



PRESIDENT & CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

EXPLORE. CONNECT. PROTECT.

SEARCH LED BY



THE OPPORTUNITY

The Living Desert Zoo and Gardens — the only AZA-accredited zoo and botanical garden focused on the deserts of North America, Africa, and Australia — seeks its next President & Chief Executive Officer.

THIS IS A HANDOFF AT FULL SPEED.

Over the past decade, The Living Desert has moved from a respected regional attraction to an internationally recognized conservation institution. Annual program revenue has grown from \$7.1 million to \$22.5 million. The endowment stands at approximately \$80 million, among the largest of any zoological organization and the second-largest among nonprofits in the Coachella Valley. Roughly \$90 million in campus improvements has reshaped the guest experience, and the organization carries no long-term debt.

The next chapter is already underway. Lion Ridge — the culminating phase of the Crossroads of Conservation master plan, and the largest project in The Living Desert's history — begins site work this fall.

The next President & CEO will inherit an exceptional and cohesive leadership team, a devoted community, and unusual financial strength. They will also inherit a construction schedule, a significant campaign to finish, and the work of becoming the public face of an organization that has been closely identified with one leader for more than a decade.



AT A GLANCE

1,200

PROTECTED ACRES

Across Palm Desert and Indian Wells, plus miles of hiking trails.

600+

ANIMALS

Representing 141 species.

~550K

ANNUAL GUESTS

Plus approximately 16,000 members.

\$35M

OPERATING BUDGET

Approximately 75% earned revenue.

\$80M

ENDOWMENT

Funding approximately 10% of annual operating expenses.

~\$148M

ECONOMIC IMPACT

Annually, to the Coachella Valley.

- Founded 1970 · AZA-accredited zoo and botanical garden
- 105+ conservation projects across 12 countries
- 213 team members off-season, rising to as many as 275 at peak
- Founder of the International Desert Conservation Summit; championed the California state designation of World Desert Day
- No long-term debt; no government funding for operations
- 100,000+ school children served annually
- 450 volunteers
- One of fewer than a dozen AZA-accredited institutions selected to host an IUCN Center for Species Survival





“Five years from now, our question will be, what have we done lately to really make The Living Desert continue to be a destination? That's always the challenge. You're never done.”

CRAIG MCCOLLAM · TREASURER, BOARD OF TRUSTEES

THE ROLE

The President & CEO reports directly to the Board of Trustees and serves as an officer, Director, and Trustee, leading a senior team of seven.

The role is heavily external. The next CEO will be the organization's principal storyteller, chief fundraiser, and most visible ambassador in a community where philanthropy runs through personal relationships and a busy social calendar.

DIRECT REPORTS

Chief Operating Officer

Chief Development Officer

CFO & VP of Information & Innovation

Vice President of People & Culture

Vice President of Conservation

Vice President of Learning & Impact

Vice President of Marketing & Communications

Executive Assistant



KEY RESPONSIBILITIES

PHILANTHROPIC LEADERSHIP

Complete the fundraising for Lion Ridge and build the donor pipeline and endowment that sustain the organization once the project opens. The CEO is not expected to carry day-to-day cultivation — a chief development officer and a team of major gift officers do that work — but is expected to oversee the efforts, to be the person who closes, and to tell the story that moves donors. Trustees carry significant fundraising responsibility of their own and expect an active partner in the CEO.

STRATEGIC VISION

Carry forward implementation of the existing strategic planning process, already underway. With Lion Ridge completing the Crossroads of Conservation master plan, the next round of campus master planning has been deliberately held so the incoming CEO can shape it; the Board is looking for a master plan that is both ambitious and measurable.

FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP

Be accountable for a revenue model spanning earned income, philanthropy, grants, and endowment. Engage substantively in monthly finance committee work, move budgeting toward continuous and data-informed forecasting, and pursue a deliberate strategy to grow the endowment.

CONSERVATION AND MISSION ADVANCEMENT

Serve as champion for the desert conservation work that distinguishes The Living Desert globally, and raise its public profile to match its impact.

