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Minnesota Zoological Garden

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<http://www.mnzoo.org/>

AT A GLANCE

- World-class conservation organization caring for nearly 5,000 animals, including many threatened and endangered species
- 485-acre campus with 125 buildings and related facilities
- Nearly 1.36 million visitors served in FY26
- Minnesota's largest environmental educator, providing environmental learning opportunities to 148,970 participants in FY26
- Provided 113,890 free admissions in FY26 to Minnesotans who qualify for public assistance through the Free to Explore program

PURPOSE

The mission of the Minnesota Zoological Garden (Minnesota Zoo or Zoo) is **to connect people, animals, and the natural world to save wildlife.**

The Minnesota Zoo is an expansive environmental marvel with a campus including 125 buildings, 6.5 miles of roads, and 4.75 miles of pathways within nearly 500 acres of picturesque woodland and aquatic landscapes. Housing nearly 5,000 animals, including many threatened and endangered species from around the world, the Zoo is the state's largest environmental learning center and a leader in wildlife conservation.

The Zoo provides engaging and hands-on learning and play opportunities for children to experience Minnesota's native environment through amenities like the Hanifl Family Wild Woods and Woodland Adventure. Zoo guests can also learn about the natural world around the globe while visiting cutting-edge exhibits such as Discovery Bay, 3M Penguins of the African Coast, Medtronic Minnesota Trail, Tropics Trail, Northern Trail, Wells Fargo Family Farm, and Russia's Grizzly Coast. Opened in 2023, the 1.25-mile Treetop Trail brings guests up to 32 feet above the ground and provides a year-round, accessible journey into nature for people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities. These experiences are designed to be intentional about building a bridge for collectively appreciating the treasures that Minnesota's natural environment has to offer, as well as building awareness of global conservation issues.

The Zoo is ardently committed and actively engaged in saving wildlife in Minnesota and around the world. Zoo experts use science in partnership with other government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and universities to improve the conservation of the state's most imperiled butterflies. Additional current conservation initiatives focus on bolstering populations of threatened aquatic turtles, restoring native endangered freshwater mussels, and reintroducing bison in Minnesota to restore the key ecological, cultural, and economic functions that healthy herds provide. Its international conservation efforts through the renowned black rhino project, championing tiger conservation for decades, and a diversity of other initiatives led to the Zoo's recognition as a catalyst for wildlife conservation.

As a leading environmental education institution, the Zoo has long offered a wide variety of expertly created educational and interpretive programming designed to build understanding and respect for nature and empower students to become change agents for protecting wildlife and wild places. In FY26, 73,641 students participated in a Zoo field trip from 1,173 schools and organizations. Also, in FY26, 2,881 Summer Zoo Camp participants received age-appropriate professional education, animal encounters, special zoo experiences, active games, and tours.

The Zoo continues to expand its proven environmental education model to reach more learners through innovative programs and experiences. In FY26, 17,934 participants engaged in school programs, including STEM stations, Zoo classes and tours, the ZOOMS Design Challenge, and the “Show Us Your Mussels” campaign, which educated participants about native mussels, their role in water quality, and actions needed to support their survival. In 2026, the Zoo’s Nature Preschool earned recognition from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), advancing the program toward accreditation. The preschool is fully enrolled for the 2026–27 school year.

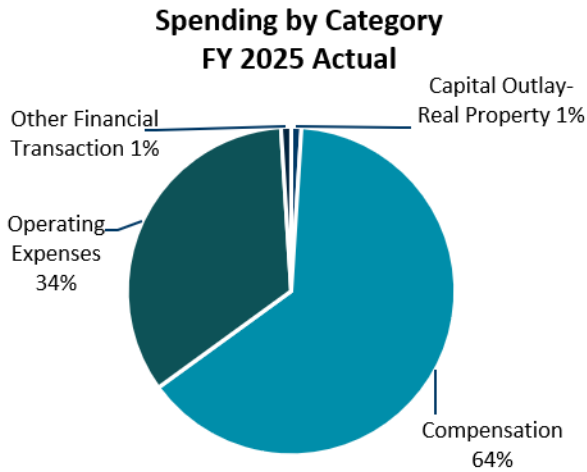
The Zoo continues to prioritize access and inclusion initiatives so that a zoo experience is never limited due to economic, cultural, physical, geographic, or other barriers. The Zoo provides financial support and assistance for admissions and transportation to under-served schools throughout the state so that all students can experience the awe of a close encounter with a wild animal. Also, in FY26, 113,890 guests accessed the Zoo through the Free to Explore program, which ensures Zoo admission is free for Minnesotans who qualify for public assistance programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, MinnesotaCare, and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

Furthermore, the Zoo offers a variety of programs designed to serve communities with diverse needs and abilities. Recent examples include American Sign Language (ASL) Days that support individuals learning ASL as a second or additional language; Dream Night, a special evening for children with chronic health care needs; early access to special events for guests who benefit from a less crowded, lower-stimulation environment; and outreach and virtual programs that engage older adults in memory care, particularly those who are unable to visit the Zoo in person. The Zoo also helps reduce barriers to access by providing accommodations such as ASL interpreters, sighted guides, tactile experiences, and virtual tours.

