

Animal Attraction: ZooFest Wind, dust, rain, can't blow away kids' love of animals

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LEFT: Terri Yazzie, left, Philena Byjoe and Eugina Byjoe check out the insect exhibit during ZooFest at the Navajo Nation Zoo in Window Rock Saturday. **CENTER:** Ten-year old Tanish Smith stands by the black bear cage during ZooFest at the Navajo Nation Zoo in Window Rock Saturday. The zoo's annual event featured animals, games, and other family activities. **RIGHT:** Rose Anderson takes a look at the inside of a forked Hogan during ZooFest at the Navajo Nation Zoo in Window Rock Saturday. The Hogan and other cultural displays are part of the permanent exhibit at the zoo. [photos by Cable Hoover / Independent]

By Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola
Staff Writer

WINDOW ROCK — Almost 6,000 people braved Saturday's gusty spring winds, blowing dirt, and rain showers to attend the second annual ZooFest at Window Rock's Navajo Zoo.

Although the weather conditions were less than ideal, families from across the Navajo Nation came to enjoy the free event which featured native animals of the Southwest, newly designed exhibits, music, guest speakers, face painting, and fun.

Some of the more popular zoo residents like B.J. the bobcat, orphaned black bears Bernie and Bessie, and venomous Gila monsters Thelma and Louise were joined by friendly two-legged animal mascots — Smokey the Bear, Eddie the Eagle, and Woodsy the Owl — that mingled with the crowd and posed for photographs.

Siblings Rachael Lapahie, 4, and her brother, Albert Lapahie Jr., 5, traveled from their Four Corners home to enjoy the animals. Rachael said she liked the eagle the best, while Albert couldn't decide. With a triceratops and a tyrannosaurus rex freshly painted on his face, Albert much preferred to run around rather than take time to answer questions.

A group of Wingate Elementary and Middle School student volunteers were part of the crew that helped paint faces throughout the day. Mid-schoolers Harlie Craig, 13, Evangeline Norton, 12, Mckayla Torres, 12, and Alondra Willie, 12, were joined by elementary school students Tanisha Smith, 10, and Sherice Sam, 10. The girls, members of the Walking in Beauty Program at Wingate, were accompanied by Natasha Clark-Baker and Garrett Chee, who help run Wingate's program for the National Indian Youth

Leadership Project.

Volunteers like the leadership group helped Matthew Holdgate, curator of the Navajo Nation Zoological and Botanical Park, and his small staff host the event for Saturday's record crowd. Although 2,846 people attended the first ZooFest last year, Holdgate was pleased with this year's attendance total of 5,833.

Holdgate, who has been curator for 19 months, said the ZooFest idea was created as a way to let area families learn about the zoo and enjoy the recent improvements to the park. "Word of mouth works slowly," he said, "but a free event works fast."

Some of those improvements include gutting the inside of the 30-year-old Discovery Center and rebuilding all its exhibits. The reopened center features frogs and toads, salamanders, cottontail rabbits, tarantulas, scorpions, horned lizards, black widow spiders, and millipedes.

With modern zoo principles in mind, Holdgate said other exhibits have been updated and made to be more appropriate for the animals they house. The Navajo Zoo now has 75 animals total, he said, representing 36 species of native wildlife. Most are "non-releasable," meaning they can't survive in the wild because they are injured, orphaned, or are confiscated wildlife that were once illegal pets.

All of the zoo's birds are unable to fly, Holdgate explained, because of injuries they have sustained from vehicles, electrical lines, or guns.

The park is the only tribally owned zoo in the country, and its unique connection to Navajo culture is another important aspect the zoo staff is now emphasizing with its exhibits, Holdgate said. In addition to educating the public about each animal, he said, the zoo also strives to share traditional Navajo stories about the animals.

Because of the zoo's tribal ownership, Holdgate said Navajo people can make an appointment at the zoo for traditional purposes. Most commonly, he explained, people make appointments so they can leave corn pollen or another offering with a specific animal, or they ask to perform a religious ceremony involving an animal.

The improvements at the zoo and the emphasis on Navajo traditions have to do with making a contribution to Navajo society, Holdgate said. "It comes back to the idea that members of the Navajo tribe can call it their own and have a better life," he said.

During Saturday's ZooFest, Holdgate and his staff encouraged individuals, families, businesses, or classrooms to consider participating in the zoo's Adopt-An-Animal Program to help support the work of the park. For \$100, sponsors can "adopt" one animal for a year. For that fee, sponsors get a framed photo of the animal and a certificate, and their name is listed on the exhibit and on the zoo's Web site.

As for the future, Holdgate said the zoo staff is planning their first-ever ZooBoo Event this Halloween. In addition, Holdgate said he and Manuelito Wheeler, the director of the Navajo Nation Museum, are collaborating on long term plans to possibly create a Navajo Cultural Center that would meld some common cultural interests of both their facilities.

Information: www.navajozoo.org