Wild Animal Initiative

Growth plans and room for more funding

18 Dec 2020
Introduction

Table 1. Estimated 2021 room for more funding.

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Introduction

The vast numbers of wild animals, their high rates of premature death and extreme suffering, and the historical neglectedness of this cause suggest that improving wild animal welfare could be one of the most cost-effective ways to address animal suffering within the next few decades. The current limiting factor to realizing this potential is the lack of empirical knowledge. That’s why Wild Animal Initiative is focused on building a community of scientists advancing our understanding of how to improve wild animal welfare. Encouraging research simultaneously shifts institutions and the educated public toward valuing wild animal welfare, which builds long-term capacity to solve this problem at scale.

As pioneers in a mostly unexplored space, we face massive opportunities for growth and counterfactual impact. But as a young organization in a novel field, we are highly uncertain about the rate at which we can increase support for our work.

The plan below represents the maximum growth we estimate we could achieve in 2021 if we were not limited by funding. As necessary, the same plan would guide our strategy if we didn’t meet our room for more funding, with modifications such as not hiring a Hiring Manager early on.
Table 1. Estimated 2021 room for more funding.

Funding opportunities are listed by project (white rows), by phase (gray rows), and in total (black row). New hire expenses include salaries, benefits, and administrative costs for one year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total room for more funding:</th>
<th>$1,813,550</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 1: Invest in growth</td>
<td>Subtotal: $250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Program Director</td>
<td>$90,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiring Manager</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development Director</td>
<td>$90,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2: Leverage capacity</td>
<td>Subtotal: $405,550</td>
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<tr>
<td>Field experiment</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webinar series for GAP applicants</td>
<td>$2,550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workshop costs</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conference attendance</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Director</td>
<td>$80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Writer</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications Specialist</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations Director</td>
<td>$85,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event Planner</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 3: Scale up</td>
<td>Subtotal: $278,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conference attendance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Outreach Director</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>Salary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outreach Coordinator</td>
<td>$65,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentorship Coordinator</td>
<td>$65,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development Specialist</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
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</table>

**Phase 4: Launch the Summer Research Fellowship**  
Subtotal: $130,000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research Fellows (8 fellows for 10 weeks = 1.7 FTE)</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lodging</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Phase 5: Fund academic researchers directly**  
Subtotal: $750,000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grants to 10 postdoctoral research fellows (salary and research costs)</td>
<td>$750,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Plans for growth, by program

For more information on our programs, please refer to our 2020 Strategic Plan.

Grant Assistance

Our Grant Assistance Program helps promising researchers secure funding for wild animal welfare projects.

Grant Assistance goals for 2021

1. Secure funding for two projects currently in our advising pipeline:
   a. Evaluating the welfare benefits of a potentially less harmful insecticides
   b. Testing the efficacy and welfare effects of a rock pigeon (Columba livia) contraceptive
2. Run two to four additional rounds of the Grant Assistance Program.
3. Conduct a program retrospective to identify areas for improvement and revise processes accordingly.
4. Officially launch the program on our website and issue a call for applications.

Plans for growth

Expanding our Grant Assistance Program is our highest growth priority in 2021.

Hire a Grant Program Director

A Grant Program Director is the next hire we plan to make, as soon as funding allows. This staff member would take our Grant Assistance Program to the next level by contributing grant-writing expertise, expanding our portfolio of promising mainstream scientific funders, and offering our academic contacts a streamlined service to secure funding for wild animal welfare research. We see this as an investment in the growth of not just our Grant Assistance Program, but also our Research and Outreach Programs, because a longer grant assistance track record will more clearly communicate the value we can add to potential collaborators.
Workshop and Webinar

A key component of the GAP is to encourage and help scientists develop project ideas that advance the field of wild animal welfare research, leverage their areas of expertise, and suit the interests of funders. We plan to achieve this with a workshop (in-person once that is possible) and a webinar series. Our advisory panel, which includes scientists who understand our work and advise us on questions as they arise, would also be invited. Biologists, ecologists, and scientists from adjacent research spaces coming together to develop and improve a research agenda for the field of wild animal welfare as a whole would have important strategy implications and allow us to foster a thriving wild animal welfare research community.

