

# Trailing Chief Black Bison - an event for children at Rotterdam Zoo

*Chris Peters, educator at Rotterdam Zoo*

Every year, during the late spring and summer holidays, Rotterdam Zoo organises an event for children between six and 13 years of age. For 2002, it was decided that the project would be free and linked to the new Bison Prairie exhibit donated by the Friends of Rotterdam Zoo.

The “bottom (story)line” of the project was to show how people like the Native Americans lived harmoniously with nature in earlier times. They never killed for joy, but only for food and basic needs like clothing and shelter (from skins) and tools (from bones, sinews, etc). We chose Chief Black Bison as the wise man that would communicate with the children, and so we named this summer activity “Trailing Chief Black Bison”.



*Children enjoy beating a  
Native American handmade drum*

## **SHEETS AND ‘SKINS’**

The first part of the event was a trail sheet which led the children to ‘skins’ with information marked on them, each hanging in a wooden frame, and to various activities: a dance floor for the bison-dance, the bean-dance and the sun-dance; visiting the Three Sisters (a famous Indian agricultural combination of beans, corn and pumpkins); listening to the story of Turtle Island (which became America); a rock for making petroglyphs; and so on.

In completing the trail children developed their own totem, a symbolic identity something like a passport.

A totem is often an animal of power and special meaning to the person who carries its name. During their search from symbol to symbol on the ‘skins’, the children hunted certain letters. Together these formed the word ‘TATANKA’. This means ‘bison’ in the Lakota language, and was the password for an Internet site.

Back at home they could log in to [www.diergaardeblijdorp.nl](http://www.diergaardeblijdorp.nl) and use the password to access all kind of activities, like making and printing their own totem, colouring a picture, giving themselves an Indian name and a chance to win (prize for the most original name) one year’s subscription to ‘Baribal’, a famous Dutch children’s magazine about Native Americans, and more.

All the elements were designed and made in a special house style. The artificial skins were of silk screen decorated canvas, printed in house, and, with our illustrations and texts, were a great success.

Also, with the help of the Botanical Department, a collection of plants, used by Native Americans as sources of medicines or of paints, was exhibited outside. Special signs with an organic look explained how the plants were used.

## **TEPEE VILLAGE**

During the summer holidays a village of eight teepees was built next to the Bison Prairie. This village was inhabited by living, traditionally-clothed, Dutch



*Dutch ‘Native American’ family acting out a day  
in the life of a prairie-dwelling Lakota family*

## CONCLUSIONS

'Native Americans', acting out the daily life of typical Lakota families - handcrafting, making drums, designing dreamcatchers, woodcarving, cooking...the chores of a normal day. Before the children arrived at the village their faces were painted at the Schmink Tepee. They could choose the face of a Crow Indian, a Thunder Bird, a Sioux or a Bison Hunter. They could then visit the fully furnished Family Tepee of Chief Black Bison.

One of the highlights was listening to Native American tales at the Story Tepee, while in the middle of the village children were allowed to make traditional music on the drums. During the weekend two intensive pow-wows were performed together with the children.

### ZOO CAMP WITH NATIVE AMERICANS

The same theme was also the focus of 15 summer Zoo Camps, exciting overnight experiences at Rotterdam Zoo. The children (about 25 for each camp) enjoyed a barbecue in the evening together with the Native Americans, after which Chief Black Bison told an impressive story with the rhythm of drums in the background. A tour followed, relating this story to the near extinction of the bison.

After a lot of activities during the evening, a closing session encouraged the children to be considerate to each other and to nature, with specific reference to the bison.

Saturday began with an early morning ceremony to welcome the sun, led by Chief Black Bison. After that came breakfast, and then it was time to go home, with many memorable experiences to recollect and share.

During this six-week summer event more than 175,000 people visited the tepee village, enthusiastically participating in the activities. For example, more than 2,500 children had their faces painted, about 3,780 listened to the Native American stories, many hundreds visited the family tepee and thousands of parents and children experienced the pow-wows.

About 36,000 trail sheets were handed out, although how many really finished it is hard to say. Observations indicated most of them were working seriously. The Internet site was visited 2,660 times, among which 956 used the password 'TATANKA' to access the activities as described above. The USA was the source of 60 'hits'.

Trailing Chief Black Bison got a lot of attention from the local and national newspapers, magazines and television. Together with the new Bison Prairie, it was the highlight of 2002 for Rotterdam Zoo.



*One of the highlights was listening to Native American tales in the Story Tepee*