

Navajo Zoo opens doors of eagle sanctuary

Written by By Mia Rose Poris Sun Editor
Friday, 15 July 2016 00:28



Zoo's new facility educates about, protects livelihood of sacred bird

On July 1, after five years in the making, The Navajo Nation Zoo opened the doors of its Eagle Aviary and Education Center, a facility with space for over 25 injured birds. The sanctuary provides refuge for and care to eagles that are not releasable into the wild.

“We currently have six Golden Eagles at the Navajo Nation Eagle Sanctuary. All of the eagles are Golden Eagles ... no Bald Eagles yet,” zoologist David Mikesic told the Sun. “Two of our eagles are able to fly short distances, but four have had partial wing amputations, so they are un-flighted.”

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Annually, the zoo sees around 40,000 visitors, and the sanctuary “will hopefully allow us to provide excellent educational opportunities on eagle conservation,” Mikesic wrote in an invitation letter for the opening of the aviary.

The eagle is one of the largest birds of prey and sacred to many. According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, 40 years ago, the bald eagle was nearly extinct. Because of conservation efforts, the once dwindling eagle population has made a strong comeback over the past few decades.

Eagle feathers, which are sacred to the Navajo and used in traditional ceremonies, are difficult to obtain legally, and only federally recognized tribes may possess them. The resulting black market trade of eagle feathers and the poaching of eagles for their feathers are real threats to the species.

A 1940 bill protects the bird, and large fines and prison sentences are in place for the possession of feathers. Still, the sacred birds are both killed and maimed as a result of poaching, as the price per feather is high. The zoo hopes to reduce poaching by allowing local distribution of “live” eagle feathers to the Navajo.

“We do hope by providing feathers to the Navajo People that need them for ceremonies or other uses, then no wild birds will be harassed for feathers,” Mikesic said.

“Since eagles naturally shed their feathers once per year, we are now permitted through the US Fish and Wildlife Service to release those feathers to the Navajo People,” Mikesic explained. “We allow two long feathers (wing or tail) per year per person, plus everyone gets two bonus body and plume feathers.”

Valid identification is required for feather applicants.

The 4,000-square-foot aviary was made possible by contributors such as former President Ben

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Shelly and the 23rd Navajo Nation council; the Navajo Tourism Department; US Fish & Wildlife Service; Navajo Department of Fish and Wildlife; Navajo Parks and Recreation; Navajo Forestry Department; among many others.

The zoo, which first opened in the 1970s, provides “quality exhibit of injured and orphaned Southwest wildlife,” Mikesic said, as well as “excellent animal care to over 100 animals of 50 species on a daily basis.”

The zoo’s aviary and education center is the most recent such facility in the Southwest, and the first Native American eagle sanctuary in Arizona.

***By Mia Rose Poris
Sun Editor***