Transforming Gorilla World

Inspiring Visitors and Improving Gorilla Well-being at the Cincinnati Zoo
Project Description

The Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden (CZBG) is undertaking a major $12 million capital project to transform our most popular exhibit, Gorilla World. Plans call for creating a new indoor habitat to allow for year-round visitor viewing of and engagement with CZBG’s western lowland gorillas, and reconfiguring and modernizing the off-exhibit holding facilities to create optimal care and management conditions for our two family groups of gorillas, now including a population of eleven with the August 25, 2015 birth of the 50th gorilla to be born at our Zoo. The following project description provides a rationale for the project, clarifies our goals for the project in light of our long experience with this magnificent and highly endangered species, and presents details of the major components of the project.
When Gorilla World opened in 1978, visitors to the Cincinnati Zoo were treated to a spectacular, state-of-the-art outdoor exhibit where the Zoo’s (then and now) most popular animals – and a species with which the Zoo already had a history of unprecedented breeding success – could be seen in a spacious, naturalistic environment interacting in family groups and able to exercise their natural wild behaviors.

Over the years, while the exhibit has been well maintained, two major factors have created the need for its expansion and revitalization: the Zoo’s priority for and leadership in visitor engagement, and the Zoo’s involvement in international gorilla conservation and consequent concern for gorilla well-being at our zoo and everywhere. Annual attendance at our Zoo has grown to
Why the Project is Needed

more than 1.5 million visitors a year, and our statistics show that more people want to see gorillas than any other animal at the Zoo. At present, the gorillas can be seen for 7 or at most 8 months of the year because the exhibit is outdoors. Building an expansive indoor habitat in addition to the outdoor exhibit will allow much-desired winter viewing for our visitors and also dramatically improve gorilla well-being by providing multiple gorilla family groups with access to naturalistic settings, natural daylight, and large interactive spaces, promoting healthy interaction among family members – in short, improving visitor family experience and gorilla family life!

The second major component of the proposed project will involve just as dramatic a change as the exhibit, and that is the construction of enhanced off-exhibit holding and living conditions for the Zoo’s gorillas. The current holding, although state-of-the art in 1978, has become antiquated and is not in keeping with modern gorilla management. It features a linear arrangement of holding rooms that makes it difficult to shift the gorillas efficiently to other parts of the exhibit, to clean and maintain each of the holding rooms, and most important, to create natural and healthy interactions and introductions between the family groups and family members. New and more progressive holding facilities with rooms arranged in a “roundabout” fashion are needed – that is, the rooms need to be in a flexible by-pass configuration with cage groupings that have no dead ends or straight lines so that the animals have easy options to move past one another without having to press through the same cage. This will allow the gorillas to be shifted in many different directions, giving keepers flexibility and gorillas, spatial variety and healthy interactions.

Visitor engagement is one of two major factors that have created need for Gorilla World expansion and revitalization. Annual attendance at our Zoo has grown to more than 1.5 million visitors a year, and our statistics show that more people want to see gorillas than any other animal at the Zoo. At present, the gorillas can be seen for 7 or at most 8 months of the year because the exhibit is outdoors.
A three-month process of 24/7 human surrogacy and “gorillification” by 10 Keepers and volunteers and gradual introductions to four potential gorilla “moms” ended happily in baby Gladys’s full adoption by M’Linzi and her entire gorilla troop.

Goals for the Project

Enhance the Wellbeing of Our Gorillas at CZBG
Strengthen Visitor Engagement
Inspire Support for CZBG’s Gorilla Conservation Efforts
The CZBG has a rich and successful history with western lowland gorillas going all the way back to the arrival of Susie, the first gorilla at our zoo, in 1931. The Cincinnati Zoo early on became a leader in captive gorilla propagation, and over the years has made significant contributions to gorilla populations in zoos across the country. These contributions began with the births of Sam and Samantha, the first two gorillas born here a week apart in 1970 to our classic “founder” gorilla couples, King Tut and Penelope, and Hatari and Mahari. Our Zoo has worked cooperatively with other zoos to provide them with gorillas born at CZBG to enhance the social balance of their groups, and we have also accepted challenging individual gorillas to help socialize them here. A recent accomplishment was CZBG’s successful human-to-gorilla surrogacy in 2013, to our knowledge the first of its kind in a zoo anywhere. When a first-time gorilla mother in the Gladys Porter Zoo in Texas rejected her newborn, the gorilla infant was pulled and hand-raised for a month, and our zoo was chosen as the best possibility for introducing her to a surrogate gorilla mother. A three-month process of 24/7 human surrogacy and “gorillification” by 10 Keepers and volunteers and gradual introductions to four potential gorilla “moms” ended happily in baby Gladys’s full adoption by M’Linzi and her entire gorilla troop. Last year, the team repeated the gorillification process with another abandoned baby, Kamina, who found her “forever mom” at the Columbus Zoo.

