

# Orangutans at Miami zoo use iPads to communicate

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In this Feb. 21, 2012 photo, an orangutan works with an IPAD at Jungle Island in Miami. Experts who work with primates have been using sign language and other methods to communicate with apes for years. But with advancements in tablet computer technology, workers at Jungle Island in Miami are using iPads to better communicate with their orangutans. (AP Photo/J Pat Carter)

(AP) -- The 8-year-old twins love their iPad. They draw, play games and expand their vocabulary. Their family's teenagers also like the hand-held computer tablets, too, but the clan's elders show no interest.

The [orangutans](#) at Miami's Jungle Island apparently are just like people when it comes to technology. The park is one of several zoos experimenting with computers and apes, letting its six orangutans use an [iPad](#) to communicate and as part of a mental [stimulus](#) program. Linda Jacobs, who oversees the program, hopes the devices will eventually help

bridge the gap between humans and the endangered apes.

"Our young ones pick up on it. They understand it. It's like, 'Oh I get this,'" Jacobs said. "Our two older ones, they just are not interested. I think they just figure, 'I've gotten along just fine in this world without this communication-skill here and the iPad, and I don't need a computer.'"

Jacobs said she began letting the orangutans use iPads last summer, based on the suggestion of someone who had used the devices with dolphins. The software was originally designed for humans with [autism](#) and the screen displays pictures of various objects. A trainer then names one of the objects, and the ape presses the corresponding button.

The devices have been a great addition to the enrichment programs Jungle Island already does with the orangutans, Jacobs said. Keepers have long used [sign language](#) to communicate with them. Using their hands, the orangutans can respond to simple questions, identify objects and express their wants or needs. The apes can also identify [body parts](#), helping the trainers care for them and even give them shots.

"We're able to really monitor their health on a daily basis," Jacobs said of the need for communication with the orangutans. "We can do daily checks. If somebody's not feeling well, we know it immediately."

While Jacobs and other trainers have developed strong relationships with the orangutans, the iPad and other touchscreen computers offer an opportunity for them to communicate with people not trained in their sign language.

"It would just be such a wonderful bridge to have," Jacobs said. "So that other people could really appreciate them."

Orangutans are extremely intelligent but limited by their physical inability to talk, she said.

"They are sort of trapped in those bodies," Jacobs said. "They have the intelligence that they need to communicate, but they don't have the right equipment, because they don't have voice boxes or vocal cords. So this gives them a way to let us know what they know, what they are capable of, what they would like to have."

Other zoos and nature parks are doing similar work.

Richard Zimmerman, executive director of Orangutan Outreach, said he's building an "Apps For Apes" program with old, donated iPads at facilities throughout North America, though Jungle Island isn't part of that group. Orangutan Outreach started working with the Milwaukee County [Zoo](#) and then expanded to zoos in Atlanta, Salt Lake City, Toronto, Houston and elsewhere. They're hoping to use a video-conferencing program to reconnect orangutans with friends and family members who have been transferred to other zoos, he said.

"We're putting together what we're calling primate playdates or red ape rendezvous, which is to say connecting the orangutans in different facilities," Zimmerman said. "We're looking at a larger picture."

When it comes to orangutans, the iPad itself has limitations. First, the relatively small screen causes orangutans to hit the wrong buttons sometimes. Also, the touchscreen won't register if they try to use their fingernails. Most importantly, the devices are just too fragile to actually hand over to the apes - the trainers must hold them.

"If I gave them the iPad, I could just basically hand them \$600 and say, 'Go have fun,'" Jacobs said. "So until we come up with a better screen or a better case, I'm going to hold onto the iPad."

If Jacobs gets her way, a more secure interface might not be far off. The long-term plan is to set up a larger, orangutan-proof screen in the holding area, along with another screen outside for guests. They would ask the orangutans questions and the apes could respond.

"It's really just a matter of getting the technology and equipment here," Jacobs said. "There's not a doubt in my mind that they could do it and would be marvelous at it, and I think the public would absolutely love it."

It's important to note that training the orangutans isn't done to entertain Jungle Island workers or guests. Because the animals are so intelligent, Jacobs said their minds must be kept active to prevent them from getting bored or depressed. The challenge is making the enrichment activities enjoyable.

"They need a lot of stimulation," Jacobs said. "Training isn't mandatory, but they love it."

Scientist and conservationist Birute Mary Galdikas, founder of Orangutan Foundation International, said orangutans are among the most intelligent animals. Orangutans in the wild, where Galdikas has studied the [apes](#) for more than four decades, routinely use tools to scratch themselves, swat insects and create simple shelters. In captivity, Galdikas said orangutans have demonstrated remarkable creative-thinking skills, specifically in their ability to escape enclosures.

"Anything that Jungle Island can do to help their orangutans while away the day is to be commended," Galdikas said. "IPads seem to work for humans. It's not surprising that orangutans, who share 97 percent of their genetic material with humans, like them, too."

**More information:**

Miss Millie Foundation, <http://missmillie.org>

Jungle Island, <http://jungleisland.com>

Orangutan Outreach, <http://redapes.org>

Orangutan Foundation International, <http://orangutan.org>

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