that weird transition time where some places still are requiring masks and still requiring distancing, and just check before you go. Can you eat at the zoo? Animals can eat at the zoo and you can't you can't eat animals at the zoo. But can you eat human food at the zoo?

**Patricia Sobczak:** You can, but only in designated areas. Again, we're talking post-COVID, so everything's a little different. You can't walk around eating, now you have to eat only in designated areas. So yeah, it's a little more controlled than it used to be, but yeah they have places to eat. They have several restaurants are open, so that's good. I also wanted to say that, if you go to the zoo, you can't automatically go see the pandas, you actually have to request an Asia pass to go to that specific area where the pandas are. So if you want to go to the zoo, you have to reserve your spot to get in, but you also have to reserve a spot to see the pandas. So they're really trying to control the number of people because they don't want to get the pandas or anything.

**John Aughenbaugh:** That would be okay. So that reflects what? One, how popular viewing the Pandas are but two, is there something about the transmission of COVID in what it could do to the Pandas?

**Patricia Sobczak:** That wasn't specified in this, but they did make a point. If you go to the website to say, by the way, if you want to see the pandas, you have to do this extra step. Yeah. So I think it's crowd control, I think there might be some concern about transmission, but there was nothing that said explicitly about that. But I think that's true anyway, I think if you go to the zoo, pre-COVID, you still have to do this extra step to see the pandas. But they have the Panda cam, you don't always have to go, you can do the panda cam.

**Nia Rodgers:** Well, and I wonder if in part that may also be something that the Chinese government put into place as a control measure, because they are so rare and hard to breed. Baby pandas are really celebrated thing because they are so unusual that one, you can get a baby panda and two, that they live.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah, yeah, that's true.

**Nia Rodgers:** Is the zoo ADA compliant?

**Patricia Sobczak:** It is. So if you are planning on going to the zoo after May 21st, when you go and get your pass, you put in there that you need accommodations, and so when you show up, you have to show that you have an accommodation on your pass. They have all different ways of accommodating wheelchairs, and they have documentation that's printed differently in larger. So there's a lot of

accommodations that they make, but you have to specify. You can't just walk in there and say, "Hey, I need this, I need that." You have to actually specify ahead of time. That's kind of interesting, but I think we're still adjusting to the post-COVID. So that may change, but that's what they ask you to do now.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Nia, back to your question, is the National Zoo ADA compliant? I remember when the ADA was being considered by the United States Congress, and they actually did a study before Congress actually voted on the ADA as what would be the impact of the ADA on businesses, government, etc? In one of the studies that was done by, I want to say, the Office of Management and Budget was what would be the potential costs to retrofit the National Zoo to make it ADA compliant.

**Nia Rodgers:** Listeners, if I can find that document I'll add it to the research guide.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Because that was one of the more interesting things about the debate, about the Americans with Disabilities Act was what would be the cost to make various, if you will, institutions, structures, etc., compliant and places like zoos, museums. The idea is to get the public to come. How do you go ahead and make that compliant? Patty, a few moments ago, you mentioned the panda cam. Nia and I are both fascinated by the fact that they have various cameras that all you've got to do is just go onto the zoo's website. How many of these cameras are we talking about? Because I would think that you'd get a lot of viewers for certain animals. But is there any logic?

**Patricia Sobczak:** That's a really good question. I don't know because they have four cams that you can watch on the website. The most popular obviously is the panda cam.

**Nia Rodgers:** Because they're adorable.

**Patricia Sobczak:** They're adorable but sometimes they stay in the cam and I actually lean on and looked at it, they hide. They're actually are not very nice. Sometimes they go (makes noise), I'm going to hide behind the tree so you can't see them. They're not always willing to accommodate when someone wants to watch them. But there's actually a lion cam, which I think would be interesting, and an elephant cam. Then there's a naked mole-rat cam. Which I think that must be a political decision because this animal, he's not the most easy on the eyes, I guess that's what I would say. We think we all can find things to like about lions, we can find things to like about elephants and pandas.

**John Aughenbaugh:** It must be political?

**Patricia Sobczak:** Why would you pick the naked mole-rat cam? Why wouldn't you pick a badger or a prairie dog or something, a bison. I mean, really?

