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Zoo Anxiously Prepares to Reunite Baby Gorilla with Mother Reintroduction Scheduled for February 26

February 25, 2019 – *Jacksonville, FL* – Staff at the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens are preparing for Gandai’s reunification with her mother and the rest of the Western lowland gorilla troop with confident anticipation. After nearly five months of 24-hour care by the keepers and countless consults with peers at other zoos, keepers are hoping for the best, but prepared for multiple outcomes.

Animal care staff at the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens knew that there was always going to be some level of risk involved in Kumbuka’s motherhood journey. She had lost two infants at a previous institution because of her improper positioning of them. She came to Jacksonville in 2014 to learn mothering skills from the experienced females in the troop. Soon after arriving in Jacksonville, keepers suspected Kumbuka was hearing impaired which was confirmed with an exam performed by Nemours Children’s Specialty Clinic.

Armed with more information about this important mother within the Species Survival Plan, the gorilla team began a multi-pronged approach to helping Kumbuka become a successful mother including training on infant-handling. Unfortunately, when she gave birth in late September 2018, although she exhibited perfect maternal behaviors in all other ways, Kumbuka immediately began carrying the infant in an unsafe position. The difficult decision was made to intervene for the baby’s survival. Keepers would assist in raising the infant until the day she could be safely reunited with her mother.

Keepers have provided round-the-clock care for the young Gandai. They have slept in the gorilla building so that Gandai was never apart from her gorilla family. The dedicated caregivers have walked around on hands and knees in a “gorilla walk” so Gandai would learn the proper ways to hold on when she is in her mother’s care. They’ve helped her reach all her milestones so that she could once again be a full member of the troop.

Now that the time has come for Gandai and Kumbuka to take the next step in their journey, the staff of Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens is anxious to see if the carefully planned reunion goes as hoped.

Gandai has remained in close contact with Kumbuka and the rest of the troop but direct contact has been through a mesh barrier. The next step will be placing Gandai in an area and allowing Kumbuka full access. Now that Gandai is strong enough to position herself on Kumbuka, there is reduced concern of injury and hope that Gandai may even help Kumbuka learn safe infant-holding techniques.

Keepers refer to the reunification of Gandai with Kumbuka as “Plan A.” It is an ideal outcome that would have the mother and daughter reuniting and bonding behind the scenes for some time before Lash, Gandai’s father, joined them. After the small family spends some time bonding further, the gorilla team will assess the potential for safely introducing the other gorillas. This might not be how the story ends.

If Kumbuka does not show the appropriate response to the infant, “Plan B” involves Jacksonville Zoo’s experienced mother Bulera stepping in as a surrogate. Bulera is the mother of 23-year-old Madini and 4-year-old George. She has consistently shown interest in Gandai through the mesh barrier. George is a precocious youngster who is both fully weaned and enjoys his independence, making his mother available as a surrogate.

However, there is a “Plan C” that involves Gandai going to live at another AZA accredited zoo for surrogacy so that she can join a natural social group and continue to thrive. The gorilla management team has identified several candidates at other zoos who could be good surrogate mothers if needed. Whatever outcome prevails, Gandai’s safety and the wellness and stability of the Western lowland gorillas at the Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens are the priority.

Reintroduction scheduled for Tuesday, February 26. Guests and media will not be able to view the reintroduction. Gorillas will be off exhibit for tomorrow and possibly longer as the family is most comfortable when in sight of each other. Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens will be updating media and public on the outcome of the process.

[Dropbox link to video of Gandai playing near Kumbuka by Senior Mammal Keeper Lynde Nunn](#)

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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.