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FAMILY

Just for Kids at the L.A. Zoo

Children's area, opening today, allows youngsters and animals to mingle.

By BRENDA REES, Special to The Times

Amid the majestic roars of lions and the shrill cries of monkeys, visitors to the Los Angeles Zoo will soon be

hearing different animal noises: bleating goats, snorting pigs and braying donkeys.

Those and other domestic animals are part of the new \$3.4-million Winnick Family Children's Zoo that opens today, where kids will be able to learn more about their furry friends through theater, interactive play and up-close observations.

The new Children's Zoo fills a void left when the old "petting zoo" closed in 1987.

"We think that if kids can come here and appreciate domestic animals, and then go see the exotic ones, maybe they will go back home and have a greater appreciation of all forms of life," says Manuel A. Mollinedo, director of the zoo. Bringing back the Children's Zoo has been a high priority for him since he took the job six years ago, Mollinedo says.

Situated on the former Adventure Island site near the front of the zoo, the two-acre Children's Zoo will feature Muriel's Ranch, a penned area where kids can have direct contact with the animals. Named in honor of Muriel Gluck, whose Gluck Foundation contributed to the project, Muriel's Ranch will allow kids to touch free-roaming animals and observe others on exhibit, such as sheep, alpacas, rabbits, a potbellied pig, a donkey and a miniature horse.

Goats will initially be the animal of choice in the "touching" area, but zoo officials are hoping to add other touchable animals in the weeks to come, depending on how well the animals respond to being around excited kids.

"The area will be staffed at all times by zoo personnel and augmented by our volunteers," Mollinedo says. Staff will limit the number of children allowed in the area as a way to provide a safe environment for both kids and animals.

To ensure that the animals have enough rest time, safe zones have been designed that allow easy retreat from the public.

Zoo staff will organize informal educational presentations with kids in the touching area, guiding them to observe certain animal characteristics and to encourage thoughts about all the different kinds of animals in the world.

"This can be such an important area to kids," Mollinedo says. "We can't lose sight of the fact we are an urban zoo and, even though we are located in this lush green park, the majority of our young visitors grow up in the city."

Health is a big factor in the contact area. "Children and adults will have to wash their hands before and after visiting the area," Mollinedo says. "In addition, we have rubberized treated mats guests must walk on that will stop any threat of hoof and mouth disease."



Spencer Saccoman, left, and Renika Briscoe make a friend at the new Winnick Family Children's Zoo.

TAD MOTOYAMA

Nearby, the Riordan Kid's Korner (named in honor of former L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan, who donated \$50,000 to the project) is a hands-on education center with revolving themed programs. Geared for kids ages 2 to 8, the programs are 15 to 20 minutes long and have animal-related topics. "One program is our 'It's a Zoo,' where kids can dress up like a zookeeper, zoo director and role-play," says Beth Thomsen, director of education. "We want kids to say 'Gee, that was a lot of fun! Let's do this again next week!'"

Videos and slides, puppets and dress-up animal costumes will also be a part of Kid's Korner.

Next door, the former Animals and You Theater has been transformed into Adventure Island, a storytelling venue. "It will be highly interactive," Thomsen says. "It's not just talking heads reading a book. We'll be bringing things to life."

Newly renovated, the former nursery has become the Winnick Family Care Center and will continue to be home for small mammals, birds and newborn animals that need special care. The nearby caves are still there for kids to wander through, and one will feature a new Desert Trail exhibit that showcases tortoises, chuckwallas, bearded lizards, scorpions and tarantulas.

Original artwork by New Mexican artist Armando Alvarez is placed around the Children's Zoo; huge life-size sculptures of children and animals and a Byzantine mosaic hand-washing station are among the pieces on display.

The Children's Zoo is part of a long-term plan to revamp the entire zoo. Construction is scheduled to begin next spring on a new entryway where visitors will be greeted--from both above and below--by sea lions. A Children's Discovery Center will be the pivot point for schoolkids and groups arriving at the zoo.

An underwater hippopotamus exhibit is also in the works, as is a new reptile house. A Rainforest of the Americas exhibit, to be built near the current aviary, will showcase animals from Mexico, Central and South America.

All in all, the Children's Zoo can be a place of both education and entertainment, says Karen Winnick, the children's book author who, with her husband, Gary, made a \$2-million donation that led to the facility being named for their family. "I love animals and I want a place for kids to come and learn about them in a direct way," she says. "Wonderment. I want us to sustain that sense of wonderment in kids. You need joy in your childhood. I want this place to do that."

The Winnick Family Children's Zoo is a regular part of the Los Angeles Zoo, 5333 Zoo Drive, Los Angeles. The zoo is open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. Admission is \$8.25 for adults and \$3.25 for children ages 2 to 12. General zoo information: (323) 644-6400.