

# New interpretive displays

## in Johannesburg Zoo

by L. Gordon,

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A new master-plan was designed for Johannesburg Zoo in the nineties, although we struggled to develop it due to a lack of funds. Most of the designs were huge new complexes that required a lot of funding.

At the end of 2003, Jenny Gray was appointed as the new Director. An engineering graduate with energy and practicality, she set about re-designing the master-plan as an exciting, achievable project. We still needed a lot of funding, but somehow Jenny started the ball rolling and the rest is now history.

The implications for the Education Department were not apparent in the beginning. We were more used to complaining that we could not do a thing without any budget than actually planning new designs. This all changed with budget allocation...and did our ball start rolling.

What was our task? The zoo would be divided into six new zones – Heart of Africa, Spice Route, Southern Africa, Amazonia, Extreme Environments and the new Children's Farmyard. Our task was to develop informative signage that differed from zone to zone.

The first zone included the Ape House, which needed desperate measures to ensure a larger living space for our chimpanzees. This was the great start of the "Heart of Africa".

The buildings were done in the typical mud style of Africa and various designs were added in earthy colours. The "Celtic" cross was added as it originated in Africa, symbolising earth, wind, fire and water. Mosaic brightened the entire structure in imitation of the use of mirrors in certain parts of Africa. The interior was decorated with wood chips, clay pots and the same mud style with mosaic. We added masks made of recycled drums.

Our signage was developed with a certain theme – the colours would be jungle greens, yellows and browns. The posters would have a specific border to signify the zone, in the case of Africa consisting of masks and jungle plants. The content would be new. Animal information would be included, but we wanted to add more to our visitors' knowledge base. We therefore added information on the bush meat trade. This was a first for us and even though we started quite low key, we had a number of visitor reactions. People were horrified by the idea of chimpanzees being eaten, and of the many other species that suffer the same fate.

Poetry was included – a new dimension to encourage reading and the appreciation of language.

With further progress in the "Heart of Africa" zone, a new poster series was developed, on red river hogs, bongos, sitatungas, red duikers, Ross turaco and guinea fowl. Poetry was again included and the ecology around a tree. Some interesting facts about pigs concluded the series. Again we used jungle colours in the background, within exactly the same frame.

### Technical aspects

Our challenges with designing these exhibits have so far consisted of finding the correct information, portraying it as naturally as possible and saying just enough to educate our public. We also faced the problem of sourcing photographic references available for use free of charge (fees can range from R100-00 to R1000-00 per picture; R100 = £8-34). The picture quality needed to be clear enough to be portrayed on an A1 poster. The posters also had to withstand our climate and so Correx, a highly durable, light material was used. Colour quality was guaranteed for two years, with a 5% fading factor thereafter. The posters were displayed in a clip frame for easy removal and maintenance. Minimal damage has been experienced so far – only two have lost some of their lamination due to extreme weather exposure.

Producing posters in this way also lends itself to recognizing sponsors cost effectively as we simply add their logo to the appropriate poster instead of reproducing a different plaque.

This exercise has turned out to be quite a learning curve for us but has also inspired us to an improved product. We are very happy with our progress so far but need now to implement the next interactive phase – monkey puzzles, feeler boxes, foot prints and biofacts on display will be our next challenge, combined with an "Origin of Man" display.

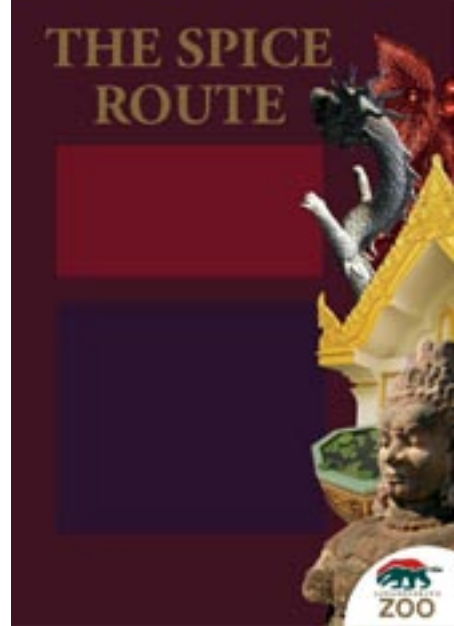
In the meantime, the master designs for the other stages are being developed and we are looking forward to the warm reds of the Spice Route and the bright colours of Amazonia.

Educational displays need to have an effective message, be cost effective and applicable for a few years. They need to follow the particular educational message of the institution concerned and convey the four recognised objectives of any zoo: conservation, research, education and recreation.

We, as the Education Department, find this

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the Spice Route –  
another of Johannesburg  
Zoo's major zones

new phase very exciting, especially as it is the first time that education has been part of the master plan process.

African architecture – a view of the Ape House tower



an ape mask adds atmosphere



Themba displays one of the posters specially developed for the Heart of Africa