

Playing in the zoo

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It was no surprise that, at the beginning of 2004, Rotterdam Zoo's children's playground was declared unfit. After twenty years of service and more than a million descents down its slide, "Kiboko Jungle" needed to be replaced.

So it was that we patched up the old playground for one more season and started to make plans for a new one. Since it had to be built in our African "continent", it had to reflect an African style. Now, what is a playground in African style? Our educationalists and some other zoo people gathered to do some brainstorming. As well as enjoying ourselves, what follows are the results...

A place for fun

The playground should in the first place be fun, providing opportunities for climbing, sliding, interactions, running and so on. The outside had to remind visitors of Africa – wood, huts, conical roofs. Mulch would be used underfoot instead of sand or rubber tiles.

There were some other requirements, such as building with sustainable materials and the inclusion of a number of apparatuses suitable for disabled children.

The next step was to find a company that could design and build a playground that met our demands. After several selection rounds we came to an agreement with Kinderland in Ede (Netherlands), representatives of Kinderland Germany. Unfortunately this agreement was reached very late in the day – the contract was signed in January and we wanted to open the new playground ("Oewanja Jungle") before May! The delay arose because we had to wait for a sponsoring contract.

In fact, Kinderland and our design team had been looking ahead during the selection process, planning and drawing up a wooden tower with a distinctly African look, filled with nets to scramble in, holes to creep through, walls to climb up, swinging bridges, artificial tree branches and much besides.

Although Kinderland could therefore start construction immediately after the contract was signed, it was nevertheless a miracle that the company managed to finish the job before May. Indeed, it was on April 27th, 2005, that alderman Janssens of Rotterdam opened Oewanja Jungle.

Now, every year the Education Department at Rotterdam Zoo holds an event for children aged six to 12, linked to some topical matter or a newly-built animal enclosure. In the past we have had, for instance, "ZOOlympics", "On the trail of Black Bison" ("In het spoor van Zwarte Bison") and "Egg" ("Eitje"). These events lead children and their parents through the zoo to find clues, answer questions and, above all, have fun. On each occasion the zoo finds itself enriched with new playing materials – giant eggs to sit in, a frame for swinging like a gibbon, a giant weaver nest to hang in, tortoise shells to creep into. These materials are scattered all around the zoo and so children can play everywhere and parents don't have to tear them away from playgrounds to go see some animals.

Pondering a trail

So it was that last year we were pondering what trail or event we might create for 2005. It was our Director in the end who brought up the idea of using play itself as the theme. We happily embraced his idea and created "Safari Oewanja", a game to play in the zoo based on the game of "goose".

Being educators we wanted to make a link between the playing of children (and adults) and animal play – not as easy as it sounds! What is playing? What is animal play? What is the goal of playing? What is its function? Which animals play? When does playing change into more serious conflict?

To find answers to these questions we invited Jan van Hooff, Professor of Ecology at the University of Utrecht, to meet with us. After two hours' discussion with him our basic knowledge of the behaviour called "play" had expanded dramatically. It was only then we could create Safari Oewanja.

I am sorry I cannot go into all the details of the event here and now (you could always make an appointment with Jan van Hooff!) but let me assure you – Safari Oewanja is scientifically safe, and it's great fun!

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