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**“Recovering
the wild”**

continued from page 15

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Ron Kagan,
director of the Detroit Zoo



Parrott believed that if the zoo could emphasize animal welfare above any other priority, it would reenergize the public’s interest—and create a powerful place to meditate on the plight of animals in the wild.

Today, by making its enclosures larger and more relaxing for the animals, this means patrons are often watching the animals from further away.

“You get your educators out there to help tell the public why you’re doing it,” Parrott says. “The people are seeing the animals in a non-stressed state. They’re seeing them do natural behavior. They know what they’re seeing.”

Parrott isn’t the only head of an American zoo viewed as a trailblazer. Ron Kagan, director of the Detroit Zoo, has also been lauded for bringing a careful, empathy-driven approach to the treatment of animals. In 2016, the Detroit Zoo moved its 75 penguins into a 33,000-square-foot, 326,000-gallon state-of-the-art facility, complete with Arctic winds and icy waterfalls. No other penguins in captivity enjoy an environment like it.

Kagan also insisted that his zoo, in a city where the winters are long and frigid, not house wildlife used to a warmer climate. The penguins, along with polar bears and arctic foxes, are now some of the top attractions. The zoo does not have animals that belong in extremely hot, subtropical environments, such as orangutans. Finally, the Detroit Zoo works to make sure it’s not keeping instinctually social animals isolated, or solitary species in crowded conditions, which causes stress.

“Beyond the science, you have to use common sense and you have to use compassion,” Kagan says. “If you take on the responsibility of having something in captivity, you have to ensure that it will not only survive, but that it will thrive. It’s about quality over quantity.”

Leaders at the Sacramento Zoo are hoping a relocation and reinvention will allow them to follow at least some of the principles put in place in Detroit and Oakland. They want the room to recreate an African savannah larger than the entire current zoo with