Conservation Connection

See the wild and the world with Como Friends' new travel program.

inside

Helping Orangutans from St. Paul to Southeast Asia
Cultivating Kava at the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory

Photo by Jewelie Grape
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From St. Paul to southeast Asia, Como Zoo’s Megan Elder is committed to improving orangutans’ odds of survival

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Kava from the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory takes root around the region, helping researchers study the plant’s potential health benefits

Taking Root

Gifts made in Kenya with recycled bottle caps

Garden Safari Gifts

Como Friends is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization whose mission is to inspire community generosity to advance Como Park Zoo and Conservatory as a destination where people from all walks of life can gather, learn and enjoy the natural world.

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Como Park Zoo and Conservatory is accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Look for the AZA logo whenever you visit a zoo or aquarium as your assurance that you are supporting a facility dedicated to providing excellent care for animals, a great experience for you, and a better future for all living things.

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The American Association of Botanical Gardens and Arboreta (APGA) serves and strengthens public gardens throughout North America by supporting and promoting their work, value and achievements in horticultural display, education, research and plant conservation.
Travelers Sunset Affair: Cool Cats
Thursday, July 17, 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m.

Summer’s hottest fundraising gala will celebrate Como Zoo’s coolest cats at the 13th annual Travelers Sunset Affair. “Como Zoo has been a leader in raising and conserving large cats for more than 50 years, so we’re excited to call some attention to this critical conservation work at Sunset Affair,” says Caroline Mehlhop, Como Friends’ Director of Sponsorships & Events.

Como Friends’ annual summer gala has been a sell-out event for the last five years, which is why our volunteer committee has voted to expand the event to include 100 additional guests by adding “Choice Seating” in Gorilla Forest and Polar Bear Odyssey.

Proceeds from the event help to support everything from free admission and budget-friendly education programs, to great care for Como Zoo’s large cats and the gorgeous gardens of the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory. “If you’ve been too late to grab tickets before, this is a great year to come back and experience Travelers Sunset Affair, and be part of supporting a destination everyone loves,” say Mehlhop. To learn more about Travelers Sunset Affair, visit us at www.comofriends.org or watch your inbox for updates.

The official start of summer: the Sparky Show returns

It’s Minnesota’s favorite rite of spring—the return of the “Sparky the Sea Lion Show” beginning on Memorial Day, May 26. This season—Sparky’s 58th year at Como Zoo—the super smart sea lion will make a splash at the amphitheater every weekday at 11 a.m., with an additional 3 p.m. program on weekends and holidays. Remember, you can keep track of everything Como Zoo’s most charismatic marine mammal does by following “Sparky the Sea Lion” on Facebook!

Calling all campers!!

Did you know that Como Friends’ members receive 10 percent off the tuition for all of our Camp Como offerings? Now is a great time to plan your kids’ summer adventures by signing up for one or more of Como’s award-winning week-long summer camp sessions, taught by qualified and enthusiastic instructors, and offered for a range of age groups, from preschoolers to 8th graders. Spend some time “Monkeying Around” with your primate pals; reveal your creative side with “Adventures in Art”; take an “African Adventure” right at Como; or try on the hat of a zookeeper or gardener in “Behind-the-Scenes.”

Visit www.comozooconservatory.org to see our full range of Camp Como offerings, filling fast!
A trip to Africa was the inspiration behind Arta Cheney’s decision to become involved with Como back in 1996. “Seeing animals in the wild makes you want to be part of their preservation,” says Cheney, who has served in a variety of roles at Como in the last two decades, from preparing enrichment treats for primates, to educational outreach, to helping with the Sunset Affair gala, to her current work as a member of Como Friends’ board of directors. An inveterate traveler who has led conservation tours in the wild, Cheney recently talked to *The Como Insider* about the ways that Como Park Zoo and Conservatory supports conservation.

**Which do you like best—the Zoo or the Conservatory?**
I am a nature lover. Plants and animals are forever linked, so, for me, it’s one big package. The Zoo and Conservatory, in my mind, must be linked together, just like in nature.

**When you started, Como’s education department was housed in a mobile home. What do you make of the improvements that have taken place since then?**
When I first came to Como it was so dated that the changes we’ve seen in the last decade, from the Visitor Center to Gorilla Forest, have been marvelous. Como has really reinvented itself. The education department was in its infancy when I started, and now it has really matured. Conservation has always been part of Como’s educational message. It’s not enough to say that the rainforest is being cut down—you have to ask, “What can I do to make things better? What are the things you can do in your own home to make a difference?” I think that’s the message that makes zoos and conservatories such important places for education and for understanding the environment. There has to be that connection between animals, plants, and the people.