BOARD PARTNERSHIP

Work closely with an engaged Board, bringing candor and clarity, and inviting deeper strategic engagement as the organization transitions.

EXTERNAL AND COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Represent the organization to donors, members, the cities of Palm Desert and Indian Wells, the wider Coachella Valley, tourism partners, media, and the AZA and IUCN communities.

CAPITAL DELIVERY

Steward Lion Ridge from site work through opening, on budget and on schedule, with a credible operating plan for the staffing and infrastructure the new habitat will require.

TEAM LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE

Lead a tenured, mission-driven staff and build trust across every level of the organization. The Board names team leadership as its single highest priority.



FIRST-YEAR PRIORITIES

The Board has identified four priorities for the new CEO's first year:

- Meet scheduled fundraising targets
- Effectively manage construction of the Lion Ridge project
- Ensure the senior team understands the new CEO's priorities, while listening to what the team believes should be accomplished
- Assess the talent on the senior team and build close working relationships with its members



LION RIDGE — RENDERING

The culminating phase of the Crossroads of Conservation master plan, and the largest project in The Living Desert's history.



“People are very proud of where they work and want to make sure the guests have a Best Day Ever — which isn't just a catchphrase. We have a culture where good ideas can come from anywhere.”

KAIT HILLIARD · VICE PRESIDENT OF MARKETING & COMMUNICATIONS

THE IDEAL CANDIDATE

The Board seeks a leader who pairs genuine warmth with real business discipline — someone equally at home with a room of donors on a Saturday night and a budget review on Monday morning. As one board member frames it, the requirement is *smart and heart*: intellect alone will not carry this role.

While no candidate will bring every attribute, the successful candidate will demonstrate most of the following:

A MASTERFUL FUNDRAISER AND STORYTELLER

A record of closing major gifts and leading campaigns, with the instinct to connect donors emotionally to a cause, and comfort with sophisticated, high-net-worth philanthropists. Persuasion here looks less like salesmanship and more like telling a story people want to be part of.

FINANCIAL AND BUSINESS ACUMEN

Fluency with complex budgets, earned-revenue models, endowment and investment oversight, and long-range planning. Direct accountability for a budget, including experience making difficult financial decisions. Vision without financial discipline is not an asset.

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

A track record leading an organization of comparable or greater complexity — whether as a CEO ready to step up in scale, or as a senior executive at a larger institution ready for the top seat. The Board is open to a high-potential leader, not solely a long track record.

A CREDIBLE STEWARD OF LIVING COLLECTIONS

Deep respect for and working understanding of animal welfare, AZA accreditation standards, and the operational realities of caring for living things — earned in a zoo, aquarium, sanctuary, botanical garden, or conservation organization.

CAPITAL PROJECT EXPERIENCE

Direct experience delivering significant construction, or close partnership with those who have done so.

NONPROFIT FLUENCY

Experience with nonprofit governance and board partnership.

EXPERIENCE LEADING A REPRESENTED WORKFORCE

Familiarity with labor relations and leading in a unionized environment is an asset. A small unit of animal keepers voted to unionize three years ago; a contract has not yet been negotiated with the union.

PRESENCE AND ENERGY

A visible, engaged community leader who genuinely enjoys the public role. This is not a role for someone who prefers to be in the office.

HUMILITY AND PEOPLE-FIRST INSTINCTS

A leader who empowers a strong team, welcomes ideas from all levels, and lets others shine. An empathetic, open-door style matters here more than specific credentials.

RANGE ACROSS CONSTITUENCIES

The ability to be equally effective and equally respectful with staff, board, volunteers, donors, and the public.

AUTHENTIC CONSERVATION CONVICTION

A genuine, informed passion for the natural world and for deserts as places worth protecting.

THE ORGANIZATION

EXPLORE. CONNECT. PROTECT.

The Living Desert focuses on the deserts of North America, Africa, and Australia on a campus spanning the cities of Palm Desert and Indian Wells. It is both zoo and botanical garden — a hybrid with no obvious institution to model itself after.

