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Phila. Zoo's Big Cat Crossing gets a test run



Early reviews were positive from the tigers, on a test run on Big Cat Crossing, a 330-foot, \$2.3 million addition to the Philadelphia Zoo's trails program. (TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer)



GALLERY: A tiger tries out the latest trail addition at the Philadelphia... (TOM GRALISH...)

By Sandy Bauers, Inquirer Staff Writer

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Suddenly, people walking along a main pathway at the Philadelphia Zoo jerked to a standstill.

Some gasped. "Tiger!"

Just overhead, 320 pounds of gold and black fur stalked into view. No cage bars. No thick glass wall. Just barely visible mesh netting.

The mesmerized visitors looked up.

He peered down. Those teeth! Somehow, when those big incisors are 14 feet above . . . gulp.

It was a test run for Big Cat Crossing, a 330-foot addition to the zoo's innovative trail system that is being unveiled Wednesday and officially opens Saturday.

The \$2.3 million project will give the zoo's tigers, lions, pumas, jaguars, and snow leopards unprecedented access to more areas, more smells, and more views - including gawking humans.

Philadelphia is the nation's first zoo to so fully embrace the concept, which is considered transformative for both animal and visitor.

The first trail - 1,735 feet - was a treetops runway for small primates. The next, at 200 feet, was big and sturdy enough, for on-the-move orangutans.

In 2015, hippos, giraffes, zebras, and the like will go where they have never gone before.

"It's a game-changer," said Terry Maple, an expert on zoo animal welfare and a former Zoo Atlanta president. "It's going to change the way we build zoos in the future."

Most zoos have gone from barred cages to naturalistic "enclosures" and now incorporate various enrichment equipment designed to keep the animals engaged and active.

But no matter how cleverly designed or enhanced, enclosed exhibits are still "pretty boring," said Jon Coe, who has worked extensively with the zoo. Founder of a Philadelphia design firm that specializes in zoos, Coe now is based in Australia.

"Zoo animals suffer all around the world from a lack of physical fitness and behavioral competence," Coe said.

Eying the swan boats

The trail system is a way to give animals change, flexibility, and, above all, choice - tough to achieve in captivity. It allows them to get exercise and see interesting new things.

Such as a sea of openmouthed humans, cellphones held aloft for a good shot.

With the new trail, the cats can travel out of the main exhibit area, over a major visitor path and down to the ground near the cafeteria entrance - prepare for gridlock there, too - and Bird Lake, where the initial cat travelers were "fascinated by the swan boats," said Andrew Baker, the zoo's chief operating officer.

Or, perhaps, the meaty humans paddling them.

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(Nearby in their trail, the orangutans were *not* as pleased to see big cats in such close proximity.)

The zoo is incorporating the concept in other areas as well. Most mornings, pink flamingos cross a bridge to a new pond. In KidZooU, goats clamber up a stairway to an overlook.

Indeed, the zoo's new theme is "Zoo360" - as you move around the zoo, the zoo moves around you.

The switcheroos have to be done with caution, however. For instance, big cats pass through bacteria from their raw-meat diet. Plant-eating primates aren't adapted to that. So the big cats might get the run of the orangutan trail in winter, when the warm-climate primates are inside, and the passage will get a cleansing come spring.

'Serious exercise'

The whole notion stems from brainstorming by Coe and the zoo some years ago. By 2006, the zoo had begun animal rotations, moving, say, the panthers to the puma exhibit for a day.

Coe began to wonder, "Why can't we hook everything in the zoo to everything else and let the animals have the run of the place?"

Now, he describes the idea even more simplistically. At a zoo conference in New Zealand in March, Coe asked the group: "How many of you have a dog? How often do you take the dog for a walk?"

When it comes to zoos, "how often do these animals get to go for a good walk, get an outing, get some serious exercise, see something new?"

Maple is reminded of a zoo director in Jakarta, Indonesia, who used to drive up to the orangutan enclosure in a horse-drawn carriage. The orangs would pile into the back and the director would drive them around the zoo.

Why?

Simple: They liked it.

When Philly came up with its trails idea, "I said, 'Good Lord, this is exactly what we should be doing,' " Maple recalled.

The network of trails works for Philadelphia, in particular, because the zoo is small. With a railroad on one side and a major highway on the other, it has no place to expand but up.

And now, Maple said, "zoo architects will begin to use this idea, and we'll see all kinds of iterations."

Keepers are studying what happens, and so far are seeing what they hoped for - more activity.

They have also noticed novel behaviors, things animals can't do in a traditional enclosure. "As simple as it sounds, just straight, long-distance, high-speed running," said Baker.

Some animals scent-mark the trails - or worse. (Although the staff thinks it unlikely with the big cats, it can't rule out the possibility that some pedestrians will get dripped on.)

And the small Bolivian gray titi monkeys have started belting out loud territorial calls. "We never heard it while they were indoors," Baker said.

The zoo hopes for a richer experience for the humans as well. They'll now see animals in unexpected places - more like an animal encounter in the wild.

In conjunction with Big Cat Crossing, the zoo has proclaimed this the Year of the Cat, and through a companion exhibit, the staff is hoping to engage visitors in the palm oil issue. Worldwide, rain forests are being razed for palm oil plantations; that threatens the animals who live there, including tigers, Baker said.

'Carefree'

The first animals to try out Big Cat Crossing were two Amur tiger brothers, Wiz and Dmitri, youngsters who are both curious and adventurous.

So far, they seem to like it - if "like" is something an animal experiences.

Tammy Schmidt, the zoo's curator of carnivores and ungulates, watches their body language.

Is the tail twitching nervously? Are they cautiously creeping up to the bridge way?

No. They're "up and walking, carefree, chuffing" to each other as they pass, "the tail just swinging along very expressively," she said.

"Their mouth is open and just bringing in all the scents of the area and being catalyzed by the children walking by and seeing all these things that they see from a traditional area, but now they're walking amongst it."

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Watch tigers try out Big Cat Crossing, the latest addition to the zoo's innovative trail system, at www.inquirer.com/tigers

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