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Audubon Zoo Welcomes Western Lowland Gorilla

Tumani, which means “hope” in Swahili, and Praline soon will be joined by another female gorilla and later, a new male

(New Orleans, La.) - Audubon Zoo welcomes the arrival of a female Western lowland gorilla from the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo – the first step in an ongoing effort to establish a new gorilla troop that animal care professionals hope will bolster the sustainability of the critically endangered species.

Tumani, a 10-year-old female, joins Praline, a female who is the last gorilla born at Audubon Zoo 21 years ago. Tumani, which means “hope” in Swahili, and Praline soon will be joined by another female gorilla and later, a new male.

The new Audubon troop may not be visible to the public view for a time as the gorillas engage in a structured introduction process to ensure that they bond socially. Zoo staffers emphasize that this is an important step toward ensuring that the new group is a cohesive unit.

Like all great apes, gorillas are in danger of extinction due to habitat loss from unsustainable agricultural and mining practices.

The AZA process, known as the Species Survival Plan (SSP), weighs the genetics and personalities of each animal as well as the needs of and potential mates at other zoos.

“The gorilla rotation at Audubon and other zoos is part of a complex process administered by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums,” said Courtney Eparvier, Curator of Primates and Sea Lions at Audubon Zoo. “The SSP reviews the genetic makeup of animals throughout its accredited facilities and makes recommendations about which animals should be moved where.

“Once the recommendations are made, each facility works together to ensure the moves will be best for the animals. The individual animal’s needs always come first.”

Each species has an advisory board of experts who consider the parentage and genetic information of every animal in the system to determine which ones would make the best match at the time given the current gene pool. The panel strives to maintain the genetic variation that a species would get under ideal conditions in the wild.

Very few zoo animals are brought in from the wild and fewer still will return there. Instead, they are bred and live under human care, serving as the ambassadors for their counterparts in the wild – ideally as a healthy, genetically diverse population designed to avert extinction.

“We hope the plight of gorillas inspires our guests to make simple changes in their lives,” Eparvier said. “For example, by recycling your electronics, you can reduce the demand for coltan, a mineral that is mined in the habitats of gorillas and other critically endangered species. Small steps like this can make a big difference.”

The AZA’s Gorilla Species Survival Plan manages 350 gorillas in 48 North American zoos, including a dozen born last year. Many gorilla populations have declined or disappeared over the past few

decades. The Western lowland gorilla is critically endangered, with an estimated population of 100,000.

As part of the comings and goings at Audubon Zoo, Bandia, a female gorilla, left for Louisville Zoo this week. Binti, another female, departed for Houston Zoo in spring of 2015.

Casey, the lone male in the gorilla troop who did not produce offspring despite being paired with four females during his 15 years at Audubon Zoo, departed for Louisville Zoo in June.

Audubon staff plans to have the new troop – Praline, Tumani and the two new gorillas - in place by early 2018. The structure of multiple females and a single adult male mirrors gorilla social groups in the wild.

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