**Nia Rodgers:** Something cute. I like it. Aughe, we need to find whose district the mole-rat comes from. Is that person who's super powerful in Congress and like, "You know what I want? I want a cam on a mole rat." I was going to ask you if there were cams on anything that wasn't cute.

**John Aughenbaugh:** He had to sit on the Smithsonian board .

**Patricia Sobczak:** It is dubious. I think we have to think about why that cam is on the naked mole rats.

**Nia Rodgers:** That's a good point though. That brings up a good point, which is all of the wildlife conservation groups choose cute animals to be their mascots. The WWF has the panda on it and a lot of them choose pandas or elephants or whales, something that's pretty or majestic, hardly any of them choose something like the naked mole rat or something else. But those animals also need to be conserved. Biosphere isn't just the adorable animals it's also the animals that aren't adorable but contribute to the overall.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Why does a wildlife group have, the jackal, or a razorback.

**Nia Rodgers:** A wolverine, one of those violent things on the earth. Let's conserve these. Let's conserve them pretty far away from people, but let's conserve them.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Think of a wild boar.

**Nia Rodgers:** The whole idea of that is, I think is fascinating that they choose the cuddly ones. Because those sell in the gift shop. When's the last time your daughter said to you Aughe, "Daddy, I like this mole rat. Can you give me this mole rat?"

**John Aughenbaugh:** Never. No.

**Nia Rodgers:** We've discussed that she likes sloths, but she likes sloths because in Ice Age they're cute.

**John Aughenbaugh:** In the movie series, Ice Age, the sloth is a somewhat adorable character and played very well by an actor who Nia, like you I can't say his last name John.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Leguizamo.

**Nia Rodgers:** Leguizamo. Thank you.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Very good. Thank you Patty. But no, you're correct.

**Nia Rodgers:** But real sloths are covered in lice and moss and they're super slow and they're really not particularly adorable. They're green because they're covered in moss. But they don't show you that one. The one in the gift shop is adorable and cute and fuzzy and all that other stuff. I get that zoos have to sell themselves, they have to sell the animals in some way. Part of that is because visiting the zoo and the gift shop and all that other stuff, I'm sure helps to finance some of what goes on at the Smithsonian and so you have to do the adorable, but I do like that there is a naked mole rat cam. I'm probably not going to watch it, but I like that one exists. Well, for those of you out there who are mad because you love naked mole rats and I've just talked them down, I'm sorry. But you're entitled to not like things as much as you want.

**John Aughenbaugh:** But think about when the pandemic hit. I mean, my daughter and I, when we were on the fly converting to at home virtual learning, to get her head out of a tablet, I would go ahead and she and I would watch cameras of animals at zoos and I led her to ask a whole bunch of questions about a whole bunch of animals where I didn't know the answers and it was a teaching moment because I would say, "Okay, so let's look it up." Because I wouldn't know. I didn't know how long it took baby condors to emerge from the egg and be able to actually do things on their own.

**Nia Rodgers:** They have big feet.

**John Aughenbaugh:** They do have big feet.

**Nia Rodgers:** They're born with huge feet and then they grow into them.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Yes. We actually did spend a little bit of time, Patty, with the National Zoo Panda Cam and most of the time they did hide. Part of it was trying to guess where actually the pandas were. Yes.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yes.

**Nia Rodgers:** We alluded to this earlier, but the National Zoo does not own the pandas. Pandas are on loan?

**Patricia Sobczak:** They are, yeah, it actually started way back in 1972 and the first two pandas were given to the Nixon's and they donated them to the zoo. There's been obviously since '72 several iterations, as pandas died, they would get more and so the interesting thing is when a panda is born at the zoo, and as you mentioned earlier, a lot of them are born dead, it's very hard to have a live baby panda. They hardly survive. But if they do and they've had several now that they have to relocate to China after they're four years old. That's the deal, is we give you these pandas you do all this care and feeding but when they turn four, they have to go back to China.

