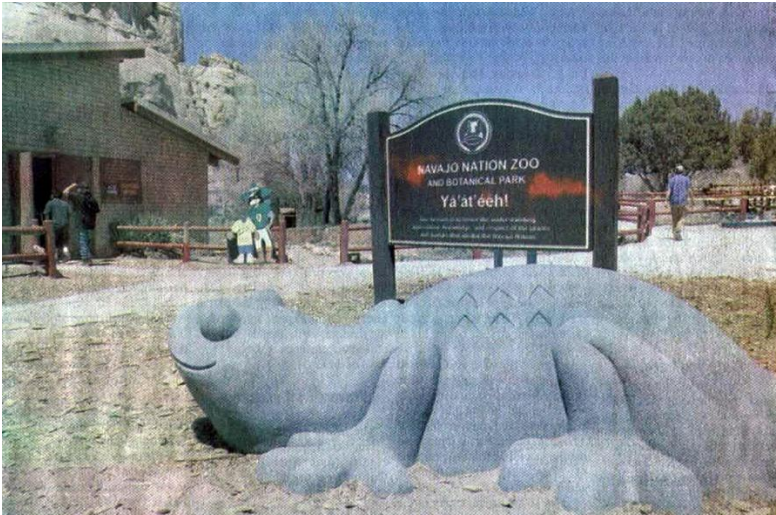




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Two-legged creatures to swarm ZooFest

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TOP: A concrete lizard welcomes visitors to the Navajo Nation Zoological Park Wednesday in Window Rock. ZooFest is on Saturday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. **BOTTOM:** A tazhii, or turkey, poses Wednesday at the Navajo Nation Zoological Park in Window Rock. [photos by Donovan Quintero]



By Cindy Yurth
Tséyi' Bureau

WINDOW ROCK — Navajo Nation Zoological Park employees were expecting “maybe a hundred” people at last year’s first-ever ZooFest. Three thousand showed up.

This year, with the remodeled indoor Discovery Center being unveiled, they’re predicting as many as 5,000 will converge on the little zoo in Window Rock for what Zoo Director Matthew Holdgate is billing as “our newest annual event.”

The human visitors will far outnumber the 70-odd animals at the zoo, all of which are indigenous to Navajoland.

The event, which is designed to celebrate and draw attention to the tribal zoo, will include food, games, prizes, face painting, inflatable slides, and guest speakers.

Some 40 volunteers from the Navajo Nation's Fish and Wildlife Department and the National Indian Youth Leadership Program will man the booths.

Visitors will get to see the 16 new species of animals that have been added since last year, including spotted skunks, a ringtail cat, frogs, salamanders, scorpions, native fish, rabbits and prairie dogs.

There's also been an effort to present the animals in light of their relationship to the Diné, with the help of Diné storyteller Sunny Dooley.

"We have an eight-minute video running in our Kids' Corner where Sunny introduces the animals and talks about their place in Navajo culture," Holdgate said. "In addition, we have two new displays for each animal."

The first, Holdgate explains, lists the English and scientific name of the animal, where it's found, what it eats, and so on. The second gives its Navajo name and a brief story about the animal written by Dooley.

While visitors have always been welcome to donate to the zoo (admission is free), this year's visitors will find two new donation bins. One collects money for a college scholarship for a Diné youth pursuing a career in science; the other will go toward conservation efforts on the Navajo Nation.

"The zoo has always preserved Navajo wildlife, and that's a good start," Holdgate said, "but modern zoos go a step further and try to contribute to conservation efforts in their community."

Hopefully that fund will raise enough money to offer an annual grant to a deserving individual or group who is protecting endangered animals or plants, Holdgate explained.

Holdgate also hopes to gain support for the zoo's latest effort: creating an eagle sanctuary that will rescue injured eagles and permit their feathers to be gathered by tribal members who need them for ceremonies.

"We have approached the council and executive branch about this," Holdgate said. "So far we have a lot of interest, but no one's put forth any money."

He estimated it would cost about \$400,000 to establish the sanctuary, which would be the third such tribal facility in the country.

Holdgate would also like to add more special days to the zoo's calendar. Already in the works for this fall is "ZooBoo," a Halloween-themed party that will, presumably, supplant ZooFest as the newest annual event.

Like ZooFest, ZooBoo will feature food, games, and door prizes, but kids will also craft their own animal masks at an arts and crafts station.

Plus, zoo employees will be feeding the animals pumpkins. Apparently, this is more entertaining than it sounds.

"The bears like to smash them," Holdgate said. "For other animals, we can hide stuff inside the pumpkin and watch them try to get to it."

Information: 928-871-6574.