

# Home on the range: Antelope get new digs in New Orleans

September 28 2017, by Janet McConnaughey

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In this Sept. 26, 2017 photo, Tufani, a 3-month-old giraffe, and Bobby, an adult bull giraffe, stand by the fence of their enclosure at the Alliance for Sustainable Wildlife in New Orleans. Tufani was born at the New Orleans breeding center, but officials wanted to be sure all of the animals were used to their new digs before a news conference Thursday at which officials of the Audubon Nature Institute and the San Diego Zoo Global Wildlife Conservancy were to announce that the center is up and running. (AP Photo/Janet McConnaughey)

A few tiny herds of African antelope have a new home on ranges in New Orleans, and zookeepers hope they will take advantage of the extra space away from curious crowds of humans to relax and reproduce.

The Alliance for Sustainable Wildlife breeding center has developed 88 acres (35 hectares) of its 1,000-acre (400-hectare) parcel of land, on the other side of the Mississippi River from the much smaller Audubon Zoo, where about 2,000 animals are on display.

In addition to 22 antelope—eight elands, six sable antelope, six Eastern bongos and two yellow-backed duiker (pronounced DIKE-er)—the area also will serve as home for seven giraffes and two okapi, a close relation to the giraffe that stands out from the rest because of its black-and-white-striped legs. Most of the animals have been moved here from the San Diego Zoo and its safari park.

"We're letting them be animals, letting them do their thing," said Michelle Hatwood, curator for the center, jointly established by the Audubon Nature Institute, an umbrella organization that includes the Audubon Zoo, and the San Diego Zoo Global Wildlife Conservancy.

The land, which is owned by The Audubon Institute and the Coast Guard, was used for 20 years by an Audubon project that focused on cloning and artificial insemination of endangered animals. The San Diego Zoo covered the \$5.2 million cost for new site work, including the paddocks with solar-powered double gates, zoo spokesman Frank Donze said. The two zoos are sharing a little more than \$1 million a year in operating costs, Hatwood said.

Officials from both zoos planned a news conference Thursday, about 4½ years after announcing the project, to celebrate its official opening.



In this Sept. 26, 2017, photo, a sable antelope appears during a media tour in the new breeding facility created by the Audubon Nature Institute and the San Diego Zoo Global Wildlife Conservancy in New Orleans. Officials see the new Alliance for Sustainable Wildlife as both a place to breed animals, some of them endangered, and build a sustainable population for zoos, and as a possible inspiration for other zoos to start similar projects. (AP Photo/Janet McConnaughey)

In the new facility, six Eastern bongo, nearly chest-high to Hatwood, and a pair of yellow-backed duiker about half their size share 3 acres (1 hectare).

The bongo are from what Hatwood described as a critically endangered subspecies with fewer than 100 in the wild, though North American zoos hold about 550.

"Bongo are water-loving forest antelope, so this is their dream," Hatwood said Tuesday, as she and zoo curator Joel Hamilton took journalists on a preview tour through the paddocks on a low flatbed trailer with hay bale seats.

The duiker were delighted with their new environment, she said: "They immediately started to breed. They were excited by all the space."

The bongo and duiker will move into a 12-acre (5-hectare) enclosure when its current occupants—eight eland and six sable antelope—move into a 45-acre (18-hectare) enclosure with the seven giraffes, including two who arrived pregnant.

"The exciting thing about the whole project is that in these large spaces, we're really able to increase the population sizes so they're much more sustainable for the future," Robert "Bob" Wiese, chief life sciences officer at San Diego Global, said in a phone interview Tuesday.



This Sept. 26, 2017 photo, shows an eland at a new breeding center created by Audubon Nature Institute and the San Diego Zoo Global Wildlife Conservancy in New Orleans. Officials see the new Alliance for Sustainable Wildlife as both a place to breed animals, some of them endangered, and build a sustainable population for zoos, and as a possible inspiration for other zoos to start similar projects. (AP Photo/Janet McConnaughey)

While most of the animals have explored all their new territory, the giraffe—sentinels of the savannah and browsers along the forest's edge—are cautious beasts and have stayed at the perimeter near their barn, Hatwood said. "They're the drama queens," she said.

Giraffe aren't currently considered threatened or endangered, but that's likely to change after scientists fully study recent genetic and population work, Hatwood said.

The eland aren't endangered either, but are great for teaching people about relationships between people and wild animals, Hatwood said. They're the world's largest antelope—weighing up to 1 ton (1,000 kilograms) each—and are often poached. But they're also being studied for farming because they're easier on the environment than cattle and are calmer than most antelope, she said.

Two male okapi, endangered because of poaching and habitat loss, are being kept in separate 1-acre (0.4-hectare) enclosures. That's because, unlike their female counterparts, they don't play nicely together. Omar, a bottle-raised animal, quickly came forward for treats of carrot and yam on Tuesday, but Kikari stayed distant and camouflaged, barely visible among the close-spaced trees.

The staff have set aside 22 acres (9 hectares) for females to share, with the first one expected to arrive in October, Hatwood said. Females of all the species will be fairly permanent residents of the center, but males will be rotated so they don't mate with their daughters.

The two zoos have decided on a number of Asian and African mammals for Phase 2, which could begin in a couple of years: wild pigs called babirusa and wild cattle called banteng, both from Indonesia; barasingha deer, an Indian species; and two more African antelope species—lechwe and sitatunga.

The breeding facility's dual aim is to provide stock for zoos, which no longer collect hoofed stock from the wild, and to inspire other zoos to form similar collaborations, both curators said.

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