**Nia Rodgers:** Can I just say that is a terrible immigration policy that panda is American. That panda should have the right to be here if it wants to be here. It's never been to China, so it's not going back. It's going to a whole new country with whole new people speaking a whole new language. If we think that animals don't get used by the way, to the cadences of language, they do. If you've ever visited another country and listened to people tell their dog commands, they say it in whatever language they live in and the dog responds. Dogs hear language, I'm sure pandas hear language and I'm sure that at four they're used to English. They're used whatever they'd been listening to, that's not cool.

**Patricia Sobczak:** That's the best fee agreement. It's an agreement with the China Wildlife Conservation Association.

**Nia Rodgers:** Yeah and I guess there's no way to sneak around.

**Patricia Sobczak:** No. It's a pretty big deal when a baby panda is born. We all go absolutely crazy.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Of course, the political scientist in me are like, "Nia, this is an example of soft power, international relations." It was a big deal when China gave the pandas to the Nixon's. That was part of Nixon reaching out to the communist Chinese government. It has political overtones. That would be a major a front to the Chinese people and government if a baby panda was born here in the United States and at four years old we said, "Yeah, sorry, we're keeping it."

**Nia Rodgers:** It's asked for sanctuary and it's staying here and we're not sending it to China. I can imagine that that would stop the entire rest of the program. Like whatever pandas we had in the country at that point would be the only pandas we would ever see again. Because I'm sure that lots of feathers would get ruffled or lots of fur would get rubbed and that would not be acceptable.

**Patricia Sobczak:** But something else I want to share is that the two pandas that are there now, and I can't pronounce their names, Mei Xiang and Tian Tian, they're actually on loan, and they have to go back in 2023 to China.

**Nia Rodgers:** Will more pandas, or is that up in the air?

**Patricia Sobczak:** It's up in the air.

**Nia Rodgers:** You can renew this only through 2023?

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah.

**Nia Rodgers:** Oh no, if we don't fly right, we might not get more pandas.

**John Aughenbaugh:** That's right.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah.

**Nia Rodgers:** Then there's Aughie's diplomacy?

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah.

**John Aughenbaugh:** We may be panda-less, yeah.

**Nia Rodgers:** Oh no. No, that's really sad because, and I'm assuming that part of all of that is and not to be ugly, but the pandas draw in a lot of people and make a lot of money.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Yeah.

**Nia Rodgers:** Because they sell, there's a lot of things that go along with that. There's a lot of layers of diplomacy there that would need to be managed. Oh my goodness, well, I need to write a letter to President Biden, and say "Be nice to China."

**Patricia Sobczak:** I think he already is. I think they have him in the bag, I just think.

**Nia Rodgers:** We need to make sure on the panda issue. Good.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Wait. But just stop for a moment. Imagine the conversation that would go on in the Oval Office. From the President's Foreign Affairs team, these Director of the CIA, the National Security Director, "Okay, Mr. President, we need to talk about the pandas."

**Nia Rodgers:** What pandas? The pandas in the zoo.

**John Aughenbaugh:** "We know you've been dealing with the pandemic, the malware attack on our petroleum pipeline, a sluggish economy, yada, yada, yada. But we just need to make you aware that before your term is up, we have the panda issue."

**Nia Rodgers:** Yeah. We need to keep that on the list. Can you imagine, he's "Really, we need to keep this on the list? Yes, sir, because we cannot be without pandas."

**John Aughenbaugh:** Now, you want to talk about a West Wing episode, the panda issue.

**Nia Rodgers:** That would be a good one. Also "Sir, if we don't give them back in 2023, we're going to have a war."

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah.

**Nia Rodgers:** Can you imagine the great panda war of 2023? Oh my goodness, that can't happen. If I was president, I would not want that on my watch. You made a note in your notes, and I just adore it because it's so very you. For those of us who don't know, Patty is a collections librarian and that's a very specific kind of librarian. They decide what goes into the library. What books are on the shelf? What things we buy? How we spend our money? Because we only have a certain amount of money and we have to be careful to try to get as broad a treatment of a subject as possible. The collections librarians just spend a lot of time working on that. Well, not a lot of time, it's like their whole job. Their whole job is that. I noticed that you had a comment in here about curating the animals, which I thought, how very Patty that to ask yourself the question of how do they decide which animals go into the zoo. That's an interesting question, and I don't know if there's even an answer. Is there even an answer to that question?