We had originally planned to host this workshop in 2020, but delayed it due to the coronavirus pandemic. If a vaccine is widely accessible in 2021, we will host the workshop in person. If not, we will host a virtual version informed by best practices developed over a year of global experimentation in virtual events.

In future years, we hope to grow the workshop into a flagship annual conference.

Hire specialists

As funding allows, our next hires for the Grant Assistance Program (and their approximate overall hiring priority) are:

1. Grant Writer (#4): To help more wild animal welfare scientists get more funding by expanding our capacity to improve their grant applications to mainstream scientific funders.
2. Mentorship Director (#10): To match each postdoctoral candidate funded through our Grant Assistance Program with a pair of academic advisors - one in ecology and one in animal welfare science. This project would foster neglected interdisciplinary research while simultaneously bringing at least three scientists at a time into wild animal welfare research.

Evaluate, then pivot or scale

Because even the most effective grant writers have low rates of success, we expect it will take three years to fully develop this program and determine its effectiveness. If our metrics reveal that the program has not been successful within the target timeline, we are ready to pivot to other mechanisms for accelerating research. If the program is successful in that time, we plan to build it up with more staff and promotional programs. This could include launching an academic journal or annual conference to showcase the work funded through the program and encourage further engagement with the ideas.

Outreach

Our Outreach Program cultivates relationships with academic researchers.
Outreach goals for 2021

1. Double our outreach rate to connect with over 114 new scientists working in relevant fields.
2. Causally contribute to our work or the work of our collaborators being covered in at least 4 news articles in outlets scientists are likely to read (e.g., major general news outlets, popular-science web outlets).

Plans for growth

Expanding our Outreach Program is our second-highest growth priority in 2021.

Hire specialists

As funding allows, our next hires for the Outreach Program (and their approximate overall hiring priority) are:

1. Communications Specialist (#5): To develop and market content across platforms to more effectively convey to academic researchers what wild animal welfare research is, why it’s an exciting new scientific frontier, and how they can contribute to groundbreaking work.
2. Event Planner (#7): To engage more scientists more deeply by planning workshops, webinars, the first annual wild animal welfare conference, and (as funding allows) the Summer Research Fellowship.
3. Outreach Director (#8): To lead our newly expanded academic Outreach Program, guiding our messaging as an organization and optimizing our efforts to build a generation of wild animal welfare scientists.
4. Outreach Coordinator (#9): To broaden our outreach efforts by speaking at universities about opportunities in wild animal welfare research and coordinating volunteer-led seminar groups in relevant departments.

Attend more conferences

In 2019, attending academic conferences yielded an exceptionally high return on our investment. After a coronavirus vaccine is widely accessible, we plan on attending as many relevant conferences as funding (our primary constraint) and time allow. The modularity of conference outreach makes it a high-value investment for any additional funding below the level required for another hire.

Launch the Summer Research Fellowship

If funding allows, the Summer Research Fellowship would also represent a major expansion of our Outreach Program. In the past, our fellows and interns made remarkable contributions relative to the limited time
they’ve spent with us, and have gone on to maintain relationships with Wild Animal Initiative after their tenure.

In addition to supporting more such research breakthroughs, the Summer Research Fellowship would offer a richer and more collaborative experience to empower early-career academics to lead a new frontier in science.

Research

Our Research Program produces original research in order to launch the kinds of conversations we would like to see in the academic wild animal welfare research community.

Research goals for 2021

1. Advance to the next stage in developing a pilot project that can improve wild animal welfare in the field within two years at low-enough cost that funding is not the main barrier to implementation. Based on our research this year, a promising project is replacing urban pigeon poisoning with contraceptive management. We are currently exploring options to test the effectiveness of a contraceptive and monitor for adverse consequences.
   a. If we cannot launch that experiment in 2020, our goal for 2021 will be to launch the experiment and report on results.
   b. If we succeed in launching that experiment in 2020, our goal for 2021 will be to report on the results and recommend either further research or expanded implementation of contraceptive management for pigeons.
      i. If we succeed in launching that experiment in 2020 and recommend expanded implementation, an additional goal for 2021 will be to launch a pilot campaign to convince pigeon population managers (city governments, transportation authorities, utility companies, or property managers) to replace existing poisoning programs with contraceptive management.
2. Author or co-author four papers accepted for publication in peer-reviewed journals.
3. Based on the results of the academic workshop (see Outreach Goal #1), develop a prioritized research agenda for the wild animal welfare field at a large.

