

# Meineke Man Bonds with Endangered Wildlife

Marblehead Conservationist Transports a Tapir from Costa Rica to Florida

**Susan Jacobs**

*Jewish Journal Staff*

As owner of Meineke Car Care Center in Salem, Paul Sudenfield is accustomed to dealing with humans. Yet every few months he journeys to a remote jungle region of Costa Rica where he communes with endangered animals at a rustic, family-run wildlife reserve.

La Marina Wildlife Rescue Center is located in the province of Alajuela, about two hours north of the capital city, San Jose. More than 400 exotic mammals, birds and reptiles, including toucans, raptors, emus, crocodiles, caiman, turtles, monkeys, ocelots, jaguars and lions, roam the zoo's 27 acres.

The 57-year-old is passionate about the center, and voluntarily devotes a lot of time and energy to promoting it. He recently went down there to help transport a 450-pound tapir named Romeo to the United States.

Tapirs — which look like a cross between a horse and a rhinoceros — are native to Central America and are often referred to as

“jungle cows.” There are only 35 of the endangered mammals in North America. The Nashville Zoo was anxious to secure a pair for breeding purposes.

Due to government bureaucracy, it took more than two years for the historic event to take place. Romeo is the first animal to ever legally leave Costa Rica, and he is the first tapir to be brought into the United States in two decades.



*Courtesy photos*

**Romeo, a 450-pound tapir born in captivity at La Marina Rescue Center, has been relocated from Costa Rica to the United States. Below, La Marina owner Juan José Rojas Alfaro is pictured with his wife and daughter.**



La Marina, which had five tapirs, was happy to ship three-year-old Romeo to Tennessee. A specially-constructed cage was built, and last week Romeo arrived in Miami on a cargo plane with Sudenfield and several representatives from the Nashville Zoo. Although Sudenfield said he was processed immediately, it took five hours for the animal to clear customs at the airport.

“Romeo is currently practicing his Yiddish accent on a huge ranch on Florida’s West Coast. In May, when it gets a little warmer, he will be transported to the Nashville Zoo. His future girlfriend, Houston, is in Panama right now. She will also be arriving in Nashville in May,” Sudenfield said.

Although Sudenfield’s wife, Debby, and son, Adam, have visited Costa Rica, they generally stay home in Marblehead while he pursues his animal adventures.

Over the years, Sudenfield has formed a bond with Juan José Rojas Alfaro, the dairy farmer who owns and operates the wildlife center with a small staff of zookeepers, a part-time veterinarian, and a handful of volunteers.

“The zoo has been in Juan José’s family for more than five decades, but it was getting pretty run down. I did some marketing to help drum up interest in the place,” Sudenfield said. He created a website, printed up some brochures, and spoke with tour operators to attract interest in the center.

His tireless efforts proved fruitful. Tourists began making the trek to La Marina, and donations began to filter in. Over the past five years, he admits that the place “has improved dramatically. It’s been cleaned up, has new exhibits, new bathrooms, and a new entrance. Last year, the organization received a \$15,000 donation from Ford Motor Company/Jaguar to build enclosures for their jaguars,” Sudenfield noted.

Although the Costa Rican government is a big proponent of eco-tourism, it does not financially support the fledging center. The zoo receives its animals from the MINAE (Ministerio de Ambiente y Energía), a branch of government that oversees the management of Costa Rican wildlife. Each year, MINAE brings approximately 150 injured, abused or orphaned animals to the center for care. Whenever possible, the center tries to rehabilitate the animals and re-release them into protected wildlife sanctuaries.

As one of Costa Rica’s many educational centers, La Marina welcomes local and foreign visitors, promotes conservation, and encourages awareness and protection of native plants and animals.

Sudenfield is just happy to help. “I have always loved animals,” said Sudenfield who, along with his family, cares for a cat and an iguana in Marblehead. I’m not religious, but my wife tells me that what I do is in the Bible. I’m just trying to do something positive.”

*For further information, to make a donation, or to learn about volunteer opportunities, visit [www.zoocostarica.com](http://www.zoocostarica.com) or email [mufflerpaul@yahoo.com](mailto:mufflerpaul@yahoo.com).*