**Patricia Sobczak:** There really isn't. They're guided by a strategic plan, and their real focus is conservation and saving endangered species. There's a interest in you don't know when those kind of animals become available, they are probably at the top of the list and we're going to take them in because we want to conserve them. We want to make sure that they breed and that they grow, and that

the population doesn't get decimated, but there really isn't like it. I couldn't find like a list of top 10 animals that we wanted to bring into the zoo. Who's the most popular animal we want to bring in? But I think a lot of it is, it's opportunity. When they find certain things or someone brings it to their attention, "Hey, we have this particular animal, or breed, or it's endangered and we have this opportunity, that would be something that they would consider. But it's also taken through this strategic plan in how they look at what they want to provide as part of the zoo. But the real issue, their real focus, and I think it's because it's a Smithsonian Institution, is conservation. It really is about conserving the breeds and the endangered species, and really being just excellent caretakers of the animals. I think that's really their driving force of what they bring into that zoo. Then we know that things die, right? Famous animals have died in zoos and we're all very depressed. It's very sad when some famous animal dies and so they want to avoid that. They don't want to have any incidents if they can with what they do with these animals. It's an interesting question, but I don't think there's a real good answer.

**Nia Rodgers:** I'm intrigued by the idea of provenance because I know that you as a collections librarian, if somebody came to you and they said, "I just happen to have this Gutenberg Bible that I'd like to sell the library," you'd be like, "Really. Where did you get that Gutenberg Bible?" They'd say, "I found it on a doorstep." Then you would say, "Excuse me, I have to make a brief phone call to the police to come get you for having stolen a Gutenberg Bible."

**Patricia Sobczak:** Right.

**Nia Rodgers:** I assume zoos don't deal in black market. If suddenly somebody called the National Zoo and said, "Hey man, I got a panda, you want it?" They would say, "Heck, no, we don't want your panda."

**Patricia Sobczak:** Oh yes.

**Nia Rodgers:** Because it didn't come through legitimate channels.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Right.

**Nia Rodgers:** I'm assuming that part of what limits their conservation is that they have to know that the animal came to them in an honest way as opposed to, because I know around the world black market animal dealings are huge.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Huge, yeah.

**Nia Rodgers:** There are people trading animals all the time that shouldn't be traded in, partly for endangered animals, but also partly for dangerous animals. You shouldn't just be trading in certain animals. I'm assuming that also limits their ability to get a hold of something.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah. Think about like any art museum like VMFA, someone comes to them and then says, "I have a Picasso. Come to my doorstep and look at my Picasso." It's the same scrutiny. Like you said the word "provenance", I think it's a really good word, because like any museum, they have a

standard where they have to be able to show provenance, and where they got this, and who had it. Because there's always that fear or that issue of is this coming to us in a way that isn't legitimate, or legal, or safe or whatever. The way they do it is probably very much like any museum or any institution that has fine art. This is Smithsonian, just anything can't show up in the Smithsonian. They have ways of curating and checking all [inaudible] I want to put this in the Smithsonian.

**Nia Rodgers:** Right. So you don't have stolen stuff and that if somebody who was walking by and says, "Hey, that's mine."

**Patricia Sobczak:** That's mine.

**Nia Rodgers:** Well, and we know that in the art world, things have been stolen and sold and then had to be returned to the original owner and whoever bought it is just out the money because you bought a stolen thing. If any of our students are thinking about somehow going to China and picking up a panda out of the wild and bringing it back to the national zoo. Please don't.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Please don't.

**Nia Rodgers:** Please don't, because they will say to you, "My goodness, that's not a good thing." They'll take it in, but then you'll go to jail and you can't go back to China. Maybe don't do that. Also, can I make a side note for our listeners who might want to think about crawling over the fence and getting their picture taken with a jaguar or some other animal, please don't.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Don't do it.

