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Construction Begins on African Lion Habitat At Audubon Zoo \$5 Million Project Slated to Open in 2019

(New Orleans, La.) - Construction is under way at Audubon Zoo on a new habitat for African lions that will spotlight the significant threats facing one of the most beloved wildlife species on the planet and what is being done to save them.

The new habitat, which will return lions to Audubon Zoo after an absence of several years, is designed to provide guests an up-close look at these iconic animals.

Work on the eagerly-awaited exhibit – scheduled to open in 2019 - will necessitate temporary detours for Zoo visitors while a pedestrian bridge located between the rhino and zebra habitat and Monkey Hill is removed and a walking path is installed. Plans call for the detours to be in place from January 30 into February.

“With this project, we will take our guests on an adventure through one of the most incredible places on earth to see a magnificent animal that deserves our attention, love and respect,” said Audubon Nature Institute President and CEO Ron Forman.

Philanthropists Joy and Boysie Bollinger donated \$5 million to Audubon Nature Institute to fund design and construction of the lion exhibit. The \$5 million donation is the largest single gift Audubon Zoo has ever received from a private individual or family.

Cobalt Construction of Slidell, La., is the lead contractor on the project that will generate an estimated 100 jobs during construction. CLR Design of Philadelphia is the architect.

The new habitat will be the first step in a larger redesign of the Zoo’s popular African Savanna exhibit that opened in the 1980s. Lions have been cared for by Audubon Nature Institute since the 1940s but have not been at Audubon Zoo for nearly five years.

Bubba, a male, died of cancer in May 2013 and female Cassie – now 20 years old – has been moved to the Freeport-McMoRan Audubon Species Survival Center on the West Bank where she is receiving geriatric care in her large habitat.

The new exhibit’s focal point will be a replica of an abandoned 1920s-era train station – a tragic symbol of the transportation system that once spanned lion country and opened the door to habitat loss, poaching and the devastation of Africa’s vast natural resources across the continent.

Mock train cars will be repurposed into conservation and research stations where Zoo staff will offer animal care and education demonstrations. The design will offer panoramic views of the site along with places for up-close looks at the majestic animals. The habitat will be built to accommodate multiple lions, though it has not been determined how many animals will reside at Audubon.

“Our hope is that this exhibit sends a message that humans have seen the error of their ways,” said Audubon Zoo General Curator and Vice President Joel Hamilton.

The lion population in the wild - more than 450,000 in the 1940s - has dwindled to around 20,000 today.

"Indiscriminate hunting, habitat loss, competition for resources, introduced diseases and persecution of predator species across Africa have contributed to a drastic decline in lion numbers," Hamilton added. "We must remember the failures of the past and learn from them. And we are excited to share current and future successes in conservation as people learn to live side by side with lions."

Working with the lion Species Survival Plan overseen by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Audubon hopes to breed lions. Animals will be chosen for the habitat based on the best genetic and behavioral matches available to help bolster the lion population in human care.

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