

# Members on the Move for Conservation

## *An interview with EMA Conservation Committee member Tina Dow, PhD*

This year, the Conservation Committee is highlighting EMA members that are making a difference for elephant conservation. For this issue of Gray Matters, we turn to **Tina Dow, PhD**, Assistant Professor in the College of Medicine at University of Central Florida. After earning her degree in Animal and Veterinary Sciences from West Virginia University, Tina began an internship at Roger Williams Park Zoo (Providence, RI). Favoring elephants, she studied at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute for her doctoral work under the mentorship of Dr. Janine Brown investigating endocrine and physiological factors influencing infertility in managed female African elephants. She has been a member of EMA since 2008.

### **How have you been involved in elephant conservation?**

My involvement with conservation is through my research. Studying infertility in managed females has helped fill knowledge gaps in the reproductive physiology and endocrinology for African elephants. My hope is that it has allowed a better understanding of requirements in reproductive management and is beneficial to the establishment of *ex-situ* conservation breeding programs that may be applied to *in-situ* populations in the future if needed. In addition, once post-pandemic normalcy is established and international travel resumed, I will be working on a few collaborative projects regarding human–elephant conflict, how elephants utilize available resources, and in what way human–elephant interactions induce physiological changes within wild elephants.



### **Can you highlight any fun or unique details you would like to share?**

Not only has my research given me the chance to work with some amazing elephant keepers, managers, and curators, but also to travel and network. I have been most fortunate to see elephants in the wild and participate in biological sample collection and collaring. In addition, I've had the opportunity to meet people most affected by human–elephant interactions in range countries. This has allowed me to gain a better perspective as to where conservation efforts are needed at present and long-term to facilitate coexistence.

### **What impact did this opportunity have on you?**

My research and first-hand experiences give credibility and have helped me develop conservation talking points. To share my stories with individuals in my local community, colleagues, students, friends, and family gives me the chance to foster awareness for these incredible animals. Most people do not know the pressures elephants face in the wild due to loss of habitat and depletion of natural resources, conflict with humans, and poaching. Knowledge is truly a powerful tool in conservation. Through dissemination of data via presentations, articles, videos, and pictures it is my wish that others outside of our EMA and related groups get a chance to experience and appreciate elephants as we do.

### **Does your facility support elephant conservation? If so, what projects/organizations do they support?**

One may not expect to find an elephant researcher as a faculty member at the University of Central Florida (UCF) College of Medicine. I am extremely lucky that my department and college supports the work I do with elephants. Giving me a platform to share my expertise as well as funding to travel and carry out research has been critical in continuing my involvement in this field. In addition, by highlighting my research, several of my UCF colleagues and students have donated time and/or money to conservation projects for elephants at home within zoos and abroad with non-governmental conservation organizations. I love seeing the excited looks on people's faces when they learn about the uniqueness of elephants.

### **Why is conservation important to you?**

Wildlife and their habitat continue to be threatened. Now more than ever we need to work to establish tolerance for coexistence and secure safe spaces for elephants to flourish. To better recognize how both humans and wildlife, particularly elephants, utilize their resources and how to best accommodate the needs of all is necessary to ensure elephant survival for future generations. Furthermore, understanding elephants on fundamental and physiological levels will give conservationists the necessary tools, if needed, to establish and maintain healthy, genetically diverse wild populations.

### **Do you have any advice for other EMA members that are interested in conservation?**

Don't be afraid to reach out and let someone at your facility know you are interested. I still pinch myself when I think of how I got to this point in my career. The opportunities working with zoos, traveling to present research, visiting range countries in Africa, and meeting some truly remarkable people all began with just an email.

*Thank you, Tina, for taking the time to share your experiences with the EMA membership! Keep up the good work! We want to continue to showcase the many ways in which our members are impacting the future of elephants both in captivity and in the wild. If you know someone who is involved with elephant conservation and should be highlighted? Email us at [conservationema@gmail.com](mailto:conservationema@gmail.com).*