

The Boston Globe

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 2006

Zoo plans big renovation for return of Little Joe

\$2.3m cage designed to prevent escape

By Jenna Russell

GLOBE STAFF

Three years after the gorilla known as Little Joe broke out of the Franklin Park Zoo and mauled a 2-year-old girl, the facility announced plans yesterday for a glass-walled cage that will let him see his public again — but prevent another escape.

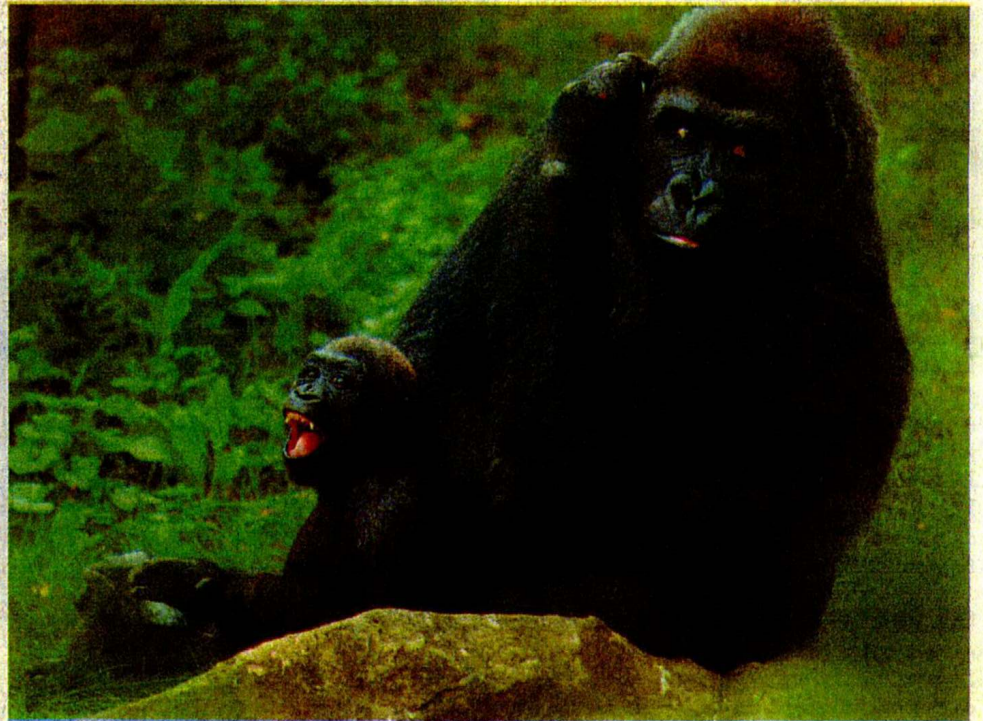
The renovation of the exhibition space inside the zoo's Tropical Forest building will include new triple-layer glass walls around the enclosure and a new mesh cap of woven steel cables over the top. Work began last week on the \$2.3 million project, which will be used

to display all seven of the zoo's gorillas by early next year, said John Linehan, president of Zoo New England, the nonprofit entity that manages the Boston zoo.

"This will allow us to bring out our two male gorillas, who have been off-exhibit for the past three years," he said. "To get them back on exhibit will benefit our visitors and the gorillas — they enjoy being out there, and I'm sure they're [the gorillas are] looking forward to it with bated breath."

The zoo's two adolescent male gorillas, Little Joe and Okpara, known as "Okie," have been kept away from the public since Joe's leap out of the gorilla exhibit in September 2003, an incident that sparked national debate about the caging of wild animals.

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JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Kiki, a 23-year-old gorilla, tended to her baby, Kimani, at an exhibit at the Franklin Park Zoo in Dorchester. The younger male gorillas have been off display.

Zoo plans renovations for return of gorillas

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Joe, now 13 years old, spends his days snacking on popcorn and raisins, playing with toys, including a red plastic airplane, and learning new voice commands from trainers, all out of sight of the public. As he grows older and more mature, he is less interested in watching "Teletubbies," though zookeepers said he still enjoys the occasional "Nova" documentary.

He has grown bigger, weighing in at close to 400 pounds, according to the exhibit's assistant curator, and is calm and obedient.

At 300 pounds, Joe made his first brief escape over the wall around the indoor gorilla enclosure in August 2003. Six weeks later, he climbed over the wall and barreled out of the pavilion, attacking two terrified girls. Courtney Roberson, 18, an off-duty zoo employee, and her 2-year-old family friend, Nia Scott, were visiting the zoo together; both were thrown on the ground and dragged, and they suffered cuts and bruises. For more than two hours, Joe terrorized the neighborhood before police fired tranquilizer darts to corral him.

Roberson and the mother of the injured toddler have sued the zoo; the suits are pending.

Yesterday, the lawyer representing both families said the zoo's improvements are being made too late.

"Why did it take two escapes and gorilla attacks on two innocent girls before Zoo New England finally decided to make the necessary modifications to the exhibit to contain this gorilla?" Donald L. Gibson said.

He said the \$2.3 million cost of the project reflects the scope of the zoo's safety problem.

After Joe's escape, zoo officials described him as an "extraordinary" animal who was able to scale his cage — surrounded by a 12-foot moat and electric-shock cables — because his teenage



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

John Linehan, president of Zoo New England, held a news conference to detail the renovations for the gorilla exhibit at the Franklin Park Zoo in Dorchester.

weight had not caught up to his tremendous arm strength. They ruled out euthanizing Joe, a member of the endangered western lowland gorilla species, but also determined that they lacked the money to upgrade security. They tried to interest other zoos in Joe and Okie, but found no takers.

The money for the renovation is now in hand, Linehan said, after gifts from private donors and state government, plus a donation from the city's host committee of leftover cash from the 2004 Democratic National Convention.

The plans for the new compound have undergone extensive review to make sure the gorillas cannot escape, Linehan said. A test run of the enclosure, with the gorillas inside, will be conducted before it is opened to the public.

The zoo's four female gorillas — Gigi, Kiki, Kira, and Kimani — have remained on public display, along with the mature male Kitombe, while Little Joe and Okie adapted to a quieter life behind

the scenes in a private, mesh-enclosed complex inside the zoo pavilion. Zookeepers said they have worked hard to make sure the male gorillas remain stimulated in seclusion, bringing them gifts to unwrap, new scents, and even new music, including country and classical. The male gorillas also have access to a narrow, 80-foot-long outdoor run.

Male and female gorillas are reunited every evening in the indoor complex, zookeepers said, when "the girls" come in from their busy day of interacting with visitors. Joe and Okie are always glad to see them.

"They get very excited, and there's a lot of vocalizing and running around, a lot of chest-beating," said Jeannine Jackie, assistant curator.

The gorillas' 9,000-square-foot indoor exhibition space will be closed during the construction, but the rest of the massive pavilion, including displays of exotic pygmy hippos and dwarf croco-

diles, will remain open. When the weather is good, the female gorillas will be exhibited in their outdoor enclosure.

The renovated space will give the gorillas unprecedented opportunities for vertical climbing, and will include an area where zookeepers can interact with the gorillas while visitors watch, zoo officials said.

Yesterday, the excitement generated by the gorillas was obvious at the zoo. When Linehan briefly opened the door to the viewing area closed for construction, two small boys immediately sprinted through the opening, shouting: "Gorillas! Gorillas!"

Zoo visitor Lamarr Monterio, 24, of Easton, said yesterday that he's looking forward to seeing Little Joe. "It seems unfair that he's here but we can't see him," he said. "Gorillas — that's my favorite animal by far."

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