
Greenspace for Primates

By Gary H. Lee & Jon Charles Coe

'Landscape immersion' is a term that was coined to describe exhibits in which visitors share the same landscape (but not the same areas) with the animals. In other words, instead of standing in a familiar city park (known as a zoological garden) and viewing zebra in an African setting, both the zoo visitors and the zebra are in a landscape carefully designed to feel like the African savanna.

A little while ago few people in the zoo field believed it was possible to exhibit gorillas in a naturally landscaped setting. For both outdoor and indoor areas, most gorillas were placed within sterile cave like enclosures with a concrete floor. The prevailing theory held that the gorillas would demolish any living plant, and that the bare floor approach was much easier to clean. Against most expectations, after 11 years, the Seattle gorilla exhibit is still lushly landscaped and is regarded as the best example of landscape immersion for primate habitats.

What is most impressive about this simulated habitat approach is its effect on both animal's and people's behaviour. Recent research on these exhibits indicates that the primates interact with their new landscape habitat much as they would in the wild. They climb trees and hillsides to favourite perches to get a better view, they browse among certain favourite plants (which are regularly replaced), and move to various spots of sun and shade for napping, browsing, or group interactions such as grooming. All of these normal behaviours are reducing the stress usually associated with primates kept in small concrete enclosures, which contributes to eventual breeding success. People behave noticeably more quiet and attentive when immersed in the animal's habitat -another positive feature of this concept.

The continuing success of the Seattle primate exhibit and ones like it have had a dramatic impact on recent design efforts at many zoos. Zoos in North Carolina, San Francisco, New Orleans, and Philadelphia have recently opened new 'simulated habitat' type primate exhibits. Still other zoos in Milwaukee, Dallas, Detroit, Oklahoma City, and Atlanta are currently in the planning stages of developing new great ape habitats. Among these. Denver will be one of the first to develop exterior primate habitat landscapes in a high altitude and cold winter weather setting.

This trend is long overdue. There are roughly only 300 gorillas in captivity in zoos and research centres world wide, with wild population estimates as low as 2,000. These are extremely distressing figures, pointing to a probable extinction of these species should the current rate of man's Tropical Forest destruction continue unabated. While other great apes such as chimpanzees and orangutans are somewhat more numerous, they are also threatened by the same destruction of their natural habitats. The Denver Zoological Foundation-, Director Freiheit and zoo staff are deeply committed to Species Survival Plan's approach. This will be reflected in how we are designing the new primate exhibits and how the visitor will see different individuals and groups of primates from visit to visit. We are developing a flexible plan for both the outdoor habitats and indoor holding areas that can adapt easily to the different great ape species. Ideally, this new complex will allow the establishment of several active breeding groups of gorillas and/or orangutans and chimpanzees, along with a number of smaller primates such as gibbons, mandrills, and guenon monkeys. This new exhibit complex will immediately be a major facility in the management of SSP primates.

It is quite early in our planning process, and funding for the project is not yet secured, but here are a few peeks at some of the innovations we are planning at the new Primates Exhibit complex.

Indoor/Outdoor Choice: During the cold winters here in Denver we are going to give the gorillas a choice, of going outside during sunny days or 20 going inside during blizzards. We will provide a number of covered areas that will have overhead heating and protection from rain and wind. We have observed gorillas routinely choosing and coming outside during sunny cold days to bask in the sun for a while before heading indoors.

Day Rooms: We are also developing a series of large indoor heated areas called 'dayrooms' that the primates will use during cool and wet weather . These areas will be skylighted, tall, and full of ropes, nests, logs, and other features for the primates to actively use. The visitor will get a close-up look (through glass) of these dayrooms which will be open year-round.

Viewing Blinds: The primates will be viewed through a series of viewing blinds, from which the animals can be seen in their natural landscape habitat. As in the Northern Shores Polar Bear Exhibit, one will be able to get nose to nose with the apes in some areas, while other views will be more distant.

The Denver Zoological Foundation has put this primate exhibit complex at the top of their priority list. Our current schedule is to complete conceptual plans and estimates by early 1988.

Gary H. Lee and Jon Charles Coe are the founding partners of Coe Lee Robinson Roesch, Architects and Landscape Architects of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In addition to the Denver Primate Complex, they are currently developing primate exhibits at Zoo Atlanta, the Detroit Zoo, and the. New York Zoological Park.

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