You’ve also traveled to see the animals you care about in the wild, joining Como Friends’ recent trip to see the polar bear migration in Hudson Bay. What does travel have to teach you about conservation?
My travels have allowed me to observe animal behavior in their natural habitat. A group of us from Como went to Borneo four years ago. One day we’d be in the rainforest looking at orangutans; then, the next day we’d be on the road, watching these trucks carrying huge, ancient logs that have been cut down to make room for palm oil plantations. It drove home the issue of palm oil plantations and the loss of orangutan habitat. Seeing the polar bears in Churchill, being so anxious to get back on the ice to hunt for food, demonstrated to me the challenges they are facing due to global warming.

*Arta, you have been involved in so many projects at Como, what is the worst assignment you’ve ever had?*
Digging through the garbage, boy, that was a fun job. It was part of a project Como was doing before we launched the recycling program. We were looking at every piece of trash for a typical day, and sorting out what should be recycled. There were pop cans, dirty diapers, everything you can imagine—but with everyone pitching in, it was actually kind of fun.

One thing I wish more people knew about Como, is “what a wonderful staff of employees and volunteers we have!” Everyone from maintenance, to zookeepers, to gardeners, to education, to Como Friends, is so hardworking and dedicated. They all deserve our appreciation and thanks.

**COMO FRIENDS PROFILE:**

**ARTA CHENEY**

Churchill, Manitoba 2013

Sunset Affair 2002

*Como Insider* | April - June 2014
“It seems to me that the natural world is the greatest source of excitement; the greatest source of visual beauty; the greatest source of intellectual interest. It is the greatest source of so much in life that makes life worth living.”
—David Attenborough

In November, sixteen Como Friends supporters ventured to Churchill, Manitoba to watch one of the most amazing migrations on earth, as the polar bears of Hudson Bay make their annual return to their hunting grounds on the sea ice.

“Conservation up Close”

Como Friends’ New Travel Tours Teach the Value of Conservation at Home and in the Wild

“I visit Polar Bear Odyssey nearly every day, but I don’t think anything quite prepares you for seeing an animal as majestic as the polar bear in the wild,” says Como Friends president Jackie Sticha, who observed nearly a dozen adults and offspring from the confines of a Tundra Buggy tour created with our partners at Frontiers North Adventures, Schulke Travel, and Polar Bears International.

“Having that kind of up-close experience in the wild, with field experts who understand what’s at stake for this vulnerable species, really deepens your commitment to conservation in a whole new way.”

Photo by Jewelie Grape
Building that connection between Como’s plant and animal collections and conservation efforts in the field is the mission behind a new series of Como Friends travel tours coming in 2015—a March trip to the tropics of Panama, and a November tour of the great gardens of Japan. “We’re really pleased to be working closely with our partners at Schulke Travel to create travel experiences that also reflect the best conservation efforts at Como,” says Sticha.

For many years, Como Zoo has been a lead player in a captive breeding program for the Panama golden frog, an amphibian that’s been declared extinct in the wild. During a 9-day tour of this tropical crossroads between the Pacific and Caribbean, guests will explore rainforests teeming with wildlife, including three-toed sloths, leaf-cutter ants, howler monkeys, agoutis, brilliant blue morpho butterflies, and tanagers.

Meantime, the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory’s nationally-ranked Japanese horticultural collections will be the point of origin for an exploration of “The Gardening Art of Japan.” Como Friends’ travelers will visit some of Japan’s most famous gardens, including Kenroku-en and the garden at the Adachi Museum of Art, ride the country’s world-famous bullet trains, and immerse themselves in the beauty of bonsai at the Omiya Bonsai Art Museum during the autumn foliage season.

Both tours will include expert guides from the region, connecting animals, plants, and people for an unforgettable travel experience. “We know that visiting Como widens the worldview of our visitors, and we’re excited to take that to the next level with these upcoming trips to Panama and Japan,” says Sticha.

If you’d like to receive further updates about Como Friends’ conservation travel tours, please send an e-mail to ComoMembership@como-friends.org with the phrase “will travel” in the subject line.

Info Sessions

Meet up with Como Friends travel experts at Como Park Zoo and Conservatory to learn more about the 2015 trips.