That singular desert focus is the organization's strongest and most distinctive positioning, and at the same time its least-understood story. The Living Desert works hard to raise public awareness of desert conservation and preservation, convening the field through the International Desert Conservation Summit and partnering on conservation work well beyond its own collection. Public familiarity with that work still lags behind its actual reach, and closing that gap is seen as a central opportunity.

The campus itself has been transformed in recent years. The Crossroads of Conservation master plan delivered Australian Adventures, Rhino Savanna, the Sausman Office Complex, the Patti and Jack Grundhofer Entry Plaza, Bighorn Cafe, the Bill Gross and Pax Stengaard Oasis Splash Pad, the Suzan and Bill Appel Gift Shop, the Living Legacy Endowment Garden, and a 30% parking expansion with EV charging. Several of these additions are only now coming into full use. Evening programming has opened new audiences. Lion Ridge completes the plan.

Financially, The Living Desert is unusual among nonprofits of its scale. Today the organization carries no long-term debt, funds approximately 10% of operations from endowment earnings, and directs philanthropy largely toward capital rather than annual operating support. As an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit, it operates without the constraints of a layered municipal governance.

MISSION

**DESERT CONSERVATION
THROUGH PRESERVATION,
EDUCATION, AND
APPRECIATION.**

GUIDING ASPIRATION

**A “BEST DAY EVER” FOR
EVERY GUEST.**



"I don't know a soul who doesn't love The Living Desert."

SUZ HUNT • BOARD TRUSTEE

ABOUT THE COACHELLA VALLEY

The Coachella Valley — Greater Palm Springs — extends roughly 45 miles through Riverside County southeast of the San Bernardino Mountains, encompassing nine cities and a permanent population of approximately half a million, supplemented by a substantial seasonal population. The Living Desert sits across Palm Desert and Indian Wells, two of the region's most affluent communities.

The valley draws millions of visitors annually to its resorts, golf, and cultural calendar — the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, which brings more people to the region than any other attraction or festival, along with the McCallum Theatre, the Palm Springs Art Museum, the Palm Springs Air Museum, and the Palm Springs International Film Festival. The BNP Paribas Open has been played in the Coachella Valley since 1976 and is unofficially known as the “fifth Grand Slam.” The Women’s Tennis Association Finals in Indian Wells, the Coachella Valley Grand Prix pickleball tournament, Firebirds hockey, and Lakers basketball — all in Palm Desert — have joined the sports calendar in recent years. The region is home to several colleges, including College of the Desert and campuses of California State University, San Bernardino, and the University of California, Riverside. Families are often surprised by how much is here: museums, the aerial tramway, ice skating, strong library programming, good school options, and great restaurants. The valley is also the ancestral home of the Cahuilla people, with several tribal nations holding reservation lands in the region.

This is a place that gives. Long-time residents describe a valley with several hundred nonprofit organizations and an unusually deep culture of service, where board membership and community presence are how people participate, not how they build a résumé. A significant concentration of philanthropic capacity sits within reach of an institution the community already loves.

The climate in the Coachella Valley is ideal most of the year, making it a premier resort area. Typical of a desert environment, the summers are hot, with temperatures averaging over 100 and sometimes exceeding 110 degrees. The community thins considerably during these months. Candidates and their families should come with clear eyes — and with the same affection for this landscape that the institution exists to protect.



THE OFFER

COMPENSATION

The salary range for this position is \$475,000 to \$550,000. The Living Desert also offers an annual performance incentive and a competitive benefits package.

HOW TO APPLY

The Living Desert Zoo and Gardens has partnered with Canopy Strategic Partners to lead this search. Send a cover letter and resume to search@canopysp.com with the subject line “The Living Desert — President & CEO Application.”

The Living Desert Zoo and Gardens is an Equal Opportunity Employer. All qualified applicants will receive consideration for employment without regard to race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, disability, or status as a protected veteran.





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