

LOCAL ATTRACTION



From Spectacle to Sanctuary

As the Oakland Zoo turns 100, we celebrate its past, present, and future.

BY LEEANNE JONES

Growing up in early 1980s San Leandro, my oldest memory of the Oakland Zoo is watching a gibbon swing effortlessly around a cylindrical metal enclosure. It would pause, seemingly observing me, then swing away. I was mesmerized.

Not unlike the sway of a gibbon, the history of the East Bay's beloved institution feels a lot like an arc. Over the years, the zoo has shifted much of its focus from entertaining people to conservation and caring for animals. As the Oakland Zoo turns 100 this month, *Diablo* looks back at its evolution and ahead to its future.

PAST: Growing Pains

Henry A. Snow, a naturalist and big-game hunter, established a museum and zoo in downtown Oakland to exhibit his extensive collection. Visitors marveled at the exotic creatures he retrieved from around the world—most stuffed and mounted but some very much alive, including monkeys, snakes, lions, badgers, and bears.

In 1926, after nuisance complaints, the live animals were moved to caged enclosures in Sequoia Mountain Park (now part of Joaquin Miller Park) and then in 1939

to Durant Park (now Knowland Park), where the zoo is today. Under the leadership of Snow's son Sidney, the zoo began earnestly developing its 37 acres in the late 1950s, adding permanent habitats and increasing attendance. Some of the zoo's residents even became local celebrities, such as Rosebud the dancing chimpanzee and the harmonica-playing elephant Miss Effie.

The zoo kept growing through the 1960s—adding the gibbon tower as well as a “baby zoo,” where toddlers rode on the backs of tortoises—but by the 1980s, it was low on funds and falling behind the times. In 1983, the Humane Society of the United States named the Oakland Zoo among the country's 10 most substandard zoos.

Things turned around when Dr. Joel J. Parrott became executive director in 1985. The conservation-minded veterinarian remained at the helm for 36 years, securing financial support, emphasizing wildlife education, and seeing nearly every inch of the zoo renovated and revitalized, beginning with the addition of the nationally recognized one-acre Mahali Pa Tembo



From left: White-handed gibbon Rainer enjoys life in the trees; an Oakland Zoo staff member feeds a lion cub; a 60-foot gibbon tower once stood at the zoo's entrance; participants at Knowland Park's dedication in 1950.



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elephant habitat. By 1988, the institution received accreditation from the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, and it kept getting better.

PRESENT: California and Conservation

In 2018, the zoo opened its most significant expansion, more than doubling its size from 45 to 100 acres. Located deeper (and higher) in Knowland Park, the new California Trail section is accessed by gondola, and its exhibits highlight the state's native wildlife.

Colleen Kinzley, vice president of animal care, conservation, and research, has been at the zoo since 1990 and was heavily involved in designing the California Trail animal enclosures. As manager of the elephant program, Kinzley led a transition to "protected contact management," in which keepers only use positive reinforcement and are always protected by a barrier. The Oakland Zoo was the first in the country to use this humane system—no hitting, no bull hooks—and it was immediately successful. That led Parrott and the zoo to advocate for elephants everywhere, supporting legislation against animal cruelty and even helping law enforcement investigate circuses.

"It really set us on a path of advocacy for all animals," Kinzley says. "That is not typical for zoos, and I think that's one of the things that has set us apart for nearly 30 years."

Kinzley oversaw the African Savanna and Children's Zoo developments, gradually pushing boundaries with animal habitats and management. When she learned that two gray wolves would be part of the California Trail, she worried. Wolves are terrified of people and could make for a bad exhibit. So she made sure the pair arrived early to acclimate, tried warming them up through member previews, and limited the number of visitors on the boardwalk, but nothing really calmed down the wolves until Kinzley suggested they be granted daytime access to their larger evening yards. Soon, the wolves were comfortable enough to breed, and the zoo welcomed four pups in May 2019.

"Now I think it's one of the best exhibits," says Kinzley. "Their behavior is very typical of wolves in the wild, and it's extremely rare for me to not see them [even in such a large yard]. I think we did that really well, and I think not every zoo would have allowed that space."

In addition to keeping the exhibited animals happy and healthy, the Oakland Zoo operates the largest wild animal veterinary facility in Northern California (in 2020, it famously rehabilitated three mountain lions burned in wildfires) and

supports 15 wildlife conservation initiatives around the world, from reintroducing yellow-legged frogs to the Sierra Nevada to combating elephant poaching in Africa.

FUTURE: The Next 100 Years

Following Parrott's retirement in April 2021, longtime Oakland Zoo executive team member Nik Dehejia was promoted to CEO. Dehejia was project director for the \$72 million California Trail expansion, but continuing Parrott's efforts to lead through a pandemic proved even more challenging. The zoo shut down from mid-March to July 2020, depleting its financial reserves and threatening permanent closure. A variance from the state allowed the zoo to reopen with restrictions, but it was forced to close again for two months in December 2020.

The return this month of the zoo's main fundraising event, Walk in the Wild, is a sign that things are getting back to normal. There are considerable losses to recoup, but zoo members and visitors are ready in support: 13,000 donors raised a combined \$3.5 million when closure seemed imminent, and the rush for tickets upon reopening crashed the zoo's website.

"People yearned to be at our doorstep, to be outside, to just feel, smell, and hear animals," says Dehejia. "I think that was a reminder for all of us about how critical a place like the zoo is to [giving] people a sense of joy."

The zoo's short-term focus is less about renovating facilities (although the giraffe, chimpanzee, and tiger habitats are on the to-do list) and more about recovering financial stability and deeply engaging the community. The latter requires no capital funding but yields priceless returns: educating and inspiring the next generation of wildlife conservationists and increasing accessibility for all who want to be a part of the zoo's future. Dehejia especially hopes to plant seeds for the next 100 years by facilitating connections between young people and animals.

"There's always a magical moment you can have with an animal when you come to the zoo," he says, "especially when you can feel like you're looking at them and they're looking at you. That's the connection."

I know I felt that sense of connection watching the gibbon as a kid. And as I see my young daughters delight at the grizzly bears playing in their pool or the meerkats popping in and out of their mound, I hope they feel it too.

A free, public Centennial Birthday Celebration will take place on June 5 at Snow Park in Oakland, the site of the original zoo. For more information, visit oaklandzoo.org/centennial. ■



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