CZBG has also made important contributions to the understanding of how to manage western lowland gorillas in captivity. Examples are numerous, from the groundbreaking surrogacy successes just described, to operant conditioning that has enabled anesthesia-free routine veterinary care and pioneering ultrasound work in partnership with a local hospital.

Lastly, CZBG has a strong conservation connection to gorillas. For over 20 years, we have been part of the Mbeli Bai Study, the world’s longest-running research study of wild western lowland gorillas. Within this study area, called Mondika, with an estimated gorilla population of about 300, we have supported a tracking project that has habituated several family groups for up-close daily observation, providing ecotourism revenue-generating opportunities for local people, and Club Ebobo, an education and community outreach program. This conservation connection is made stronger here at the Zoo by our public’s engagement in conservation through cell phone recycling. Cell phones contain a mineral called coltan, which is mined in key gorilla habitats, resulting in deforestation and destruction of these areas. But, along with other materials in cell phones, coltan can be recycled, diminishing the demand for new sources. With over 75,000 cell phones recycled to date, our “Go Bananas Challenge” is the best in the nation, and we have been national leaders in this effort.

All together, the gorilla is a signature species for our Zoo, and the proposed expansion and transformation are necessary upgrades to strengthen our work in each of the key cornerstones of our program: Gorilla Wellbeing, Visitor Engagement, and Conservation efforts to save the species. These cornerstones translate into our three goals for the proposed project:
ENHANCE THE WELLBEING OF OUR GORILLAS AT CZBG

Creation of the proposed new indoor habitat will provide our two gorilla family groups with large, engaging and naturalistic spaces to encourage healthy behavior and interaction. Currently, our gorillas have such opportunities only during the months when it is warm enough for them to be in the outdoor exhibit. Gorillas are highly intelligent and social animals that naturally live in harem or bachelor groups in the wild. While they need the psychological support they get from living in tight groupings, they also need space to remain as a cohesive unit.

For the same reasons that they require large and engaging exhibit spaces, gorillas need dynamic, roomy holding areas. These will be provided through construction of cutting-edge off-exhibit holding facilities. Well-designed chute systems between various areas are critical for reliable and safe transferring of groups. Multiple routes allow subordinate animals more freedom of movement. Roundabout holding configurations allow gorillas to be near each other or easily move past or away from one another to avoid conflict and more easily access food.

Critical husbandry, behavior management and health assessment activities occur throughout gorilla areas, especially in holding, since they afford up-close and safe interaction opportunities for the staff, including activities such as: Operant conditioning training for voluntary body presentations, awake cardiac and fetal ultrasounds, hand injections, weights, and more; Systematic gradual introductions of new group members arriving from a different zoo or in-house group transfers; Orphaned gorilla hand-rearing and surrogate introductions; Medical procedures, either routine immobilizations for full physicals or emergencies.

STRENGTHEN VISITOR ENGAGEMENT

With the central strategic objective to “Inspire Every Visitor with Wildlife Every Day,” strengthening visitor engagement is a goal of every project we undertake at CZBG. At this already most popular exhibit for our Zoo, the opportunity for year-round viewing and engagement with gorillas and their keepers will be an enormous hit with our visitors. In addition to the up-close viewing afforded through glass walls, we expect to be able to offer special behind-the-scenes VIP experiences like watching a gorilla training session, and late evening openings for PNC Festival of Lights or other special events.

