

Zoo seeks aviary, permit to distribute eagle feathers

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A pair of golden eagles sit in their cage at the Navajo Nation Zoo on Monday. The Navajo Nation is starting an aviary to raise the birds for their feathers, which will be used for ceremonial purposes.— © 2008 Gallup Independent / Brian Leddy

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By Kathy Helms
Diné Bureau

WINDOW ROCK — The Navajo Nation Zoological & Botanical Park does not need a polar bear, an elephant, or anything quite so extravagant to draw visitors, but Curator Matthew Holdgate does have a couple of special changes in mind.

One is to seek federal authorization to disperse eagle feathers to Navajo tribal members. That's probably going to take a couple years, according to Holdgate, but two tribes already have gone through the process: Zuni and the Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma.

"Each of those tribes built an eagle flight house, or an aviary. Within that flight house they have golden and bald eagles. They feed them and take care of them and everything, not in a zoo sense, but mainly to collect the feathers that are shed. They are authorized by the federal government to distribute those feathers directly to their tribal members."

In order to do that, the first thing required is a permit from the federal government, Holdgate said, "which surprisingly might be the easier part, because the second step is finding the money to build the flight house that the eagles will live in."

The size of the flight house depends on the number of eagles desired. "For a tribe our size, we anticipate a lot of requests for feathers, so the bigger we can build it the more quickly we'll be able to respond to those requests," he said. Currently, with the exception of Zuni and Iowa tribes, all tribal members have to request feathers from the federal repository in Colorado.

Any eagles that are killed or found on the Navajo Reservation, even feathers from the two golden eagles at the zoo, are sent to

the federal repository. Requests for feathers from all U.S. tribes are put into a pool, so it can take up to a year or two to get just one feather, Holdgate told the Resources Committee Tuesday.

“You can request up to a whole bird, but then you expect more like a 10 year wait. So if we can distribute our own feathers, at least from the zoo, we’re talking, with your average-size flight house, several thousand feathers each year.”

During a visit with one of the tribes, Holdgate said one of the tribal members told him a story which gave him a new point of view. “He said tribal members should have the right to have access to eagle feathers, but in his belief, the feathers were given by the eagle as a gift, so a person of any race walking through the woods, if they came across a feather, that was put there specifically for that person to find and use as they saw fit.

“We have hundreds and hundreds of feathers being molted by the eagles at the zoo, and if you believe they are given as a gift by the eagle for use, then right now we are not fulfilling what we owe to the eagles that are giving the feathers.”

Kevin Gleason of Navajo Fish & Wildlife said that without an aviary they cannot distribute feathers to any tribal members. To receive a single feather from the feds requires filling out a five-page application, plus the wait. The Iowa Tribe, however, has a one-page form that requires basic information such as name and address and verification of tribal enrollment.

“This is all that needs to stand between tribal members and their access to feathers, and this is what the end result of an aviary on the Navajo Nation will do — it will put one page between people and feathers, rather than the federal government and everything that goes along with it,” Holdgate said. “It doesn’t work for the tribes, so the tribes have come up with their own solution.”

Zuni in the mid-1990s decided they were going to take the initiative to find a way to get more feathers for their tribe. They went to U.S. Fish & Wildlife, sat down with them and asked what they needed to do to make this possible, Holdgate said.

They learned that each year, dozens to hundreds of eagles are euthanized — “put to sleep because there’s nowhere to put them. They’re hit by cars, power lines, shot at, other things befall them, and then these eagles can’t live in the wild. They can’t fly or maybe they’re blind in an eye. There are only so many zoos to take these injured eagles,” he said.

“The Zuni realized that if they built a sanctuary for these eagles, they would be helping these animals while at the same time being able to collect the feathers. They worked it out with the federal government and in 1999 they opened their eagle sanctuary. In the first four years, they distributed 20,000 feathers.”

It wasn’t long before the Iowa Tribe decided they also wanted to build an eagle sanctuary. Whereas the Zuni Pueblo specifically brought eagles in to collect feathers, the Iowa Tribe incorporated a rehabilitation element. “As injured eagles came in, they had a veterinarian to patch them up and they actually were able to release some of them back into the wild,” Holdgate said.

After building their aviaries, Zuni received a \$20,000 grant and Iowa received \$200,000. For Navajo to take advantage of outside grants, rather than doing the same things the other tribes have done, Holdgate said they plan to incorporate an educational element.

With an aviary, Navajo also will be protecting eagles by having more feathers available, he said, “so there’s less incentive for people to go out and figure their own way to get them.”

Holdgate said he is actively seeking assistance in identifying funds. “It may not be today or next week or next month, but if funds become available and you consider it a worthy program, keep it in mind when that time comes, and the zoo will be here to do our part.”

Fish & Wildlife Director Gloria Tom said the program has been in the works for several years. “The barrier that we’re having is funding.” Harry Williams recommended Resources Committee take a lead role in trying to get funding for the aviary.