



navajotimes.com

# ZooFest attracts large crowd, goals outlined

Thursday  
May 22, 2008



Matty Holdgate



mountain lion relaxes at the Navajo Zoological and Botanical Park May 3 during the 2008 Zoo Fest. Many animals live at the park because they are injured or otherwise could not survive in the wild. (Times photo - Chee Brossy)



foxes scamper about in their cage during the 2008 Zoo Fest May 3 at the Navajo Zoological and Botanical Park. (Times photo - Chee Brossy)

**LEFT:** Matthew Holdgate, Zoo Curator. **CENTER:** A mountain lion relaxes at the Navajo Zoological and Botanical Park May 3 during the 2008 ZooFest. Many animals live at the park because they are injured or otherwise could not survive in the wild. **RIGHT:** Foxes scamper about in their cage during the 2008 ZooFest May 3 at the Navajo Zoological and Botanical Park.

By Chee Brossy  
Navajo Times

WINDOW ROCK — “We want to let the world know...the Navajo Nation has a zoo!”

Those were the words of President Joe Shirley Jr. at the 2008 Zoo Fest at the Navajo Zoological Park May 3.

According to Matty Holdgate, the new zoo curator, most of the 2,845 people who attended the zoo promotion event did not know before recent advertisements appeared that there was a zoo on the reservation. Perhaps it would be better to say let the people of the Navajo Nation itself know that there is a zoo before you start looking at international acclaim. But how can it be that an attraction with the public appeal such as the zoo has such a small profile on the reservation?

It could be funding. It could be location, as the zoo is overshadowed by the adjacent Navajo Nation Museum. Its roadside sign is in need of repainting.

Holdgate, originally from New Hampshire, is looking to change all that. Hired last September to a position that had been vacant for years, Holdgate has implemented changes at the zoo. One of the new things is the Zoo Fest.

“There’s not really been any advertising for the zoo,” Holdgate said. “That is a big problem because there is no way for people to know about us except through word of mouth.” The event brought in higher than expected numbers and effectively promoted the zoo.

Catering to the family crowd with activities for youth such as games and raffles, the Zoo Fest drew large numbers. Children flocked to the large inflatable slide and trampoline brought in to provide entertainment.

Families could be seen strolling the dirt walkways and taking in the different animals, which ranges from bobcats to black bears to red tailed hawks.

But it was also apparent that the zoo has room for improvement. The walkways by the cages and pens are dirt, not paved. This makes it difficult to navigate the zoo with wheelchairs or strollers.

Holdgate has requested funds for paving walkways and also the zoo parking lot, which was full to capacity on Saturday.

Holdgate, 26, is trained as a biologist and has extensive experience handling wild animals. A graduate of the University of New Hampshire and with a degree in animal behavior, Holdgate has worked for the U.S. Geological Survey under its biological research division. Most recently he worked with the U.S. Forest Service studying the effects of wildlife on wildlife populations.

Though this is his first job as zoo curator, Holdgate is familiar with zoo operation and goals.

“Generally, the purpose of a zoo is to be educational,” he said. “A normal zoo is able to contribute to the community, such as serving as an educational tool for children.”

“Although schools come now to see the animals, there is no formal education program,” he said. “There are no real signs as there are in a normal zoo.”

“There were tours, but they were based in zoo keeper duties – what it’s like to work at a zoo – and not addressing habitat, or things like what a reptile is versus an amphibian,” Holdgate added.

To address that absence, the zoo staff recently added signs with brief educational explanations to certain areas of the park.

But the big step, said Holdgate, would be to create a tour guide position so that a professional with knowledge in the field of wildlife biology could lead educational walks with zoo patrons. That would also be dependent on funding.

The Navajo Nation Zoo is unique in that nearly all its animals are native to the reservation. In addition to the bobcat and bear the zoo houses a mountain lion, porcupine, various foxes, chipmunks, eagles, and a crane.

In addition to being an educational tool, the zoo functions as a sanctuary for the animals it houses. The majority of animals exhibited at the zoo are injured and considered “unreleasable,” or unable to return to their wild habitat, said Holdgate.

For example, the two bears were orphaned as cubs when their mother was killed for endangering livestock on the reservation. One of the zoo’s two bobcats was blinded when it was hit by a car near Shiprock.

The zoo’s raptor population – birds of prey which include eagles and hawks – is comprised of animals unable to fly or survive in the wild. Often hit by cars while hunting, the bird’s fragile, hollow bones usually do not hold up to the impact.

When found on the reservation, they are brought to the zoo, where they are treated and, if possible, released into the wild. If not, they are housed permanently at the zoo.

Holdgate would like to see the bird exhibit expanded into an aviary, a larger enclosure that would give the animals room to fly. This would be part of a feather distribution program. Feathers of eagles and hawks are considered valuable and sacred to Navajo culture and tradition and the new program would make obtaining those feathers – shed from the birds in the aviary – more accessible.

Currently feathers are distributed through a federal program that is severely backlogged, said Holdgate.