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SCULPTURE OF TACOMA’S BELOVED IVAN WILL HELP TELL THE STORY OF CRITICALLY ENDANGERED GORILLAS AS THEIR NUMBERS DWINDLE IN THE WILD

Lifelike 600-pound bronze statue unveiled Wednesday morning in Point Defiance Park

Tacoma, Wash. – A new 600-pound ambassador for critically endangered gorillas now stands in Point Defiance Park near the entrance to Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium.



The larger-than-life sculpture of Tacoma’s beloved Ivan, cherished by generations of residents in the Puget Sound region, was unveiled Wednesday morning during a ceremony that stressed the perils of poaching and habitat loss the species faces in Africa.

Jodi Carrigan, assistant curator of primates at Zoo Atlanta, with the just-unveiled sculpture of Ivan, a western lowland gorilla, in Point Defiance Park Wednesday morning. She was among the zookeepers who cared for Ivan and got to know the gorilla well.

“Thanks to individuals like Ivan, who make special connections with us and leave us with such lasting impressions, we hope we will never face the extinction of western lowland gorillas,” said Jodi Carrigan, assistant curator of primates at Zoo Atlanta. “As we celebrate him and impact he’s made, we realize the enormous capacity he has had to change our own lives for the better. He helped us better understand the species that share our planet. And I know he will continue to live on as a powerful ambassador for gorillas everywhere.”

Carrigan was among the people who knew the gentle gorilla best, having spent several years caring for him after he joined the gorilla family in Zoo Atlanta’s award-winning habitat.



Ivan at Zoo Atlanta

She and three other speakers all emphasized that Ivan's story teaches us much about the dignity of animals and the importance of human empathy for them.

Ivan spent his early years growing up with a family in Tacoma and lived for much of his life at the B&I shopping center until moving to the gorilla habitat at Zoo Atlanta in 1994. He died four years ago at age 50.

Photo courtesy of Zoo Atlanta



The bronze sculpture by Northwest artist Douglas Granum sits in Point Defiance Park on a landing above the entrance to Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium. The Northwest zoo has never exhibited gorillas, but the message of conservation Ivan's sculpture conveys is in keeping with the zoo's mission, said Gary Geddes, director of zoological and environmental education for Metro Parks Tacoma.

Generations of children and adults got to know Ivan either while he was in Tacoma or during his later life at Zoo Atlanta, Geddes said. When children form close connections with animals, they often are eager to learn and understand the ways they can help endangered species in the wild, he added.

Metro Parks Board of Commissioners President Erik Hanberg echoed those thoughts, pointing out that there was no more fitting place in Tacoma for a memorial to Ivan. Members of the public who come to see the sculpture and then visit the zoo will learn much about ways to help conserve animals in the wild, he said.

Douglas Granum, the Northwest artist who created the sculpture, put Ivan in a pose gingerly holding a magnolia blossom, curiosity reflected in those intelligent brown eyes. Granum replicated a photograph by News Tribune photographer Dean Koepfler, taken when Ivan made his public debut at Zoo Atlanta in 1995.

The sculpture was a gift to the park district – and the people of Tacoma - from the Friends of Beloved Ivan group, which raised more than \$220,000 for the project. The artwork alone is valued at \$165,000. A team of local talent helped with all aspects of the project and fund-raising.

They established the www.belovedivan.org website and a Facebook page where members of the public could share their memories of Ivan.

Granum, who put a lifetime of experience with various media to use in the creation of the remarkably exact likeness of Ivan, is pleased the sculpture and educational materials to accompany it will teach generations about the beloved Tacoma icon.

“This was not work; it was truly a labor of love,” Granum said. “I was the artist, but this could not have been accomplished without the help of a number of organizations and individuals. I owe a debt of gratitude to The News Tribune, which graciously allowed us to replicate the photograph taken by Dean Koepfler; the Irwin family, which owned Ivan when he lived at the B&I; Form 3D Foundry of Portland; Two Ravens Studio foundry of Tacoma; and the team with whom we worked.”

Those who advocated for the memorial are thankful for the community outpouring of love for the gorilla

“Our vision was to create a sculpture that would draw people from across Washington state – and perhaps from around the world,” said Ron Irwin, son of longtime B&I owner Earl Irwin. “It is our hope that those who come to see the sculpture will be inspired to learn more about Ivan’s story and about gorillas in the wild,” he added.

“We are grateful to the Greater Tacoma Community Foundation; the Ruth Foundation, a legacy of the Gary E. Milgard Family Foundation; and other members of the community who stepped forward during our fund-raising drive to make this dream a reality,” Irwin said.

He and other members of his family were among the guests at the ceremony Wednesday morning.

Though the sculpture is installed, still to come is a series of interpretive panels that will help visitors learn about Ivan’s legacy and the perils gorillas face in the wild. Their numbers are drastically diminishing, and the gorilla species is listed as critically endangered by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.

Only an estimated 125,000 western lowland gorillas remain in Western equatorial Africa. About 250-to-300 Cross River gorillas are estimated to live in Cameroon. But estimating gorilla populations is difficult, and scientists believe there are somewhere between 2,000 and 10,000 Grauer’s gorillas and just 800 mountain gorillas in Uganda, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Here are some additional facts gathered by the Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium Education Department from a variety of gorilla conservation and scientific sources.

- In the time since Ivan was legally taken from his wild family in the 1960s, all gorilla hunting has become illegal. However, poaching remains a widespread problem and gorilla populations are declining dramatically. Gorillas are still the target of hunters who kill adults and sell the babies.
- Ivan’s memory can best be honored by helping gorillas in Africa where his story began. All species of gorillas are endangered. Their populations are in serious decline due to poaching, loss of their forest habitat, and exposure to diseases from people.
- Several conservation groups are working to protect endangered gorillas.

Established in 1995, the Wildlife Conservation Society’s Mbeli Bai Study is the longest running study on the western lowland gorillas – Ivan’s species. They continuously monitor hundreds of gorillas in their forest homes to better understand their habits and conservation needs.

The Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International protects endangered gorillas through anti-poaching efforts and conservation education programs. They also provide assistance to local communities through education, health, training and development initiatives.

- Between 2010 and 2014, 52 zoos accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums took part in a variety of field conservation projects benefiting gorillas. Over those five years alone, the AZA community invested \$4.5 million in gorilla conservation.

“The legacy Ivan leaves behind is important because he was such a remarkable and unique individual,” Carrigan said. “But the most lasting impression his life continues to leave us is the need to raise awareness of and protect his species,” she added. “Western lowland gorillas are critically endangered, and without targeted conservation efforts, we could face a time when these amazing great apes no longer exist in their native African forests.”

One small action nearly any adult can take to help gorillas in the wild is to recycle cell phones and other electronics, which use a component called coltan – a metallic ore mined in the midst of gorilla habitat in the Democratic Republic of Congo, according to Zoo Atlanta.

To learn more about gorilla conservation efforts, go to www.pdza.org/helpgorillas.

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