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Ape homes now dry as Great Ape Trust begins cleanup from record flooding

Veterinarian: Bonobos and orangutans come through ordeal in great shape

Des Moines, Iowa – June 16, 2008 – Floodwaters have receded from the buildings housing Great Ape Trust of Iowa’s resident bonobos and orangutans and the massive cleanup effort is under way after the Des Moines River spilled from its banks and flooded the 230-acre campus in southeast Des Moines. At the peak of the event, the entire campus was under water.

The great apes living at the scientific research facility, where studies into ape intelligence, language and behavior are conducted, were never in jeopardy and were monitored throughout the ordeal by caretakers who worked around the clock to ensure their well-being.

Water entered the ape homes on Thursday, June 12, and despite sandbags and discharge pumps, reached levels of two to three feet. The buildings are constructed on floating concrete slabs, and builders recommended keeping water levels at about six inches to provide for maximum stability until water pressure from outside could be relieved.

“The hardest part is now in the rearview mirror, and we have replaced worry with hard work and optimism,” said Dr. Rob Shumaker, director of orangutan research. “The

NEWS RELEASE

apes are doing really, really well at this point. We expect that the orangutans will essentially be back to normal in terms of their areas in a few days. There's significantly more work to be done in the human areas of the building."

William M. Fields, director of bonobo research, said bonobo caretakers were washing down the buildings with disinfectant with the goal of returning the bonobos to their sunroom, commonly called "the greenhouse." Until that cleanup is completed, they are spending time in the 25-foot towers designed to simulate the environment of wild bonobos.

"Due to the hard work of the dedicated staff, the bonobos were kept safe and comfortable throughout this ordeal with a minimum of inconvenience to them," Fields said. "With cleanup well under way now, the bonobos will be back to a normal routine very shortly.

"They have indicated they are eager to get back in the greenhouse by pointing to the symbol on their lexigrams," Fields added.

Great Ape Trust veterinarian Dr. Brigetta Hughes said the apes came through the ordeal without adverse affects. "The apes weathered this wonderfully," she said. "Everybody is comfortable, healthy and not too stressed, and that has a lot to do with being around people they know and who are trying to be upbeat and reassuring."

Hughes said ape caretakers collected urine samples from the apes throughout the flooding to they can measure levels of cortisol and other stress hormones to determine how they coped with the emergency in comparison with other major events in their lives. The results won't be known for several weeks.

"We had two days where the apes were affected significantly, and that was when we were managing water in the buildings," Shumaker said. "None of that was a threat to the safety of the apes, but it did restrict the places they could go in their buildings."

The bonobo and orangutan homes appear to be structurally sound, and mechanical, electrical and computer systems will be inspected this week. The four administrative buildings, which were of modular construction, had about six feet of water inside and are considered a complete loss. An estimate of damage on the campus is expected this week.

Flooding inside the ape residences was an unexpected development because they

NEWS RELEASE

were built well above the crest of the historic Floods of 1993. Trust officials speculate flooding at Great Ape Trust may have been exacerbated by post-1993 construction of a four-lane highway, which acted as a levee to impede the flow of floodwaters. Portions of the Highway 65/69 beltway remain closed today as floodwaters move over the roadway, further easing the situation at Great Ape Trust.

Recovery efforts are being coordinated from a nearby private residence Great Ape Trust leases for visiting scientists and guests.

As Great Ape Trust recovers, officials are mindful of the losses sustained by other Iowans in the record-breaking Floods of 2008. “Despite what has been a very difficult situation, all of the apes are healthy and fine, and all of the people are healthy are fine,” Shumaker said. “Not everyone in Iowa can say that. Some people have lost their homes and their lives, and they are in our thoughts and prayers.”

GREAT APE TRUST BACKGROUND

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in southeast Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, Great Ape Trust will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities.

Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes. Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization and is certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). To learn more about Great Ape Trust of Iowa, go to www.GreatApeTrust.org.

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Insights Through Collaborations with Apes