



An Endangered American Zoo Is there Hope for the Animals in Peril?

By Heidi Berry M.Ed., Executive Director
Center for Animal Research and Education

July 8, 2008

Hard times have hit America's zoos and wildlife parks, and the fates of the animals hang in the balance. These facilities often struggle on shoe-string budgets even in the best of times, but our country's current economic crisis has forced many local governments to decrease, if not totally eliminate, funding to zoos and animal parks. As a result, many smaller zoos and wildlife sanctuaries have closed. Even big city zoos are feeling the pinch and drastically reducing their open hours to try to stretch what little money they have.

One of our nation's oldest zoos has decided to close its doors for good. *Fejervary Children's Zoo* of Davenport, Iowa, opened in 1909 and will not be celebrating its centennial next year. After months of deliberation, the city council made the painful decision to place all of the zoo's animals elsewhere. Other demands on Davenport city's tight budget meant there was not enough funding for the zoo's critical needs—such as adequate staffing, facility repairs, and updated habitats for the animals.

Parks and Recreation Director for the city of Davenport Dan Sherman said the zoo needed to hire a full-time curator if exotic animal care was to remain part of its mission: *“It’s getting increasingly more difficult to run a zoo. The days of just locking up animals for people to see, poke and prod are drawing to a close. You can’t just lock up a bobcat for 25 years. You have to give him something to do.”*

As economic hardships continue, more zoo animals will find themselves homeless. Where do they go? Fejervary’s four cougars are lucky. They are being placed at the Center for Animal Research and Education (CARE) in Bridgeport, Texas. CARE is a USDA licensed non-profit big cat sanctuary with 53 other big cats currently in residence. Volunteer-run, donation based non-profit sanctuaries are the last hope of exotic animals who are losing their zoo homes. Still, these facilities are financed entirely by the public—they receive no government funds—and therefore face economic perils like all charities.

The costs to house and maintain exotic animals are not insignificant. CARE’s **“Mountain Lion Rescue Fund”** (www.bigcatcare.org) has six months to raise the \$150,000 it needs to build a safe enclosure for the mountain lions and safely transport the animals to Texas. In addition, fully half of this initial outlay must go towards installing perimeter fencing around the new mountain lion habitat, which is slated to occupy empty land the Center purchased over a year ago to enable future expansion. Over their lifetimes, each mountain lion will require an additional \$5,000 to \$6,000 a year to cover food and day-to-day care.

The CARE enclosure design team plans to build a habitat applying modern standards of enhanced animal care. The proposed 10,000-square-foot enclosure will include natural trees to climb, a waterfall complete with platforms, a variety of interactive toys, and the expertise required to care for these magnificent animals. Derek Krahn, President of CARE’s Board of Directors, explains, *“It fills us with great pride to know that our organization can be trusted to provide a fitting home for these wonderful animals. Having these mountain lions come to live with us in Texas is a very exciting thing, but seeing the current trends in our nation’s zoos and sanctuaries is quite scary at the same time. We’re feeling the same financial pressure as everyone else. Without significant public donations, CARE won’t make it through these rough times either.”*

Struggling sanctuaries like CARE may be the only hope for many big cats today. Unfortunately the future is bleak for many animals if zoos and sanctuaries are no longer able to operate. Returning dangerous animals, like big cats to the wild is not possible; therefore euthanasia would be the tragic endpoint. Krahn encourages Americans to remember there are animals in need throughout our country, and that local rescues depend on their community to keep their doors open, especially in times like these. If you would like to contribute a tax-deductable donation to the **“Mountain Lion Rescue Fund,”** please see CARE on the web at www.bigcatcare.org or send checks or money orders to:

Center for Animal Research and Education
c/o Mountain Lion Rescue Fund
245 County Road 3422
Bridgeport, TX 76426