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September 2016

VOL. LXXXIX–NO. 05

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CELEBRATE OUR CENTENNIAL
Visit our centennial website sandiegozoo100.org.

ON THE COVER: Egyptian vulture
PHOTO BY: Ken Bohn, SDZG Photographer

100 YEARS OF THE SAN

Part 8: Expansion, 1987-1996

BY KAREN E. WORLEY
MANAGING EDITOR

PHOTOS BY SDZG

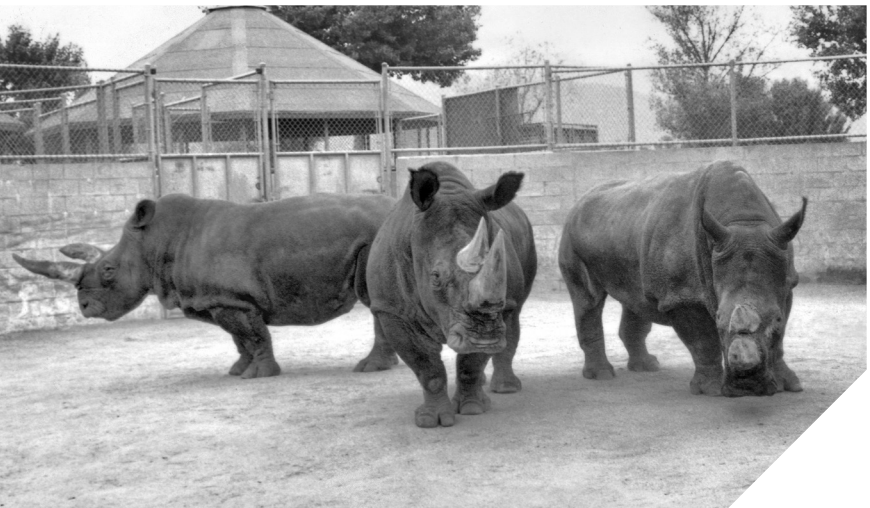
When giant pandas Basi and Yuan Yuan came to the San Diego Zoo in 1987 on a six-month loan from China, it was a monumental event for the Zoo—and for San Diego. Two exhibit spaces were constructed side by side for them, in the area that is now at the base of the Zoo's Sun Bear Forest. It was standing room only as visitors flocked to see the black-and-white bears, and Basi and Yuan Yuan's visit was extended because they were so popular. By the time they returned to China, they had won the hearts of more than two million visitors.

A major milestone was reached at the Wild Animal Park (now Safari Park) in 1988: a California condor chick named Molloko hatched at the Park's off-exhibit "Condorminium" on April 29. He was the first California condor conceived, hatched, and raised in a zoo setting, an important step forward for the California Condor Recovery Program. Then in 1989, the Park welcomed three members of another endangered species that would also come to symbolize the urgent need for conservation: northern white rhinos Saut, Nadi, and Nola.

During the late 1980s and 1990s, the Zoo began a transformation in exhibit planning and design. The new exhibit complexes were termed "bioclimatic zones": they represented an area of the world and types of habitat, featuring animal and plant species native to that area. Moving away from organizing the zoo by showing one type of animal, like cats or bears, in the same area, the new exhibits sought to depict the diversity of life that makes up a particular habitat, and to provide visitors with a better understanding of the connections between the varied species that live there.

The first bioclimatic zone exhibit to open at the Zoo was the Kopje, in 1986. It simulated the boulder-strewn areas found on the African plains, where a variety of plants, smaller mammals, and birds flourish. Tiger River then opened in 1988, representing a tropical Asian forest where tigers, fishing cats, pythons, and storks lived. Tiger River also expanded the concept of an immersive habitat experience, with innovative and interactive interpretation elements. Environmental details were a focus, with walls along walkways that looked like eroded banks with embedded tree roots, and misters that provided a humid, tropical experience.

Sun Bear Forest opened in 1989, following the design concepts from Tiger River to create an Asian forest for sun bears, binturongs, and a troop of lion-tailed macaques. On opening day, the energetic sun bears had a field day, showing off just how agile, clever, and strong they were. They made short work of stripping the bark off the carefully chosen tree branches and uprooting and moving the strategically placed logs. They also dug up the square patches of sod that had not taken root yet—much to the dismay of the exhibit and horticulture staff!



Zoo news (from top): The panda visit in 1987 was a sensation; keeper Don Sterner checks on condor chick Molloko; Polar Bear Plunge created a new home for the bears; Nola, Saut, and Nadi arrived in 1989.

DIEGO ZOO

Gorilla Tropics opened in 1991, and it included a stream and waterfall, and a lush variety of African plants for shade, browsing, and hiding. Alvila, Memba, Jessica, Kimba Kumba, Milt, and Penny were the first to live in the new gorilla habitat. Apparently it suited them, because Jessica gave birth to a baby boy, Mike, nine months after the exhibit opened. As part of the San Diego Zoo's 80th birthday celebration in 1996, another bioclimatic habitat was added: Polar Bear Plunge, which represented a summer tundra environment for the Zoo's polar bears, as well as exhibits for Arctic foxes, reindeer, and Arctic ducks. The polar bear habitat included a waterfall, rocky and sandy areas, fallen logs, and a large, deep pool for swimming, chilled to 55 degrees Fahrenheit.

BACK IN TIME
Discover much more about the San Diego Zoo's 100 years of history on our centennial website: sandiegozoo100.org

It had now been 10 years since Basi and Yuan Yuan had visited the Zoo—and in 1996, giant pandas were back! After extensive negotiations and planning, a 12-year breeding and research loan agreement was signed with the Chinese government to bring two giant pandas to the San Diego Zoo: Bai Yun and Shi Shi. Their arrival in September 1996 made news around the world, and visitors couldn't wait to welcome them. The Giant Panda Research Station was constructed to provide flexibility and comfort in managing the bears and workspace for the researchers and animal care staff. The Horticulture Department developed a browse program for the bamboo the pandas would need, and playful and energetic Bai Yun and stately and gentle Shi Shi settled right into their new home.

Work began on several conservation research projects to study the physiology, behavior, and reproduction of giant pandas. With fewer than 1,600 pandas left in the wild at the time, the species was critically endangered. But panda reproductive biology was not well understood, and scientists needed to know more to successfully increase the population.

As it turned out, however, Shi Shi would not breed. Bai Yun did her best to get his attention, but to no avail. Shi Shi had been rescued in the wild when he was found injured and debilitated from fighting with other bears. It was determined that he was quite a bit older than originally thought, and apparently reproducing was not on his agenda. This was a conundrum that our researchers set out to solve: if Shi Shi would not breed naturally, was artificial insemination possible with giant pandas? It would take a good deal of time, energy, and determination to find the answer.

"Pandamonium": From the moment Bai Yun (above) and Shi Shi arrived at the San Diego airport (left) in 1996, panda fans worldwide were ecstatic about the Zoo's new residents.

In addition to success with California condors, new bioclimatic zone exhibits, and the arrival of giant pandas, the Zoological Society of San Diego was expanding in another way during the 1990s: through technology. By now the advent of the personal computer was making sweeping changes in communication worldwide, and the Zoo delved into creating its first website. This provided opportunities to reach a much broader audience with animal information and conservation messages—to communicate nationally and internationally with those who might never have been to San Diego, but might be interested in supporting the Zoological Society of San Diego's growing worldwide conservation efforts.

Coming in November: the conclusion of 100 Years of the San Diego Zoo—Part 9: Vision (1997 to 2006) and Part 10: Ending Extinction (2007 to 2016).