Plans for growth

Expanding our Research Program is our third-highest growth priority in 2021.
1. **Diversify into field work**

As of October 2020, it looks probable that our Research Program will diversify to include field research as well as desk research. As part of the pigeon contraceptive project, we expect to either collect data in the field or closely coordinate with others to collect data in the field.

2. **Hire a Research Director**

If funding allows, we would like to hire a Research Director in 2021. They would lead strategic revisions to our research agenda, support our research team, and evaluate the impact of our research. This would multiply the impact of our researchers’ time by improving the pace, quality, and strategic value of their work. The Research Director is our third highest priority hire.

3. **Launch the Summer Research Fellowship**

If funding allows, the Research Director could also launch our Summer Research Fellowship as a joint project of our Research and Outreach Programs.

The fellowship program would:

- Bring together 4-8 early-career scientists (graduate students or postdoctoral researchers) to work on high-impact wild animal welfare research projects.
- Introduce them to key concepts, methods, and research in wild animal welfare.
- Involve them in practical field-building strategy discussions.
- Culminate in the opportunity to pitch further research projects to funders who have expressed interest in backing a postdoc to work on wild animal welfare.

4. **Hire more researchers**

If funding allows, and if our evaluation efforts indicate our Research Program is continuing to accelerate the broader field of wild animal welfare research, we can easily scale the program by hiring more researchers. Because researchers can work very independently, we expect negligible operational obstacles. Because scientists typically react to our work with interest, and because there are limited opportunities for ecologists beyond the highly competitive academic job market, we don’t expect any talent supply constraints.

Because the number of fellows and the nature of the programming are both flexible, the Summer Fellowship Program could be adjusted to fit a range of budgets. The Research Director would lead the program in its first year. If we decide to continue the program, we would consider hiring a staff member dedicated to it.

**Community Strategy**

*Our Community Strategy Program coordinates with allies to optimize our collective impact.*
Community Strategy goals for 2021

1. Maintain our existing collaborations with nonprofits and social movements working on wild animal welfare.
2. Establish regular strategic communications with at least 3 conservation or wildlife protection organizations doing relevant work.
3. Speak at three conferences focused on conservation or wildlife protection.
4. Develop and share best practices for communicating wild animal welfare issues to new audiences.

Plans for growth

Expanding our Community Strategy Program is our lowest growth priority in 2021.

Coordinating with other wild animal welfare organizations takes less time now that we've established those systems. We are shifting our relationship-building efforts to conservation and wildlife protection organizations, with the goal of broadening the number and types of organizations that are actively coordinating on wild animal welfare strategy.

The direction this program takes over the next three years is highly dependent on the results we see over the next year as we broaden our coordination efforts.

Of the next twelve positions we plan on hiring for, none are dedicated to Community Strategy. We expect this work can be completed with the continued involvement of our leadership and the additional contributions of our upcoming Outreach Program hires: Communications Specialist, Event Planner, and Outreach Director.

Cross-program capacity building

We invest in our capacity to sustain and grow our impact across all our programs.

Plans for growth

As funding allows, our next hires to build capacity across our programs (and their approximate overall hiring priority) are:

1. Development Director (#2): Grow and diversify the community of supporters that make Wild Animal Initiative’s work possible. Build relationships with wildlife defenders to minimize our reliance on limited effective animal advocacy resources while maximizing our engagement with the stakeholders most passionate about wildlife.
2. Operations Director (#6): Establish and improve systems to keep our organization running smoothly as we continue to scale our team and our impact.

3. Development Specialist (#11): Support our work at scale by maintaining relationships with the growing community of supporters who make it possible to work toward a better world for wild animals.

