

Behind the Scenes with the President

March 2007

Dear Friend of the Zoo,

Talking with people about the Zoo has become one of the real pleasures of my job. Growing up very shy, people who know me well are amazed at how effortless it is for me to talk about the Zoo. People assume that I must get tired of talking about work, but frankly it energizes me. My work at the Zoo and my personal commitment to the natural world are so intertwined; it's something I enjoy immensely and feel lucky to be a part of.

The current topic of conversation for many Zoo supporters and guests is our recent gorilla birth. This situation is so radically different from our last gorilla baby, Umande, who was born just over a year ago to a mother who did not know how to care for him. Umande is now with a surrogate (adoptive mother) and a silverback at the Columbus Zoo in Ohio, and is doing exceptionally well. All the crawling around on our knees, all the nights we spent with him, all the things we did to prepare him for his life as a gorilla really paid off. We worked hard to break the cycle of hand-reared gorillas that have difficulty assimilating with other gorillas and/or raising their own offspring. Even though she is similar in age and upbringing to Umande's mother, Asha is raising her baby and from all indications is doing everything right.

One of the questions I'm frequently asked is, "When will you know the gender of the baby gorilla?" Because this situation is different from Umande's, we will only find out opportunistically or through close keeper observations. That is, if there is some compelling reason to believe the baby is in trouble, forcing us to intervene for health reasons, only then would the veterinary staff examine the infant. Or the keeper staff may find out if Asha brings the baby close enough to them that they can get a good look. Otherwise, it could be months before we know for sure, although the keepers already suspect the baby is a girl!

Another thing people want to know is what we did differently to prepare for this baby. We knew from past experience that even though a mother might pick up her infant, she may not know how to nurse or may have problems with milk production. Since that situation is difficult to prepare for, we focused our attention on maternal training with Asha. This training took place in the months before Asha gave birth. Through the use of operant conditioning and positive reinforcement, the keepers taught Asha to bring her "baby" to a meshed section of the enclosure so keepers would potentially be able to bottle feed an infant through the mesh. They also worked with her on how to properly hold an infant in a nursing position. In our case, Asha's "baby" was a towel, which was readily passed back and forth between Asha and the keeper – another behavior trained using positive reinforcement!

The longer I work at the Zoo, the more I learn about life. Although we leave it to our guests to make up their own minds about the similarities between animals and humans, I've drawn some basic correlations between gorilla behaviors and human behaviors. What is so interesting to me is the concept of modeling behaviors. As I mentioned earlier, our two female gorilla mothers are similar in age and in their upbringing. And yet, for reasons unknown, one gorilla chose not to have anything to do with her baby while the other is an ideal parent. Given the similar circumstances, did Asha intuitively know what to do or did she model her keepers' behaviors and interactions with Umande?

One interesting behavior does give us a clue. Almost every human mother, father, aunt, uncle or friend somehow intuitively knows to rock a baby back and forth and pat it on the back. However, gorillas do not do this. Remember, though that Asha was hand-raised by our General Curator here at the Zoo. Imagine our surprise when within hours of the baby's birth, Asha started patting her new baby! Whenever you think you have not made an impact in life, you probably just did not look hard enough.

Cheyenne Mountain Zoo continues to be a resource for learning about all things in the natural world, from animal dynamics to human behavior. In the end, we are all connected in a way that is sometimes difficult to explain. We are so appreciative for all the connections and partnerships that you as donors and supporters bring to us. We hope that we can continue serving the community in ways that are meaningful and long lasting.

Sincerely,



Bob Chastain
President & CEO
Cheyenne Mountain Zoo