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Topeka Zoo -- Give it a try

Expansion, upgrades make Gage Park facility worth a visit

The Capital-Journal Editorial Board

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It's almost springtime, when a young man's fancy turns to, well, among other things, zoos.

Since spring arrives on Wednesday, this seems like a good time to encourage Topekans who haven't been to the Topeka Zoo lately to make a visit.

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We predict two things:

- 1) You'll enjoy yourself.
- 2) You might not recognize the place.

Much has changed at the zoo since a tumultuous run earlier this decade when problems ranging from loss of accreditation to West Nile virus to a rash of animal deaths rocked the zoo, once fondly, and frequently, referred to as The World Famous Topeka Zoo.

We are confident those problems have been resolved and are encouraged by recent news detailing more expansion at the Gage Park facility.

Ground has been broken on an ambitious five-year, \$5 million effort that ultimately will result in seven new, improved projects.

The newest project will be a mountain lion and river otter exhibit. Construction is expected to start soon.

Mountain lions are returning to the Topeka Zoo for the first time in eight years. River otters haven't been part of the animal population here since 1976.

The two animal families have something in common. Both are Kansas carnivores, one aquatic, one terrestrial.

The new exhibits continue a recent trend of activity. In 2004, a new outdoor exhibit and pool were constructed for the zoo's hippos. A year later, the Jungle Cats exhibit opened, providing a return of tigers and leopards to the Topeka Zoo. And last year the zoo opened a new Grant's zebra exhibit.

And the zoo has plans for even more expansion. A new exhibit for hyenas is being studied.

This isn't your grandfather's Topeka Zoo. We think you'll like it.

We should mention, however, that not everyone shares our enthusiasm. In January, the In Defense of Animals (IDA) organization named Topeka one of the top 10 worst zoos in the United States.

IDA explained its rating by citing a lack of space for elephants, saying having elephants cooped up all day is bad for their health.

Duh.

We'll ignore the fact the Topeka Zoo provides more than the minimum amount of required space, that the elephants aren't cooped up all day and that an additional 5,000 square feet is being added inside the elephant building.

Rather than get too worked up about that rating, we'll allow our assessment of IDA's assessment to be influenced by the premise that you are judged by the company you keep.

In this case, the company Topeka keeps – that list of the Top 10 worst zoos – includes Jacksonville, St. Louis and perhaps the most famous zoo of all, San Diego.

Enjoy your day at the zoo.

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