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## **Audubon Zoo Welcomes Critically Endangered Western Lowland Gorilla**

(New Orleans, La.) - The final piece in a plan to assemble a new Audubon Zoo gorilla troop is now in place with the arrival of Alafia, a 27-year-old female Western Lowland gorilla. The reformed gorilla group is designed to bolster the population of a critically endangered species.

Alafia (the word for “peace” in the language of the Yoruba community of Nigeria) moved here last month from the Los Angeles Zoo, her home for the last nine years. In 2000, Alafia welcomed her only offspring to date, Naku, at Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle, where both mother and daughter were born.

In addition to Alafia, the new Audubon gorilla troop includes Okpara, a silverback male from Franklin Park Zoo who arrived here in December; Tumani, an 11-year-old female Western Lowland gorilla from Cheyenne Mountain Zoo; and Praline, a female who is the last gorilla born at Audubon 22 years ago.

Currently, Alafia is residing behind the scenes as animal care providers and veterinary staff complete a standard quarantine protocol to ensure that new arrivals don't bring in any diseases or parasites with them that could cause problems for the existing animals in Audubon Zoo's care.

The new gorilla troop may not be visible to the public for a time as Okpara and the three females engage in a structured introduction process to ensure they bond socially. Animal care experts stress that this is a key step toward establishing a cohesive unit.

“Alafia brings experience raising offspring and her social savviness with being part of complex social structures,” said Courtney Eparvier, Curator of Primates at Audubon Zoo. “She will no doubt make a positive impact on our new group. We look forward to the future of our new gorilla group and hope Audubon Zoo will contribute to the Western Lowland gorilla population.”

Los Angeles Zoo officials described Alafia's departure as bittersweet.

“We're going to miss Alafia's quirky spirit and unique personality, but we're excited for the next phase of her life at Audubon Zoo,” said Los Angeles Zoo Senior Animal Keeper Nancy Bunn. “She's going to be part of a new family group where she can teach the younger females maternal skills that she's gained throughout her life. We wish her the best.”

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

Los Angeles Zoo, Franklin Park Zoo, Cheyenne Mountain Zoo and Audubon Zoo are active participants in the Gorilla Species Survival Plan (SSP), a cooperative, inter-zoo program coordinated nationally through the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). Species Survival Plans help to ensure the survival of selected species in zoos and aquariums.

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.

Eparvier described the collaborative, year-long effort to form the new gorilla troop as an “incredible” experience.

“Working with four different facilities, organizing the logistics, ensuring a smooth transition for the animals and ultimately introducing them into new social situations has been an honor,” she said. “To know that we all work together to help save this species is extremely rewarding.”

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