A Place for 'Sacred People'

Vice President reminds zoogoers of Diné connection to animals

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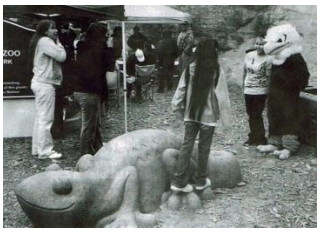

TOP: Peewee performance: Callista Belle Shepherd, 4, of Ganado, opens the program with the national anthem at the 2nd annual Navajo Nation ZooFest on May 2. Callista is the 2007-09 Miss Peewee Little Singer princess and a student in the FACE program at Little Singer School near Leupp, Arizona. **TOP:** Dewayne Lee, 1, of Rock Springs, N.M., eyes a lizard resting on a rock during the 2nd annual Navajo Nation ZooFest on May 2. **BOTTOM:** Sherice Sam of Gallup paints a heart on the face of Heavyn Halwood, 5, of Fort Defiance, during the 2nd annual ZooFest at the Navajo Nation Zoological Park on May 2. Face painting was one of many activities happening at the ZooFest. **BOTTOM:** Shermayne Stash of Ganado poses for her friends with an eagle mascot May 2 during the 2nd annual Navajo Nation ZooFest in Window Rock.

By Cindy Yurth
Tséyi' Bureau

WINDOW ROCK — When it comes to the relationship between humans and animals, Vice President Ben Shelly reminded his fellow Diné Saturday at the Navajo Nation Zoo, Navajo culture is very different from mainstream America.

In the Navajo way, the zoo is full of people – both outside and inside the cages.

While it would sound funny in English to call an animal a "person," that is exactly the right terminology in Diné bizaad, Shelly told a shivering crowd at the Second Annual ZooFest.

In Navajo, the word "dine" is applied to all creatures. The birds are "feathered people" or "sky people;" the fish are "water people;" land animals are "four-legged people;" even plants are sometimes referred to by the elders as "standing people."

Humans are "two-legged" or "five-fingered" people. "Everything you see around you, they're all sacred people," Shelly said. "They live their way."

In Diné tradition, Shelly continued, humans are not necessarily considered superior to the other people – everybody has his or her own place in nature. Some animals can see better than us, he noted, some can hear better or have a better sense of smell; most can run faster.

"We believe everybody made a choice to be what they are," Shelly said.

That's why the world's only tribally owned zoo should be a bit different from your run-of-the-mill menagerie you would find off the reservation. And it is.

In the newly remodeled Discovery Center, for example, patrons can learn the scientific facts about an animal,

but also its place in Navajo culture. You will learn, for instance, that the Gila monster inflicts a venomous bite, but also that it gives the gift of hand-trembling.

You will learn that the spotted skunk warns you with a handstand before it delivers its pungent defense… but also that traditional Diné actually consider it a blessing to smell a skunk, and if you are a good traditional Navajo you will inhale deeply of the odor rather than gag and run away.

The dual signs are a collaboration between Zoo Director Matthew Holdgate, possibly the most aptly named zookeeper in the country, and renowned Diné storyteller Sunny Dooley.

"We want to do more of this kind of interpretation," Holdgate said. "I think it really sets us apart as a Navajo zoo."

The indoor Discovery Center was a hit with the 5,833 visitors who showed up for ZooFest, and not just because the damp wind blowing through the outdoor exhibits made it a welcome sanctuary. Elders smiled and nodded upon reading the Navajo animal stories. Children tried out their tongues on the creatures' Navajo names.

Surprisingly, the youngest visitors seemed as fascinated by the resin or rubber models of the animals as by the breathing originals behind the glass.

"I think it's because it's something they can touch," theorized Holdgate. "You'll notice we've created multiple entry points to the exhibits."

"Multiple entry points" is curator-speak for appealing to all the visitors' senses. On one wall of the Discovery Center, a continuous video loop shows Dooley being interviewed by a bilagáana TV reporter (the Navajo viewers' favorite part seems to be when the white man wildly mispronounces "ahehee" – several times – as Dooley tries in vain to coach him and a gaggle of watching children erupts in giggles).

A recording of Native flute music sets the scene as visitors enter the center, and the resin models allow children to fondle critters that you wouldn't want them to touch in the flesh, like the aforementioned Gila monster.

"I see a lot of improvements since I was last here," remarked Shelly.

Holdgate is hoping for more, like a $400,000 eagle sanctuary where injured eagles could be rehabilitated and their shed feathers distributed to tribal members who need them for ceremonies.

Shelly said he supports the idea in theory, but didn't promise any money from the tribe. "Money is tight right now," he said. He advised Navajo who support the idea to start fundraising.

Meanwhile, the two-legged creatures swarming the zoo seemed to like it just fine the way it is. One family came all the way from Blanding, Utah, for the event, and Marion Seaton, who persuaded his mom to bring him from Kayenta for his seventh birthday, pronounced it "cool," especially the bears and the turtle.

If you missed ZooFest, you might want to mark Oct. 30 and 31st on your calendar. That weekend will mark a new and hopefully annual event called "ZooBoo," where children can make a mask of their favorite animal as the zoo denizens attempt to eat whole pumpkins.

And there are still several animals awaiting "adoption" – a $100 sponsorship that entitles the donor to a plaque with his or her name beside the animal's.

Other new ways to contribute include a fund for an annual science scholarship and one for a community conservation grant.

The zoo does not charge admission – and Holdgate promised it won't "as long as I'm here" – so donations are the only source of funding besides support from the Navajo Nation Council.

Information: www.navajozoo.org or 928-871-6574.