

## A Lesson They'll Always Remember

Written by Stuart Sheldon, BT Contributor  
February 2020

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### Zoo Miami opens children's eyes and hearts



Few things galvanize your love for wild animals like a full-grown giraffe French kissing you with its long black tongue. I experienced this and other rapturous moments on a recent visit to Zoo Miami with my wife and children, all under the loving eyes of Ron Magill, animal expert and Zoo Miami's original zoo keeper (*best job title ever*).

With more than 40 years' experience, Magill believes a zoo's primary responsibility is teaching people, especially kids, to love nature. His deep knowledge and enthusiasm changed my children's relationship with wild animals forever.

"In the end, you protect what you love, you love what you understand, and you understand what you're taught," he says.

A world-renowned wildlife photographer and Emmy-winning television personality, Magill grew up in New York City. "My mother bringing me to the Bronx Zoo was the first time I had a true connection to wildlife," he recalls. "You can see an animal in a photograph, you can watch a documentary, but there's nothing like looking at an animal eye to eye."

I observed that same awe and enchantment in my young boys' eyes as they stood before trumpeting elephants, pygmy hippos, and other exotic creatures at Zoo Miami roaming in a

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natural habitat.

“We met a Galapagos tortoise named Goliath who was huge and extremely handsome. He was calm and quiet and tender,” my ten-year-old reports.

When your child connects with a creature that intimately, there's reason to hope he'll feel responsible to help it and others.

Many of us have a love/hate relationship with zoos. The sight of caged animals saddens me. Yet our children face a devastating reality: They may never see a wild elephant, rhino, or lion if we don't stop killing them and their habitats. Every hour three species of plants or animals disappear forever, according to a U.N. report.

I urge you to take your kids to Zoo Miami to experience the magic of silverback apes, black rhinos, Sumatran tigers, Burmese pythons, flamingos, camels, and on and on. To avoid crowds, arrive when the zoo opens at 10:00 a.m., then sprint to the far end and work your way back to the front. At that hour, before the midday heat, you'll likely find most of the animals out enjoying the morning sunshine.

“More people go to zoos in the United States than go to all Major League baseball, NFL football, and NBA basketball games combined,” says Magill. Thus, zoos provide a vast and critical access point to nature. A world-class zoo like ours reminds us that even in a big city, we're all one big ecosystem, all related and exquisite animals.

“Zoos are providing windows into the animal world and planting seeds in kids to understand the importance of protecting wildlife everywhere,” says Magill. “It's no longer just looking at an animal like in a circus -- it's looking at an animal as an ambassador for an environment, a link in the chain for the quality of life for us all.

In a perfect world, he adds, we wouldn't need zoos. In a perfect world, everybody would be able to go to Africa to see an elephant in the Serengeti, go to India to see a tiger walking through the forest, go to the Arctic to see a polar bear on sea ice. The reality is, most people are not going

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to have that opportunity.

Still, we must teach our kids that animals are to be respected and never feared, only to be understood. Once we understand what is important to them, we can take action to live in harmony with them.

Even if you don't like animals, even if you don't like the outdoors, if you value your quality of life, you must have a responsibility to animals. The bees, butterflies, and bats pollinate our plants that produce the fruits and vegetables we eat. The trees create the oxygen we breathe. The ice in Antarctica holds the bulk of our fresh water.

"We've got to protect wildlife because by protecting wildlife, we're protecting ourselves," says Magill. "If that sea ice and those glaciers melt, sea levels will rise. And our coastal properties, where the overwhelming majority of everybody lives, will become underwater and worthless."

Our zoo is just plain fun. "Magill was like Doctor Doolittle. He'd talk to the animals and they'd respond to him in their language," my wife recounted after witnessing his full dialogue with the chimps and elephants. Can you imagine if the zoo is the last place to see (and talk to) these majestic beauties?

"We have not inherited this earth from our parents -- we are borrowing it from our children," Magill told us.

Visit [www.Zoo Miami.org](http://www.Zoo Miami.org) -- and kiss a giraffe!

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