4. Hiring Manager (if and when necessary): Manage hiring for all subsequent roles, maintaining the rigor of our evaluation process and increasing the diversity of our applicant pool while keeping everything on schedule. To be hired on a one-year contract with the possibility for extension if funding allows us to continue rapid growth.
Room for more funding

Capacity

Based on the growth plans outlined above, we estimate that our highest priority efforts would require $1,813,550 to be fully realized over the course of 2021.

Additionally, we estimate we could regrant $750,000 directly to academic researchers advancing high-priority research questions.

Please see below for important considerations and detailed estimates.

Growth constraints

Funding is by far the main constraint on our growth. Our experience to date suggests that our current growth plans will not be constrained by attracting talent, managing hiring, or finding collaborators. If anything constrains our growth before funding, we expect it to be operations or management.

Talent

We don’t expect talent availability to be a rate-limiting constraint for most of the roles in our current growth plan. So far, we have filled every opening on schedule, often with an excess of qualified applicants. We expect this to continue to be the case through the next three hiring phases because (1) most of these roles are common in nonprofits and academia and (2) few of them require precise value-alignment before joining the team. One exception is the Development Director, which we expect to be challenging to hire because (1) we have highly specific needs for the role and (2) other animal advocacy organizations have struggled to fill similar roles in recent years.

Hiring

This year, two people working part-time on hiring hired three new team members in under three months. This involved reviewing over 700 applications. With a hiring manager working full-time on hiring and increased operations support, we think it is realistic to hire four new team members each quarter for three quarters. The fourth quarter serves as a buffer in case we need to pause hiring or some roles take longer to fill. Without a hiring manager, we could still hire at least six people next year.

Collaborators

We do not expect to be limited by the number or quality of academic researchers willing to engage with our work. Biologists, veterinarians, and wildlife managers have typically responded positively to our work.
Because there are so many open questions in wild animal welfare research, many types of expertise can contribute to breaking new ground. Although we only had minimal staff time available for our Grant Assistance Program in 2020, we already have more promising proposal topics than we have been able to find funding for. Importantly, researchers don’t have to be entirely aligned with Wild Animal Initiative’s values in order to contribute.

Operations and management

We are optimistic that, given sufficient funding, we could accomplish this growth plan in as little as one year. However, we are also attentive to the risk of growing more quickly than we can scale our operations and management systems. In recent years, several other effective animal advocacy organizations seemed to have suffered major organizational setbacks at least in part because of such growing pains. We value sustainable growth over rapid growth. Hiring in phases allows us to regularly step back, re-evaluate our plans, and pivot as necessary. If we discover evidence that our growth is outpacing our operations or management systems (e.g., through town hall feedback sessions, in 360° evaluations of managers, in staff surveys, in project post-mortem discussions), we can delay the start of the next phase of hiring until we are ready to resume sustainable growth. This risk seems highest if we do in fact attempt the entire growth plan within one year. If this growth plan takes two or more years, this risk is substantially lower.

Options for further growth

Our first priority is hiring staff to scale up our impact. Among those hires, our most urgent needs are positions that can empower us to grow and leverage the full potential of our current team (see Phase 1 and Phase 2 of our ideal growth plan, above). After we see we can meet those needs, we would launch the Summer Research Fellowship, a cohort-based experience to empower early-career scientists to push the frontiers of wild animal welfare research.

Because the number of fellows and the nature of the programming are both flexible, the Summer Fellowship Program could be adjusted to fit a range of budgets. The Research Director and the Event Planner would lead the program in its first year, but if we decide to continue the program we would consider hiring a staff member dedicated to it.

Finally, we could fund academic collaborators directly. In general, we are focused on finding ways to leverage other funding sources, because this can multiply the impact of our investments. However, we still believe academic research into high-priority questions can be a worthwhile investment. We would consider directly funding academic research if available funding exceeded our other growth needs or if our growth were constrained for other reasons. In addition to the value of the research outputs themselves, this would jump-start our Grant Assistance Program. We could guarantee funding to worthy projects in case they fail to
win highly competitive grants from mainstream funders, making involvement in the program much more attractive.