

Spotlight on Eli Greer

Champion of Black-Footed Ferrets

By Helen Tarbert

Three years ago, then-eight-year-old Eli Greer of Silver Spring, Maryland, watched a *National Geographic* telecast on black-footed ferrets. Coincidentally, his mother, Annie Storr, a volunteer at Washington's National Zoo, asked if he wanted to attend a program by Dr. Jo Gayle Howard. Dr. Howard is a reproduction biologist whose artificial insemination techniques have resulted in increased birthrates in captive-bred ferrets. Eli attended the lecture and, despite the fact that the presentation dealt on a technical level with topics such as in-vitro fertilization and artificial insemination, comprehended sufficiently to raise such questions as which technique was best for the male and for the female. At the conclusion of the program, he introduced himself to Dr. Howard, announcing his intention to donate some of his money to black-footed ferret recovery. The biologist's response was that, if someone gives money, he should know what is being done with it. She suggested that they have a longer conversation.

That conversation developed into an insider's tour of the National Zoo's veterinary hospital. An even greater privilege was the tour of the Zoo's Conservation and Research Center in Front Royal, Virginia, site of Dr. Howard's artificial insemination research. Eli saw videos of pregnancy monitoring when researchers were anticipating the birth of the facility's 100th kit. He was selected as the first child to actively participate in the annual volunteer pregnancy watch; unfortunately, the program had to be canceled due to unforeseen circumstances. Still, Eli was afforded a rare experience: he saw a mother ferret and her entire family of kits in an out-

side compound...a thrill many of us have sought for years in vain.

Now firmly dedicated to black-footed ferrets and the CRC, Eli learned in April 2001 of the Smithsonian's threat to close the Front Royal Center. He took his three-page letter to Washington, leaving copies for the two Maryland senators as well as Chief Justice Renquist, Ex Officio member of the Smithsonian's Board of Regents. Dan Scandling, Chief of Staff for Representative Frank Wolf (whose Virginia district includes CRC), spoke with Eli and commended him for being one of the few letter writers who had actually seen the facility.

Another highlight of Eli's visit—which included a ride on the Senate train—was a chance meeting with Wyoming Senator Michael Enzi, who questioned him regarding his mission to Congress. The legislator was apparently impressed by young Eli's response: when the verdict was handed down, Senator Enzi tracked down Eli and sent him his personal copy of the article announcing the decision not to close CRC.

This past October, Eli and his mother were volunteers at CRC's Autumn Conservation Festival. Eli took his duties very seriously, remaining at his post throughout the day, providing accurate information and knowledgeable answers to visitors' queries about Azu, the black-footed ferret on display.

To date, Eli has donated more than \$300—money accumulated from his allowance and payment for chores—to black-footed ferret research. When asked whether he would like a pet ferret, Eli answered in the affirmative. His current pets are two cats, trained

to come to him when he holds up his hand like a traffic cop. The boy's hobbies include swimming and wrestling. And the future? Eli's ambition is to become a research veterinarian. Of one thing we can be certain: Should CRC be threatened again, Eli Greer will go into action.

You, too, may want to be prepared to go into action. Despite the fact that two panels recently issued favorable reports on CRC, its long-term future has yet to be secured. At the Festival, when the question of longevity was posed to several professional staff members, the most positive response I received was, "It's a nice day out"—not a response to reassure.



Above: The domestic ferret is a distant cousin to the free-roaming black-footed ferret.

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