**Nia Rodgers:** Please don't for two reasons. One, you are going to get legitimately mauled and it will be your fault. That's not good. But also they will put the animal down in many cases and that's not fair to the animal. You walked into its pen. It did what animals do. Now it's getting punished for that. Fortunately, the jaguar that I mentioned did not get put down. But that was only through massive public intervention in that case because a woman climbed over the fence and wanted to have her selfie with a jaguar. Really people, let's not do that. Let's not engage in climbing over any fences. So we'd like to just put that out there as a warning.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Just as a side note. The most deaths in national parks these days are from people taking selfies and falling off cliffs. Just a side note. Seriously.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Well, I think one of the great values of zoos and I've long believed this, is it forces humans to understand that not everything is about them. Don't hop the fence to go ahead and get a great selfie. Because it isn't about you. One of the purposes of zoos is to understand that we are sharing this earth with other creatures who are beautiful or depending on your perspective. This is in Patty's notes. They may be ugly to you, but to somebody else, they're just utterly fascinating and beautiful creatures. We've talked about this in a previous podcast episode about parks. Patty, you just mentioned deaths that occur at national parks because people are taking selfies and they fall off the cliff. Understand that when you're on this big, huge mountain, you're inconsequential.

**Nia Rodgers:** The cliff does not care.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Yeah, the cliff doesn't care. The cliff was there before you, it will be there after you.

**Nia Rodgers:** It will clearly be there after you.

**John Aughenbaugh:** After you, etc. To understand that it's not necessarily always about you.

**Nia Rodgers:** Exactly.

**John Aughenbaugh:** The mama elephant that's taking care of the baby elephant doesn't care about you. Whether or not you're staring at them is irrelevant.

**Nia Rodgers:** If you get up close to her or to her baby, she will rightfully stomp you into the ground. Because she is protecting her baby just like if an elephant got too close to your baby, you would snatch up your baby and protect it unless you're the world's worst parent. You know what I mean? You guys are both parents, so you would know what I mean? You would protect your kids because that's what you do and that's what they're doing. That's the natural instinct for every animal is to protect its offspring. The other thing that I think is important to mention here is the cost of something like the international breeding program that they do, don't they have agreements with other institution?

**Patricia Sobczak:** They do and countries yeah, they have one now with Japan, with the Japanese giant salamanders and they have given to the zoo and they are doing some long-term breeding with those creatures. Yeah, they have different things going on at different times.

**Nia Rodgers:** The cost of that is, in my opinion, worth it because we are losing species by the minute. Because of the way humans use the Earth or maneuvering the Earth, but also just naturally animals die out. So us trying to help that not happen seems like it's really to me worth the effort. I saw in your notes about the salamander and I thought, "I'm not a particularly huge fan of salamanders." But I'm sure the salamanders are important not only to people who love salamanders but also to.

**John Aughenbaugh:** The ecosystem.

**Nia Rodgers:** Certainly ecosystem. Hence why if you decide you want to go to Joshua National Park, please don't knock over the trees. Hello. They're part of the ecosystem. That's again part of the plant thing of zoos. A lot of times in zoos you'll see plants that are being bred or protected in the zoo as well as part of the foliage or whatever that the animal needs and all that stuff. But is there, you said earlier, there was a special plant collection?

**Patricia Sobczak:** The Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute in Front Royal, Virginia has. Actually they do on this land, they have 180 species of trees. They have 850 species of would-be shrubs.

**Nia Rodgers:** Which I thought there were like six kinds of shrubs. Here's what I know.

**Patricia Sobczak:** They actually have 36 different species of bamboo.

**Nia Rodgers:** Wow.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Who knew?

**Nia Rodgers:** Warning to our listeners, do not plant bamboo in the yard. Apparently, bamboo is an invasive species that will take over not only your yard, but all the yards within about a 100 mile radius of your home and your neighbors will hate you. There is my PSA because we've had several people who are like, I said one day, "I'd love to plant bamboo in my yard," which was a huge mistake because apparently that is a terrible species that will take over. Like kudzu, things that weren't meant to be where they are go out and get out of the hand.

**John Aughenbaugh:** This was a few years ago at a different house than I'm currently living in. I went to Home Depot and I said, "Hey, how easy, difficult is it to go and plant bamboo." Five people at the Home Depot in their lawn and garden section came to me en masse.

