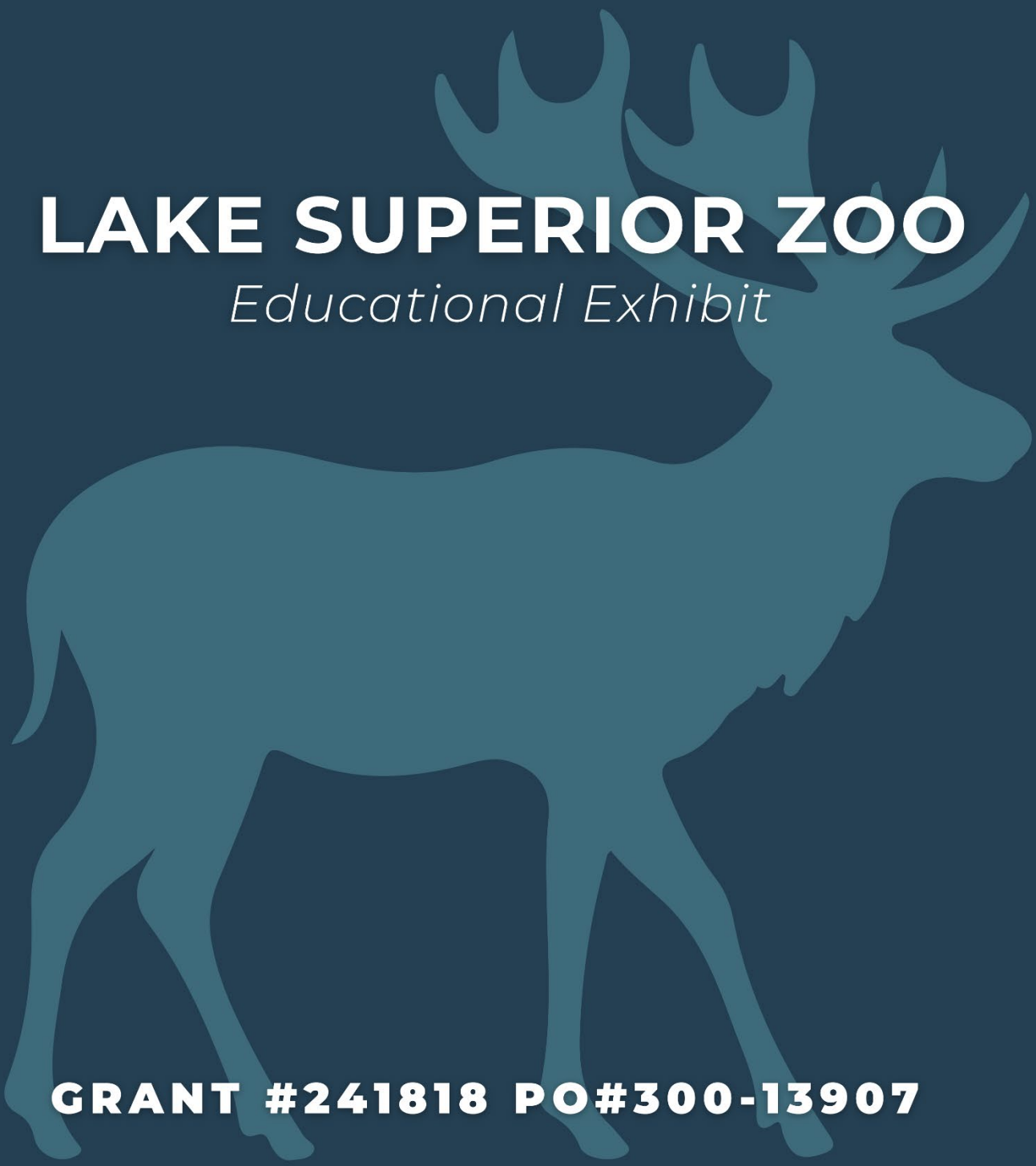
LEGACY FUNDS FY 2025

ANNUAL REPORT

LAKE SUPERIOR ZOO

Educational Exhibit



GRANT #241818 PO#300-13907

ACCREDITED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF ZOOS & AQUARIUMS

LAKE SUPERIOR ZOO

CLEAN WATER LAND & LEGACY AMENDMENT

Legacy Amendment Arts and Cultural Heritage Grant

Lake Superior Zoo | January 2026 | FY 2025 Annual Report| *July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025*

***Legislative Citation**:*
Pursuant to 2023 Minnesota Session Laws, Chapter 40, Article 4, Section 2, Subd. 6, "$150,000 each year is to develop educational exhibits and programs."

