

Crafting for conservation

Henry Vilas Zoo volunteers repurpose wildlife snares

BY CATHERINE CAPELLARO AUGUST 10, 2017



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Catching Hope saola dreamcatchers.

The keychains and dreamcatchers on the back wall of the Henry Vilas Zoo gift shop aren't flashy. But through a creative partnership called the Catching Hope Re-Purposed Poaching Snare Program, these small items are both improving the lives of humans and saving animals' lives — including the [saola](#), a creature so rare that no biologist has seen one in the wild.

The crafts feature a small replica of the saola, a large, long-horned creature that's related to antelope and buffalo and only discovered in 1992.

The saola crafts are quite literally made from death traps, illegal wire snares used by poachers to capture and kill wildlife in Vietnam and Laos. The money from sales is used to train and employ residents in and around the Annamite Mountains — the saola habitat — to disable and collect snares.

The idea for the project originated after wildlife biologist Bill Robichaud, considered the world's leading expert on saola conservation, read a 2013 *Isthmus* [article](#) about the zoo's new director, Ronda Schwetz.



Catching Hope crafts include textiles made by Hmong village women, and keychains from repurposed poaching snares (left).

“Bill saw that and contacted us and said ‘Hey, we have this cool species that no one’s ever heard of,’” says Erin Flynn, the zoo’s conservation education curator and coordinator of Catching Hope. “So he presented to the staff and did a slideshow of all the animals living in the Annamite Mountains and the threats that they face with poaching.”

Robichaud told her that conservation teams in Laos had collected around 80,000 deadly snares, usually made from bike cable. “He said, ‘It seems like such a shame that we can’t do something with them.’”

Robichaud also spoke to the Animal Ambassadors, the zoo’s volunteer group, and left them with a pile of snares. “It took us many, many, many tries just to find equipment that would cut through the snares, because [the material] destroys more tools than you would think possible,” says Flynn. “It was a group effort to find what we could make from them, and it took a combination of hardware and crafting.” One of the first products they created was a misstep; it turns out most people aren’t keen on wearing a necklace made from a poaching snare.

By 2014, the volunteers had refined designs, and between 2014 and 2016 volunteers from scouting groups, schools and church groups have made and sold more than 2,000 ornaments, keychains and dreamcatchers.

Catching Hope has donated more than \$7,000 to Saola Working Group, which Robichaud chairs. In a separate but related project, Catching Hope expanded in 2016 to commission 400 handcrafted fabric pieces featuring an outline of a saola from Hmong women living in rural Laos, after Robichaud helped the zoo connect with a local textile cooperative, [Cama Crafts](#).

Flynn notes that the crafts also expand the education effort to preserve the biodiversity of the saola habitat. “It’s this really nice, harmonious, feeling-good, giving-back thing,” says Flynn. “These are poaching snares, and we’re making art. It’s been quite the journey.”

The crafts are available at the gift shop, or by placing special orders at hvzcatchinghope@gmail.com. A table will be set up at the zoo’s International Red Panda Day celebration on Aug. 26 from 12:30–3 pm.