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New World is About to Open for Orangutans at Great Ape Trust of Iowa

Des Moines, Iowa – May 30, 2007 – By summer's end, the three orangutans at Great Ape Trust of Iowa will be able to explore their back yard.

When completed, the more than 3-acre outdoor yard will be the next step in creating a 10-acre orangutan complex at the Trust. Development of the orangutan yard, The Trust's first build-out on its southeast Des Moines campus since 2005, is important for several reasons, said Dr. Rob Shumaker, Great Ape Trust's director of orangutan research.

First, it will greatly increase the amount of outdoor space for its resident orangutans – Azy, an adult male; Knobi, an adult female; and Allie, an adolescent female – which goes to the heart of the world-class scientific research center's mission, which includes providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes. The Trust also is dedicated to studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing the conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes.

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The wooded site also will allow the orangutans, whose name is derived from the Malay words “orang hutan,” which literally means “person of the forest,” to travel in a complex and interesting patch of forest.

Found only in the wild on the Southeast Asian islands of Sumatra and Borneo, they are the most arboreal of the great apes and spend most of their time in trees, especially in Sumatra, where tigers roam the forest floor. They are brachiators, which means they can swing hand over hand from branch to branch, and access to a forest will increase the options they already have to “move their bodies the way their bodies were designed to be moved,” Shumaker said.

Allowing the orangutans freedom of movement and choice in their location is a great ape welfare issue Shumaker and his colleagues don’t take lightly. “For captive apes, this is big,” he said. “It’s a significant amount of space and offers important levels of choice for these individuals. It will allow them to have much more control over day to day decisions about where they want to go, and how they want to space themselves socially.”

The nearly three-story, 30-foot-by-50-foot indoor building where Azy, Knobi and Allie live already has a large outdoor space. The existing indoor and outdoor areas are spacious and more than adequately accommodate the orangutans’ arboreal tendencies and unique style of locomotion. Still, there are limitations in the building’s traditional design.

“We love our current building and it functions wonderfully,” he said, “but I knew we would eventually expand the amount of space that we provide for our orangutans.”

Shumaker and his colleagues are eager to see how the apes respond to the opportunity to venture into the forest – especially since each of these orangutans was born in captivity. Twelve-year-old Allie lived at the Denver Zoo before moving to Des Moines in 2005. Knobi, 27, was born at the Henry Doorly Zoo in Omaha and came to The Trust in 2005. Azy, 29, lived at the Smithsonian Institution National Zoological Park until 2004, when he became The Trust’s first ape resident.

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“It’s hard to predict exactly how each of them will react to this new area,” Shumaker said, “but I could also see where initially they might be hesitant.”

If Shumaker had to guess, though, “Knobi’s not going to be shy about this.”

“She is very confident and wants to know what’s going on,” Shumaker said. “I could imagine her being very bold about it, and I could also imagine Azy not being so bold.”

Because the patch of dense forest will have similarities to the orangutans’ habitat in the wild, Shumaker and his colleagues Dr. Karyl Swartz and Dr. Serge Wich, “can design some meaningful ways to expand how we are approaching certain research topics,” he said. “For example, it could help us to understand more about social spacing, foraging patterns, memory, and even nest building in trees.”

Development of the orangutan yard is the first phase of a multi-pronged project that could increase the number of orangutans living at Great Ape Trust, where scientists are exploring the abilities of orangutans to use a symbol-based language on a large computer monitor to express their thoughts, the comparative study of memory, problem solving, tool use, social perception and self-recognition.

Long-range plans are to construct three more orangutan homes and elevated viewing platforms on a 10-acre section of land on The Trust’s 230-acre campus. Given that adult male orangutans are highly competitive with one another, the planned facilities will provide large buffer zones between males, and space for females to travel with males, or to spend time alone.

Brian Eldridge, The Trust’s buildings and grounds superintendent, expects the project to be completed by mid-August

GREAT APE TRUST BACKGROUND

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Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in southeast Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, Great Ape Trust will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities.

Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes. Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization and is certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA).

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Insights Through Collaborations with Apes