May 6th: 5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. Panama
       6:45 p.m. – 7:45 p.m. Japan

May 14th: 5:30 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. Japan
          6:45 p.m. – 7:45 p.m. Panama

Please RSVP with Jennifer, 651-487-8296 by April 30.
Pack for Panama with Como Friends

March 14-22, 2015  Cost: $4,998 per person (airfare not included)

Meet up with Como Friends in Panama City, then grab a hammock on your private balcony of the Gamboa Rainforest Resort, your home for three nights.

Here, you can hop a boat to the world-famous Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute’s station located in the heart of Lake Gatún and the Panama Canal, see some of the more than 500 bird species found in Soberanía National Park, and discover the compelling pre-Columbian cultural heritage of Panama as we venture on the upper Chagres River. From there, we’ll move to the Chiriquí Highlands and charming Finca Lérida Lodge, where you’ll encounter the diverse orchids of the Finca Dracula, and the bromeliads of Barú National Park. The UNESCO world heritage sites of the Castle San Lorenzo and other destinations around the Panama Canal are the focus of the final days of our tour, driving the isthmus, and following the gold-digging route of the 49ers on the Panama Canal Railroad train.

Expert naturalists and expedition leaders will accompany your tour, which includes in-country transfers and meals. For a full itinerary, visit www.comofriends.org.

The Garden Art of Japan

From bullet trains to the famous Omiya Bonsai Art Museum, the history and horticultural treasures of Japan are the focus of this two week tour, slated for November 2015. Highlights will include a cultural tour of Tokyo (including the famous Tsukiji fish market,) trips to Kyoto’s finest gardens at the peak of fall foliage, a day trip to Mt. Fuji, and tours of the Hakone Museum of Art and the Hiroshima Peace Museum.

Dates and pricing will be available soon. Inquire at ComoMembership@comofriends.org if you’d like more information.
Primate keeper Megan Elder’s passion for orangutans takes her from St. Paul to southeast Asia collecting data for the International Orangutan Studbook.

Keeping track of Como Zoo’s four orangutans is just the start of Como Zoo primate keeper Megan Elder’s to-do list everyday. As the keeper of the International Orangutan Studbook, and vice president of the Orangutan Species Survival Plan, Elder also keeps very close tabs on the medical and genetic histories of an additional 1,060 orangutans living in 227 institutions in 48 countries.

“In simple terms, I’m sort of the genealogist and a match-maker for the species,” says Elder, who has been traveling to southeast Asia since 2010 to collect orangutan data and make connections in the field that can improve the odds of survival for this endangered species. Como Insider recently talked with Elder about her work, and how your support for Como Friends is contributing to conservation efforts around the world.

“As studbook keeper, I research and maintain a global database of orangutans, tracing each individual’s lineage all the way to the wild so we have a full picture of their genetics. It’s from this data that we’re able to make responsible breeding decisions to insure that we’re protecting and preserving as much genetic diversity in our captive populations as we can.”
“The four orangutans I work with at Como Zoo are the inspiration for everything I do,” says Elder, who began working closely with the panel of experts on the Orangutan Species Survival Plan after successfully managing Markisa’s complicated c-section birth for baby Jaya in 2007. “Markisa is the only living offspring of wild born parents, and she doesn’t have many relatives out there,” Elder explains. “That’s one of the reasons she’s considered genetically valuable, and we really want to preserve and promote her line.”

Supported by a series of grants from the Frog Crossing Foundation secured through Como Friends, Elder and a team of orangutan keepers traveled to Borneo to begin a successful “exchange program” that connects primate keepers to conservation efforts in the field. “The goal was to set up a program where zookeepers could visit southeast Asia, volunteer at these orangutan rehabilitation centers, offer expertise, and bring that experience back home and share that with our visitors,” says Elder. With regular trips to orangutan rescue sites, Elder has also built important relationships with orangutan advocates around the globe, presenting her work at orangutan survival conferences, and adding more than 600 individual orangutans to her growing database since receiving the prestigious appointment in 2008. In total, there are now more than 3,100 orangutans recorded in her database.
Elder credits her growing international profile to Como Zoo’s supportive management and Como Friends’ help securing private support for conservation efforts—including a recent $66,000 gift from international businessman Johannes Marliem, an Indonesian-born Minnesota transplant, who shares Elder’s passion for preserving orangutans. “I still pinch myself that I’ve had all of these opportunities. Animal curator John Dee has been a huge supporter and if you go to him with a crazy idea, like taking on a massive, high profile stud-book, he’ll say, ‘Go for it.’”