Source:
Arts & Cultural Heritage Fund

Duration:
FY 25 - July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025

Total Funding Amount:
$300,000

Administrative Costs:
3% to MN Department of Administration Grant Management ($2,250).

Direct Expenses:
$144,000.00

The Lake Superior Zoo is a statewide resource for every Minnesotan to experience close-up experiences with animals to inspire connections to wildlife and action towards conservation in our region and around the world. As one of the top-paid attractions in Duluth, both locals and tourists alike can learn about over 140 species of animals amongst a beautiful naturalistic setting with a DNR trout stream, Kingsbury Creek, running through the entire zoo grounds. We celebrated our centennial anniversary in 2023, and the LSZ will continue to highlight the importance of our legacy of education and conservation in Minnesota for years to come.

Though we are a paid attraction, LSZ staff and board members prioritize accessibility initiatives to ensure that all people, no matter their financial situation, are able to experience the wonders of wildlife and nature through programs such as Museums for All, Blue Star Museums, and Community Access Programs through our local libraries. Funding from the Legacy Amendment's Arts & Cultural Heritage Fund has allowed us to bring to life new experiences for many years.

The Lake Superior Zoo grounds and buildings are owned by the City of Duluth and operated by the Lake Superior Zoological Society. We are one of three facilities in the state of Minnesota that are accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums (AZA). This educational exhibit featuring caribou is a wonderful complement to our accreditation as a conservation organization. Only 10% of zoos and aquariums in the United States hold this prestigious status, and Legacy funding has allowed us to bring to life many different exhibits and educational programs that support our accreditation.

Oversight of these projects is the responsibility of the Lake Superior and key senior staff.

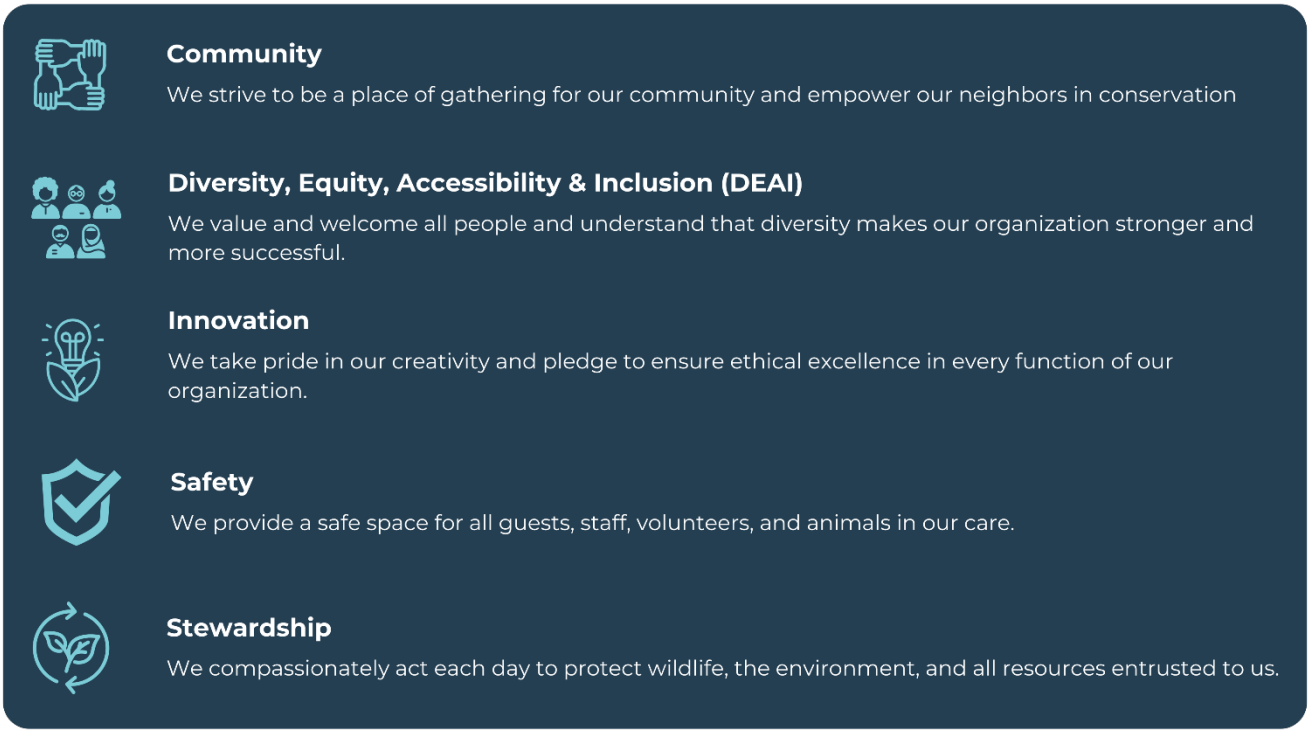
Questions about these projects may be directed to:

Noah Hobbs
Interim Executive Director

LSZ INFORMATION & LEADERSHIP

Mission: To provide close-up animal experiences that inspire connections to wildlife and action towards conservation in our region and around the world.

Vision: A future where all living things thrive together.



DIRECTOR TEAM

- Noah Hobbs*, Interim Executive Director*
- Heidi Beal, *Director of Business Operations*
- Lizzy Larson, *Director of Animal Management & Facilities*
- Samantha Halligan, *Director of Guest Experience*
- Sarah Wilcox, *Director of Education & Preschool Director*

BOARD OF DIRECTORS FY2025

- Jim Lewis, *Board President*
- Dodie Brown, *Vice President*
- Kyle Dickinson, *Treasurer*
- Jennifer Garland, DBA, *Secretary*
- Erica Walli
- Julie Benfield
- Bailey Olson
- Kathleen Privette
- Mike Polzin

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Bringing Caribou Back to Northern Minnesota

Revitalizing the former white-tailed deer habitat into a dynamic, natural space for caribou is a transformative project designed to highlight the story of a species that has been historically native to Minnesota. Over the years, the existing exhibit had fallen into disrepair, with fencing deteriorating and trees encroaching on the space. The funding through the Arts & Cultural Heritage fund will help the Lake Superior Zoo restore and modernize the area by removing dead trees, constructing new shelters, and replacing fencing to meet current zoological standards. These efforts will create a safe and enriched environment for caribou while repurposing an underutilized space at the zoo.

The educational exhibit will highlight the historical and ecological significance of this species in Minnesota. Caribou once played a vital role in the region's ecosystem and were central to the culture of Indigenous peoples, particularly the Ojibwe in northern Minnesota. This exhibit provides an opportunity to raise awareness of the species' current conservation challenges. Beyond education, the project includes research initiatives focused on understanding why caribou disappeared from Minnesota and evaluating the potential for breeding and reintroduction programs in the state. These efforts underscore the project's commitment to both cultural storytelling and wildlife conservation.

To enhance visitor engagement, the exhibit will feature dynamic interpretive signage and interactive elements strategically placed throughout the habitat. These educational tools will provide insights into the caribou's natural history, ecological role, and cultural importance, ensuring an immersive and inclusive learning experience for all visitors. By combining static displays with interactive features, the exhibit will cater to diverse learning styles, fostering empathy for caribou and inspiring a deeper connection to Minnesota's natural heritage. This innovative approach aligns with the zoo's mission to promote environmental education and conservation, making the caribou exhibit a powerful platform for raising awareness and encouraging stewardship of the state's wildlife and ecosystems.

An exciting feature of the exhibit will be a guest overlook designed as a rustic-style cabin. This immersive viewing area will allow visitors to observe the caribou in a setting that reflects the animals' natural environment. The cabin will provide a unique perspective, encouraging guests to spend more time engaging with the exhibit while learning about species' role in Minnesota's history and ecosystem. The design of the overlook will include interpretive displays and seating areas, offering both a relaxing and educational experience. By creating this intimate connection with the animals, the cabin will enhance visitors' appreciation for caribou and inspire deeper empathy and understanding for wildlife conservation.