**Nia Rodgers:** Pounced on you.

**John Aughenbaugh:** They were like, "Sir, we don't recommend anybody do that in the Richmond area." I was just like, "Did I say something wrong. Is there a state law against this." They are just like, "It will destroy your yard, your neighbor's yard. I was just like, "I did not know this." They're like, "May we recommend some less invasive?" I said, "No. Let's talk about shrubs." Then Nia, they were like, "Well, we have well over 20 different types of shrubs." I'm like, "There's over 20 different?"

**Patricia Sobczak:** It's 850.

**John Aughenbaugh:** I was like, "What are you talking about?"

**Nia Rodgers:** That's amazing. Well, in Patty's notes for people who can't read them, there are 40 species of grass, which I think is hilarious because I'm like grass, green stuff. That's amazing to me. Of course, biologists who are listening to this are just banging their heads against desks going, "Of course, there's 40 species, there's way more than that or whatever." But I guess the thing with bamboo is they make really long roots that run under stuff. You plant a bamboo in one spot and you're like, "My bamboo." Then behind you about 40 feet it pops up and you're like, "More bamboo." Pretty soon it's like pop, pop, pop, pop up and it's all over the neighborhood.

**John Aughenbaugh:** It's terrible for house foundations.

**Nia Rodgers:** The driveways.

**John Aughenbaugh:** It will destroy the root systems for trees.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Plumbing.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Yeah, don't forget about the plumbing.

**Nia Rodgers:** If you're not living on the East Coast or you're not living in the DC area, you can look at the cams and get animals there. But there are other zoos of note in the world, as Aughe said, in other countries. If you're listening to us from other countries, check out your own national zoo, you probably have one or something along those lines. If you don't have a national zoo, you have probably a well-known zoo. But you mentioned Bearizona, which I think is great for the name, Bearizona. Are there any other that you want to throw or mention out to before we wrap up?

**Patricia Sobczak:** I looked at, we're in the scheme of things where the national zoo came in on the world and it came in 17th place of the best zoos in the world. That's pretty good when you're thinking about the world. That's pretty good and then it's the sixth-best zoo in the USA. I think that's interesting. But yeah, Bearizona, was on that list. Gatorland, which is something that would never come to my mind in Florida. They have a huge park there that preserves crocodiles and alligators. Then of course San Diego.

**Nia Rodgers:** They do shows [inaudible] shows by the way, in case you want.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah.

**Nia Rodgers:** Fascinating wrestling shows and all stuff like that. If you want to see people wrestle alligators. Anyway, I'm sorry, you were saying San Diego.

**Patricia Sobczak:** I was just going to say San Diego has a wild animal park, which is where you can take a train, and you can travel through the different terrains and then [inaudible] mentioned the sea world, and we have to remember that there's also these aquariums and places that marine animals.

**Nia Rodgers:** A lot of cities as Baltimore apparently has a really nice aquarium as well if you're on the East Coast.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah. Lots of good choices. I mean, if you love animals, I mean, there's something for everybody and even the rats. What was it? The naked?

**Nia Rodgers:** The naked mole rat

**Patricia Sobczak:** Rat. Yes.

**Nia Rodgers:** Can we end on one of my favorite ever memories from my childhood, which is Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom, where the guy Jim, who was out in the wild. Marlin Perkins was the host of this show for young people who have never heard what I'm talking about. Marlin Perkins was this older guy who wore a suit, and he had gray hair, and he would show a map, and then he would show where the animal was on the map. Here is the lion in the Serengeti, and he would show you where that was, and then he would say, now Jim is going to show us the lion in its natural habitat and I don't remember what

Jim's last name was, unfortunately. He worked at the San Diego Zoo after he was no longer on this show, and then they would show this film of Jim being half-eaten by a lion trying to wrestle it so that he could show you its head or its main or its whatever. He's like, are you okay, Jim? Jim is like, "Yeah I'm fine (makes noises)." It was just great. When I was a kid, it was this wonderful view into part of what I didn't know then, but what I know now is part of what they were doing with conservation. That was the non-business side of Mutual of Omaha which is an insurance company. But anyway, that guy went on to be in the San Diego Zoo, and he would go into Hollywood onto The Tonight Show or other shows and bring animals, and so you'll see that some on, I think Jimmy Kimmel still does it occasionally and some of the other shows. You can find some of those on YouTube if you want to see some of those animals being interacted with because now, other people from the San Diego Zoo also do that, bring animals in. Steve Irwin used to do that, he would go on shows and bring animals and that thing.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah.