INSPIRE SUPPORT FOR CZBG’S GORILLA CONSERVATION EFFORTS

We expect the expanded, revitalized Gorilla World to provide a canvas for great interpretation of CZBG’s long-established gorilla work in the Republic of Congo, eliciting new investors and activism in gorilla conservation. As previously described, our work with the Nouabale Ndogki Project in the Congo includes the Mbeli Bai Study, the longest running research with wild western lowland gorillas; the Mondika site for up-close research on habituated gorilla families, including inspirational gorilla trekking opportunities for tourists that generate revenue for research; and Club Ebobo, doing conservation education outreach to local communities. Finally, we expect the exhibit to further inspire conservation action steps through initiatives like CZBG’s Saving Species cell phone recycling program.
Project Component Plans & Details

Indoor Gorilla Habitat
Off-Exhibit Holding
Observation Platform
Colobus Exhibit Improvements
The project will have three major components: 1) A spacious new indoor gorilla habitat to allow visitors year-round viewing; 2) New state-of-the-art, off-exhibit holding facilities; and 3) An observation platform for our visitors and for use by the Zoo’s Group Sales department as an event venue (see design renderings on the next pages). Also to be improved will be the colobus monkey exhibit at the current Gorilla World exit point. As with all projects undertaken by “the greenest zoo in America,” the transformation of Gorilla World will reflect the Zoo’s commitment to natural resource conservation and sustainability throughout all phases of design, construction and operation. We expect to set the standard for all new gorilla exhibits to be built in the future.

**INDOOR GORILLA HABITAT**

The renovation of our current attraction will maintain our world-class immersion exhibit while at the same time provide a new and innovative 4,350-square-foot indoor exhibit with 50 linear feet of viewing glass to further enhance the experience between guest and gorilla (see conceptual view drawing, indoor gorilla exhibit section, and site plan, attached). The indoor habitat will feature an expansive skylight to promote sunlight and ventilation, keeper access points for enrichment and engagement; and a small stream flowing through the center. Understanding and conveying gorilla behavior to our guests will also be a key feature through the use of a demonstration area that will allow guests to see up-close interactions between gorillas and their highly trained keepers. An additional 18-linear-foot glass wall will be constructed for views into the outdoor exhibit space, allowing visitors to get closer to the gorillas than they now can. Our Zoo has always been on the forefront of educating the public about this fascinating species; that will most certainly be the case in the newly renovated exhibit. Note: The indoor exhibit/habitat is for gorillas only – visitors remain outdoors.

**OFF-EXHIBIT HOLDING**

Although behind the scenes and out of public view, the holding rooms and transfer areas for the gorillas will be as critical to the project as the new exhibit space itself. A new roundabout and bypass system will be created, allowing better social management of gorillas, more interaction and opportunities to engage gorillas with other members of their family (or other families), and easier maintenance and cleaning of the bedrooms (see attached plan view of the holding areas). The roundabout configuration also allows a major gorilla facility like ours to accommodate much-needed participation in bachelor group management, ultimately enhancing our collection and ensuring our long-term ability to maintain multiple groups so that our guests are adequately engaged with gorillas on exhibit. Finally, the new configuration will aid us in maternity efforts; maintaining the gorilla population through breeding and conservation efforts.

**OBSERVATION PLATFORM**

A new, raised and covered 620-square-foot platform will be built in the tree canopy with views into both the outdoor gorilla yard and the renovated colobus monkey exhibit. In addition to enhancing general visitor observation, the platform will be useful for school groups, education programs, and special events. We will use the same footprint and construction materials for the observation platform as our current giraffe feeding deck (see photo, attached).

**COLOBUS EXHIBIT IMPROVEMENTS**

The new design calls for a substantially larger exhibit, providing more and better space for our colobus monkeys to be viewed and/or multiple family groups to be displayed. At present, the exhibit is 750 sq ft, and as proposed, will be expanded to 1,175 sq ft, incorporating a waterfall and two naturalistic climbing trees.

If you have questions, need additional information, or would like to schedule a tour of the Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Garden, please contact Zoo Director Thane Maynard at 513-487-3318 or thane.maynard@cincinnatizoo.org, or Director of Development Reba George Dysart at 513-487-3442 or reba.dysart@cincinnatizoo.org.
VIEW FROM
NEW INTERIOR EXHIBIT

Gorilla Forest
Two views of the Giraffe Feeding Deck, using same footprint as proposed Gorilla World Observation Deck