FUNDING & EXPENSE OVERVIEW

Project Duration: July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025

FTEs: None

Expense Categories: Contracted services, exhibit supplies, software licensing (for digital signage), advertising

Direct Expenses: $144,000.00

Administrative Expense: 3% to MN Department of Grant Administration ($4,320.00)

MEASURABLE OUTCOMES & EVALUATION

This project reached full completion in FY25, culminating in the successful introduction of caribou into their revitalized habitat at the Lake Superior Zoo. Over the past year, significant progress was made to ensure the exhibit not only met animal welfare standards but also provided a compelling and educational visitor experience. Extensive research was conducted on caribou behavior, ecology, and cultural significance in order to develop accurate and engaging interpretive signage for guests of all ages. This research served as the foundation for a suite of interpretive elements designed to highlight the historical importance of caribou in Minnesota and underscore ongoing conservation initiatives.

Construction efforts in FY25 focused on the completion of the new cabin overlook structure, which now serves as a central viewing area for guests. This cabin was designed to offer an immersive experience with large viewing windows, educational panels, and comfortable space for visitors to observe the caribou in their new environment. The interpretive signage installed throughout the overlook provides context on the animals' ecological role, traditional Indigenous knowledge, and current conservation challenges. Early feedback indicates that the cabin has become a popular stop for guests, creating a meaningful connection between visitors and the exhibit.

In addition to interpretive development and construction, staff conducted pre-opening data collection to establish baseline visitor engagement metrics. These efforts included tracking the amount of time visitors spent at the exhibit site prior to the arrival of the caribou and collecting preliminary qualitative survey responses focused on visitors' knowledge and awareness of caribou. This information will be used to compare against post-opening metrics in order to assess the impact of the completed exhibit. Post-opening data collection efforts are currently underway and will focus on evaluating visitor time spent at the habitat, engagement with interpretive materials, and learning outcomes related to caribou conservation and cultural history.

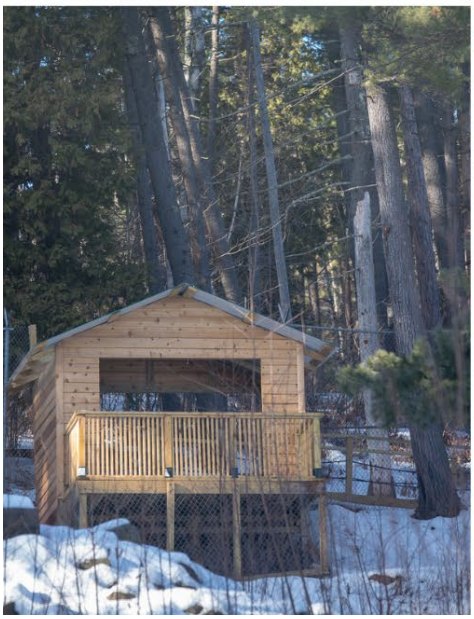
The revitalization of the exhibit space and the reintroduction of caribou to the Lake Superior Zoo have exceeded our projected quantitative and qualitative benchmarks. While our initial goal was for 25% of visitors to report new information, post-project surveys reveal that 100% of respondents became more knowledgeable about caribou. The initiative successfully met our engagement targets; Lake Superior Zoo aimed to increase dwell time, 80% of attendees reported spending more time at the zoo than they did prior to the habitat's completion. The project also succeeded in fostering empathy and conservation awareness, with 70% of respondents stating they felt more connected to the caribou and interested in the environmental factors affecting the species. These metrics demonstrate that the new exhibit has not only enhanced the visitor experience but has also served as a powerful tool for education and connection

Overall, the completed Caribou Yards project has significantly enhanced the zoo's educational offerings and has provided a dynamic, engaging space for visitors to learn about an important native species. The successful combination of research-based interpretive planning, thoughtful design, and rigorous data collection has positioned this exhibit to make a lasting impact on public awareness and appreciation of caribou and their role in Minnesota's natural heritage.

ACHIEVED PROPOSED OUTCOMES!

ARCTIC SURVIVAL
ANTLERS FOR ALL

CARIBOU & PEOPLE
Partners in Survival
CARIBOU IN MINNESOTA?
Why Caribou are Disappearing



LAKE SUPERIOR ZOO

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