

“Masoala Rainforest”

and visitor education

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the exhibit area
is 1.1 hectares,
the roof is 32m in
height

Zurich Zoo’s “Masoala Rainforest” isn’t an extraordinary project solely in terms of construction, enterprise and maintenance, but is also very special in terms of the zoo visitors’ education. By providing a natural experience in a most authentic habitat, the ideal primary goal being is to sensitise all zoo visitors to the threat to the rainforest and thus motivate them to contribute a voluntarily amount towards the conservation of these forests.

To achieve this goal, the visitor is led through the following four zones:

Acclimatisation – the underground visitors’ passage

Experience – the actual hall

Understanding – the information centre

Action – the foyer, restaurant and zoo shop.

In a roughly 60m underground passage, visitors are acclimatised to the natural experience of the “Masoala Rainforest”. Under the title, “The

deserted primeval forest – a myth”, a surprising theme is taken up in preparation for visiting the rainforest. The predominant flora, the evolutionary history of Madagascar and the threats faced by species at risk are three further themes. Large images, quotations from scientists and a few facts and figures intentionally focus on the essential information.

The visitor now enters the heart of the project – the actual hall – through a sluice. Here, we specifically decided not to use the species labelling methods commonly used in zoos and botanical gardens. Authentic natural experience, using all the senses of smelling, seeing, hearing and feeling has absolute priority. In two explorer camps, visitors get the chance to identify and discover the animal species by themselves, using specially created guidebooks, while the use of telescopes makes the observation fun and enjoyable. This presentation concept is unique

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top:
a traditional
Malagassay hut
far right:
log boats, or pirogen
middle:
Zurich Zoo's "Masoala
Rainforest" under
construction in the
spring of 2003
above:
FSC-accredited wood
element with head
phones at the
information centre

and, for some visitors, unfamiliar. Imported huts (research camps and traditional houses), pirogen (log boats) and railroad tracks illustrate a variety of human activities in the rainforest.

In a smaller area, economically important plants such as vanilla, papaya, coffee, pepper and banana grow, to name just a few. We have even planted a small paddy field. Rice is a staple food, but unfortunately also the biggest ecological problem in Madagascar.

Through the sluice visitors leave the heat and humidity and enter the information centre, at which point understanding on all aspects of the subject can be reached. The many causes, attitudes and possible solutions to the problem of deforestation are examined through several exhibition pieces, interactive elements, a cinema and terrariums and aquariums.

In the design of the exhibition, emphasis was put on a pleasant atmosphere so that visitors feel comfortable and stay within the space for a longer period.

At the end of the exhibition, we ask the visitor for their financial support for conservation, including development aid projects in Masoala.

In the first half of 2004 we raised FF45,000 (US\$8,497, Eur6,860) through this method. The idea and content of the exhibition was developed through close collaboration between Zurich Zoo's Education Department and the Zurich-based firm Formwerk AG. All wood elements are Forest Stewardship Council accredited. Information in the visitor's passage and in the exhibition area are principally written in German, French and English.

Finally in our visitors' centre our guests are offered food and drink, while arts and crafts are offered for sale. We are making sure that these products derive from fair trade practices and have been produced in as ecologically sound a way as possible. Part of these takings (2% of the turnover) is allocated to our project in Madagascar.

After one and a half years of operation we would like to offer the following comments on the construction and maintenance of the facilities:

Visitors' passage

- The lighting of the facility name in the passage isn't optimal as it is affected by the changing daylight glare.

Hall

- The Ravenala-leaf roofs of the research camps and huts rot very fast, the reason perhaps being the constant high humidity. We sorted this ourselves by fitting foils and mending the roofs using spare materials.

- Lemurs have damaged the interior decoration in the traditional houses. We discouraged them by fixing objects in place.

- The maintenance of the paddy field proved simpler than expected, although occasionally ducks damage the young rice plants.

- Direction signs for the two passages away from the hall aren't ideal and quite a few visitors miss the information centre, taking the direct route to the restaurant.

- The absence of traditional species labeling has evoked less criticism than feared. The authentic presentation of the rainforest habitat is very well received by the visitors.

Information centre

- A certain amount of maintenance has been required for a number of the electronic media devices employed in the exhibit as a result of wear and tear and, perhaps, wilful damage.

- The slides shown in the exhibition are already bleached out; by installing a UV-filter we are hoping for a longer operation time.

- At the information centre, we've only installed a few electronic media devices, working much more with mechanical elements, such as rollers and drawers. This has been excellently received and has meant lower maintenance and running costs.

- We have experienced surprisingly little damage to signage, interactives, etc as a result of visitor behaviour.

- The detailed, informative panels are well used and hold guests staying for long periods.