“Traveling to southeast Asia really shows you how complex the issue of orangutan survival really is. When you’ve been to those palm oil plantations, and met the children of the field workers, and see how much it matters to their livelihood, you can see why it’s important to find a balance where orangutans and humans can coexist,” says Elder, who believes zoos play a profound role in inspiring conservation efforts. “At the zoo is where people who may never get a chance to travel are able to make a connection with an individual animal that can turn into something very powerful.”

As the natural habitat of orangutans is encroached by the spread of palm oil plantations and other developments, more apes are turning up in rehabilitation centers like International Animal Rescue’s center in Ketapang, W. Kalimantan. “As zookeepers, we focus on the orangs that can’t be released, because of exposure to disease, or medical or behavior problems,” Elder explains. The zookeeping teams help construct engaging orangutan facilities, develop enrichment programs for the apes, and teach their caregivers how to use positive reinforcement conditioning to help improve their daily care.
The North Garden of the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory is overflowing with fascinating economic plants, but there’s one Pacific island species that’s particularly captivating to researchers. In the east corner of the North Garden, Como grows two varieties of kava—*Piper methysticum*—a pepper prized as an ancient antidote for anxiety.

“Kava is an important cultural plant in Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, where the roots are used to make a a soothing, social beverage. In traditional cultures it’s very valuable as a kind of anesthetic or analgesic that can be used as a natural sleep aid and to ease anxiety,” says horticulturist Margaret Yeakel-Twum, who became interested in the plant during a 2002 visit to Hawaii with a class from the University of Minnesota’s Center for Spirituality and Healing. At the time, the Conservatory grew a plant known as “false kava,” but sourcing the real thing was a challenge in the Midwest, where our non-tropical climate can make kava difficult to grow.

Yeakel-Twum, who curates the North Garden’s collection, got the word out that she was interested in finding real kava for Como’s collection, and eventually connected with Ed Johnston, a noted grower in Hawa’i, who donated 30 plant nodes from two different kava species to the Marjorie McNeely Conservatory in 2008. “I’m one of the few extroverted gardeners in the world, so I always let people know the plants I wish we could grow,” Yeakel-Twum says. "We got the kava in and grew them up, and passed them around to other gardens in the Midwest." Conservatory-grown kava has since taken root at the biology greenhouse in Gustavus Adolphus College, the Minnesota Zoo, and Olbrich Botanical Garden in Madison, Wisconsin, among others.

Medical researchers and plant enthusiasts are increasingly curious about kava because cancer rates are 20 to 30 percent lower in the South Pacific Islands where it is consumed daily as a beverage. Yet commercially-processed kava, such as the powdered form found in over-the-counter pills, has been linked to liver toxicity, one reason kava-based products have been pulled from the market in Europe where it had been sold as a natural anti-anxiety aid.

To help researchers learn more, the Conservatory gave 55 kava plant nodes to the University of Minnesota Horticultural Greenhouse in 2011, so that researchers can compare Como-grown kava with plants cultivated in Hawa’i. A $1 million National Institutes of Health funded study exploring whether kava can slow the development of lung and colon cancer is currently underway at the U of M’s College of Pharmacy and Masonic Cancer Center.

Though kava is highly prized, Yeakel-Twum says Como is glad to share this ethnobotanical treasure with other education-oriented institutions free of charge. “We have a long tradition of working with other partners in horticulture and research,” she says. “So when we have something great that we can share and that other people can learn from, we’re glad to do it.”

“You want to share plants like this, because they’re so special”

—Margaret Yeakel-Twum
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Please help us to reduce mailing costs and paper.
If you receive more than one issue of the Como Insider, call our office at (651) 487-8229

Please Recycle

From Fair Trade to Fleece at Garden Safari Gifts

Supporting sustainable business around the world is another great way to support conservation efforts at Como Park Zoo and Conservatory. Get packing for adventure with sturdy fleece and fair trade souvenirs at Garden Safari Gifts, where every purchase helps support Minnesota’s conservation leader!

Como Friends Members receive a 15% discount!

- Assorted color pattern items: drum (12” $23.99); bowl (4” or 6”, $8.99 - $11.99); box (2”x3” $8.99 or 3”x5” $8.99)
- Colorful monkey plush ($7.99)
- Polar Bear or Giraffe bottlecap wall plaques ($27.99)