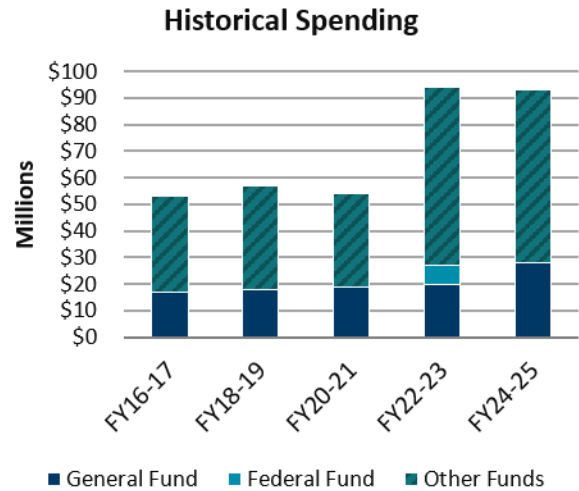
BUDGET

We are deeply committed to utilizing our resources with the utmost efficiency and effectiveness, a commitment that extends beyond the State’s investment in our mission. Our budget is supported by a dynamic blend of earned revenue, private investments, and corporate contributions. A vital component of our success is the incredible support we receive from our dedicated volunteers.

The Zoo’s primary source of revenue is earned from admissions, memberships, food and gift concessions, programs, events and facility rentals. In a typical year, the State’s investment in our operating budget through the General Fund and the Natural Resources Fund represents about one-third of the Zoo’s operating revenue. The Zoo also receives funding from the Arts & Cultural Heritage Fund, federal grants, and the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund dedicated to specific projects and programs. Charitable contributions to our nonprofit partner, the Minnesota Zoo Foundation, also support the Zoo’s mission. The State’s investment is key to maintaining the sustainability of our business. Investment from the General Fund ensures our ability to withstand the unanticipated expenses inherent in running a large facility with many outdoor areas, such as extreme weather events or fluctuations in the economy that can negatively affect our attendance.



Source: Budget Planning & Analysis System (BPAS)



Source: Consolidated Fund Statement

Because the Zoo cares for nearly 5,000 animals and a 485-acre campus regardless of whether the Zoo is open for admission, it has significant fixed operating costs. In a typical year, nearly 70 percent of the Zoo's budget is allocated to personnel compensation and related expenses. Another five percent (approximately \$2.27 million) covers fixed utility costs. As state personnel costs and utility expenses continue to rise, the Zoo's fixed costs increase correspondingly.

STRATEGIES

The Zoo's board-approved Strategic Plan and Long-Range Facilities Plan guide the Zoo into its next 50 years with a bold nature-forward vision. Together, these plans ensure that the Zoo advances animal wellbeing, conservation, education, and guest experience while addressing critical infrastructure needs.

The following pillars guide the Zoo's operations and capital investments:

- **Advance Animal Collection and Save Wildlife:** Ensure the Zoo's Animal Care, Health, Conservation and Behavior model remains exemplary and is leading the industry as an accredited member of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums.
- **Champion People and Culture:** Ensure the Zoo is a desirable place to work and that the Zoo's expert team reflects Minnesota's diverse communities and is living its mission and values.
- **Create a Nature Centered Guest Experience:** Create the nation's leading nature zoo experience that is guest-centric, robust, accessible and welcoming to all.
- **Build Animal and Nature-forward Long-Range Plan:** Modernize facilities, create new guest experiences, address deferred maintenance, and invest in future-facing infrastructure.
- **Drive Revenue Generation for Growth:** Maximize diverse revenue portfolio, optimize ROI, and increase business intelligence/acumen.

RESULTS

Part A: Performance Data

Measure	Measure type	Measure data source	Historical trend	Most recent data
Zoo Attendance	Quantity	The total number of people who visit the Zoo and/or participate in Zoo onsite programs and events.	Attendance has demonstrated a strong long-term recovery from the COVID-era disruption, returning to, and now consistently exceeding, the Zoo's pre-pandemic attendance baseline. Following a record 1.46 million visitors in FY24, attendance has stabilized at approximately 1.35 million annually in FY25–FY26.	1.36 million in FY26
Free to Explore	Quantity	The Zoo's Free to Explore program provides free admission to Minnesotans who qualify for public assistance programs.	Participation in Free to Explore has remained consistent, increasing from 9.5% of total attendance in FY24 to 9.7% in FY25 and 10.0% in FY26, demonstrating continued use of the program by eligible Minnesotans.	113,890 admissions (10% of total attendance) in FY26
Conservation Impact	Results	The Zoo manages a wood turtle headstarting program that helps support wild turtle populations. Wildlife biologists rear hatchling wood turtles during their most vulnerable life stage before releasing them into the wild at approximately one to two years of age.	The Zoo hatches approximately 50–80 wood turtles annually for release into the wild. Approximately 30 are selected for headstarting and reared at the Zoo until 1–2 years of age.	80 turtles hatched and 32 turtles reared in FY26
Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) Accreditation	Quality	AZA accreditation evaluates zoo operations, animal welfare and husbandry, veterinary care, conservation, education, and other areas of organizational performance.	The Zoo has maintained AZA accreditation continuously since 1990. AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums undergo a comprehensive review every five years, including an accreditation application and a multi-day onsite inspection.	Reaccredited in 2023; next accreditation review in 2028

Part B: Evidence of Effectiveness

This program funds infrastructure/core staffing/operations which cannot be evaluated using randomized control or quasi-experimental design methods.

See Minnesota Statutes Chapter 85A (<https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/?id=85A>) for an overview of the Minnesota Zoo's purpose, organization and authority.