

Navajo Nation ZooFest Saturday

Friday
May 2, 2008



LEFT: Navajo Nation Zoo Curator Matthew Holdgate has been in charge of the zoo in Window Rock for the past seven months, and is working to bring more visitors and some big changes to the facility. **RIGHT:** A red fox rests on top of the small hut in its enclosure Wednesday at the zoo. [photos by Jeff Jones / Independent]

By Karen Francis
Diné Bureau

WINDOW ROCK — The Navajo Nation Zoological and Botanical Park is holding its annual ZooFest Saturday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The ZooFest is an opportunity for the tribal zoo to showcase the changes it has made since it became a Fish and Wildlife program and since the new curator, Matty Holdgate, came onboard in mid-September.

The day will begin with a welcome from President Joe Shirley Jr. At 10 a.m., a jump castle and slide will open and music will be played by DJ Xscape. At 11 a.m., door prizes for children will be given away at the stage and lunch concessions will start. At 1 p.m. more door prizes will be given away, and face painting and picture-taking with zoo animals will take place. At 3 p.m. is a sponsor award ceremony and more door prizes. Raffle tickets will be available for prizes such as a Pendleton and gift certificates. All day there will be zoo games and free activity books in the Kid's Corner.

The Kid's Corner is one of the improvements that have been made since Holdgate became the curator. Holdgate, originally from New Hampshire, has education and experience in wildlife biology. He came to the Navajo Nation from Lake Tahoe where he worked with the U.S. Forest Services.

His background fits in with the direction that the zoo is going since becoming a Fish and Wildlife program.

Another change that the zoo has made is with the first exhibit upon entering the main building. It used to be goldfish because they are easy to care for, but the zoo has now replaced those with native fish.

"We're developing the zoo in response to comments from visitors, which is primarily that we need more animals and to develop educational projects," Holdgate said.

One of the main messages that Holdgate wants to get out is that admission to the zoo is free. For a short time, the zoo had been charging admission in an attempt to generate revenue. As a result, many people are not aware that there are no admission fees at the zoo now.

"We're trying to redefine ourselves as a stable institution worthy of public support,"

Holdgate said that one of the plans for the future of the zoo is to build an eagle sanctuary which would pave the way for the tribe to issue eagle feathers, rather than having to ask the federal government for any.

"We're trying to replicate the Zuni program," he said. The Zuni Eagle Sanctuary, he said, was developed with U.S. Forest Services and is one of only two tribes that has authority to issue its own eagle feathers. Other tribes, including Navajo, have to hand over eagle feathers to the federal depository which re-distributes them. Waiting for a feather can take years, Holdgate said.

To develop such an eagle sanctuary for Navajo would require building an aviary and meeting federal guidelines.

"We're promoting the idea now," Holdgate said.

The zoo is open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Information: (928) 871-6574.