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Contact: JJ Vitale ▪ 904.757.4463, ext. 145 ▪ cell: 904-635-5035 ▪ vitalej@jacksonvillezoo.org
Janet Wesley ▪ 904.757.4463, ext. 210 ▪ cell: 904-472-3699 ▪ wesleyj@jacksonvillezoo.org

Construction Starting on the Zoo's Newest Exhibit African Forest – A New Home for the Great Apes Coming 2018

June 20, 2017 – *Jacksonville, FL* – Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens (JZG) will soon begin construction on the African Forest, a major remodeling initiative of the Great Apes Loop to include gorillas, bonobos, mandrills, and lemurs.

The African Forest, a \$9 million, 10 acre project, will incorporate “wellness-inspired design.” This philosophy of exhibit architecture builds in choices, challenges and variation to stimulate the animals. The new exhibit will replace the current Great Apes Loop opened in 1990 and in need of a facelift.

“With The Land of The Tiger and The Range of The Jaguar winning national recognition as being among the best zoo exhibits in the country, the bar has been raised. Our members and visitors now expect everything we do at the Zoo to be at a standard that will make our community proud to say Jacksonville has one of the very best zoos in the country,” said JZG Executive Director Tony Vecchio. “The new African Forest will continue that legacy. Rather than just spruce up what is now one of the Zoo’s oldest exhibits, our board of directors and staff have taken on the challenge of making the Great Apes area an experience that will be special for our visitors, and, for our animals.”

Construction will begin early July, with demolition starting on July 5, 2017. During this time, there will be partial or full closings of the Great Apes Loop until completion in 2018, but the final result will be truly transformative!

From the moment guests approach the new African Forest entryway, they will be captivated by a magnificent 40-foot buttressed tropical tree. This iconic tree will serve as the heart and hub of the new exhibit. Enveloped in lightweight, super-strong woven mesh, the tree will be accessed by several aerial trails like those in Land of the Tiger and will be time-shared by the different species.

A brand-new bonobo house and two large outdoor mesh-covered, naturalistic habitats will be constructed where the lemur and mandrill exhibits currently stand. Lemurs, too, will be getting a new habitat, and the gorillas and mandrills will enjoy totally remodeled and refurbished enclosures.

Enclosing the bonobo yards will allow guests to view apes at eye-level rather than from above. Within these covered exhibits, the bonobos will now have the chance to choose an after-dark visit to their habitat and even view the night sky if they wish.

A Capital Campaign to raise \$9 million for the project is underway. Anyone interested in supporting the project should contact the Zoo’s Development Department. A generous \$2 million donation from Dan and Brenda Davis is especially meaningful as the Davis family contributed heavily in the original Great Apes construction campaign.

Because some of the residents may not be within public view, the Zoo recognizes that guests may miss seeing the animals in the Great Apes Loop and plans to take video and share pictures of them playing often. Even though only a few of the animals, such as the lemurs and siamang gibbons will be relocated to other parts of the Zoo where they can be visited, all the primates will still have access to outdoor areas during the renovation.

With the Great Apes Loop closing to public access on July 5, the Fourth of July weekend is a perfect time to visit. The Zoo is offering a Buy-One, Get-One Free admission special on general admission tickets July 1 – 4 with a coupon found on the website. www.jacksonvillezoo.org/4thofjuly

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About Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens

For over 100 years, the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens has aimed to inspire the discovery and appreciation of wildlife through innovative experiences in a caring environment. Starting in 1914 with an animal collection of one red deer fawn, the Zoo now has more than 2,000 rare and exotic animals and 1,000 species of plants, boasting the largest botanical garden in Northeast Florida. **The Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens is a nonprofit organization and a portion of every ticket sold goes to the over 45 conservation initiatives Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens supports around the world, and here in NE Florida.** JZG is proud to be an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums. For more information, visit jacksonvillezoo.org.