**Nia Rodgers:** I say that if you're looking for a natural reaction from some of the hosts, because sometimes they would hand them an animal, and they clearly did not want to be holding this naked mole rat or whatever it is. They're like, "Can I have this back at any moment?" The person who works it from the zoo is saying, Look, he's just nibbling on you because he loves you, or whatever the host is like, I don't want to do this anymore. But a lot of that is on YouTube.

**John Aughenbaugh:** For me, the best reactions and again, I'm dating myself here, Johnny Carson.

**Nia Rodgers:** Yeah. That's what I was thinking of.

**Nia Rodgers:** Monkeys on his head. The little spider monkey on his head is one of the most famous of his where he's just sitting there with his spider monkey.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Yeah. Because Carson filmed in LA, so you'd always have people up from the San Diego Zoo.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Johnny Carson was known as the king of cool. I mean, he was king of late night. But the rep from the San Diego Zoo would go and bring these animals, and all of a sudden Johnny Carson would just be losing it and the rep from the San Diego Zoo would be like, "Okay, but Johnny there's," like Nia just mentioned, "the animal obviously loves you," and Johnny Carson is just like, can we please go to commercial?

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah.

**John Aughenbaugh:** For the love of God, get this animal away from my neck that seems to be burrowing a hole there.

**Nia Rodgers:** But the reason I bring it up is because it was educational.

**John Aughenbaugh:** Yeah.

**Nia Rodgers:** Part of what Mutual of Omaha, that was on Sunday evenings and that was educationally, came on before another show that was meant for children, which was something of Disney. They were intended to be educational, same with those late-night spots. What you'll find is while the host is holding onto it, the curator is actually talking about the animal. They're talking about where it comes from and what its characteristics are, it's very educational. That's the other thing I wanted to throw out there about zoos is that the tendency, if you go on one of the tours, is that there is an educational component. Somebody is going to talk to you about the history of the animal and how it came to be at the zoo, but also what its natural habitat is and all of those things. They can be marvelous opportunities for children to learn about where animals live and how they live.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah. Before COVID, I mean, kids used to take field trips to zoos. When I was a kid, we did that all the time. We went to the local Zoos and stuff and that was part of it was just to get an exposure to different animals and learn something, and it was great, I loved it. Yeah, there's lots of opportunity.

**Nia Rodgers:** Exactly. It goes back to Aughe's point, if you're not alone on the planet, and you have to conserve, you have to think about the other animals that are here as well.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yes.

**Nia Rodgers:** Thank you so much.

**Patricia Sobczak:** I wanted to say one final story is when I was in Galapagos, the animals' world. We're standing on this rock and this iguana runs the joint, comes over, and he actually steps over my boots, and you just have to sit there, and the guy is like he's in charge, and he's just strolling along, and it's like, yeah I get that, you're in charge. Very humbling.

**Nia Rodgers:** Cool. Thank you so much, Patty for coming and visiting with us today and talking about the Zoo.

**Patricia Sobczak:** This was great I loved it. I loved the conversation, so thank you. Thank you for having me.

**John Aughenbaugh:** I really appreciate all the knowledge. But again, the enthusiasm. It's quite obvious, just listening to you, how important going to zoos and what they've meant to you.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Absolutely.

**John Aughenbaugh:** I can't speak for Nia about this, but definitely for me, anybody who's smart and enthusiastic about and over a passion in their life always have a place on our podcast. Anytime you want to come back and share your knowledge and your enthusiasm about something else, please do so.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Okay. Thank you. I appreciate that.

**Nia Rodgers:** Good to have you.

**Patricia Sobczak:** Yeah. Thanks so much.

**Nia Rodgers:** Thank you.

You've been listening to civil discourse brought to you by VCU Libraries. Opinions expressed are solely the speaker's own and do not reflect the views or opinions of VCU or VCU Libraries. Special thanks to the Workshop for technical assistance. Music by Isaak Hopson. Find more information at [guides.library.vcu.edu/discourse](https://guides.library.vcu.edu/discourse). As always, no documents were harmed in the making of this podcast.