



Creating the Nation's first BioPark

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Letter from the Desk of David Challinor
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In my last two letters I described some of the research the National Zoo is doing to prepare captive-bred animals for release into habitats their species once occupied. I told of the capture of all free-ranging, black-footed ferrets from the only known wild population near Meteesee, Wyoming. This drastic action was deemed necessary by state and federal wildlife experts when distemper struck the wild ferrets and threatened their extirpation. The Zoo's Conservation and Research Center at Front Royal has successfully bred some captive-born progeny of these wild-caught ferrets and is part of a network of facilities working to enlarge the population to a point where we can afford to release them to the wild.

In the meantime, experimental work is being done on the closely related Siberian or Turkistan polecat, which is slightly larger than the black-footed ferret. The European species occupies scree slopes in the semi-arid steppes of Asia and is a diurnal hunter of ground squirrels and hamsters. After careful study, scientists at the Zoo were able to inseminate artificially with both fresh and frozen sperm Siberian polecats. A total of 32 kits have been thus produced from 7 of 8 females so inseminated. This was an extraordinary feat, as the reproductive physiology of the mustelid family (ferrets, weasels, mink, etc.) is very complicated. Using similar techniques, we may be able soon to inseminate artificially black-footed ferrets.

Assuming that the ferret breeding program is successful and that there soon will be enough captive animals to risk release, how should we proceed? One technique is to release closely related unthreatened species into the habitat to be restocked with the rare animals and closely monitor the introduced individuals to learn of unanticipated problems. Scientists plan, for example, to liberate female Andean condors with radio transmitters in the Sesepee wilderness area where the wild California condors used to live to see if they can survive on their own.



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To prepare for the eventual ferret introduction, vasectomized male polecats and females will be liberated in the prairie dog colonies once occupied by ferrets. Now the decision has to be made whether to inoculate the released polecats for distemper or not to do so, and use them to monitor the existence of this and other viruses at the reintroduction site.

These and many other decisions will have to be made in the never ending battle to slow down the extinction rate of the mammals and birds we already know are endangered. The overwhelming destruction of the planet's limited habitats by humans is ever more obvious. The National Zoo and its cooperating institutions are fighting what often seems a losing battle, but moments of success are reward enough for our staff to keep working on this endless problem.