

A Successful Introduction of 2.10 Wild Common Squirrel Monkeys (*Saimiri sciureus*) into Captivity at the Phoenix Zoo

Prior to 2002 the Phoenix Zoo master planning had identified the otter exhibit as deficient in terms of public experience and husbandry standards. Based upon visitor feedback it was also determined that a reliable and more intense animal experience needed to be provided in this area of the zoo.

The management was looking for a new type of exhibit that would give our guests a different perspective on animals. The availability of an appropriate and preferably cohesive group of monkeys was suggested and researched before the final commitment was made to the improvement.

Dr. Ken Gold was contacted about his experience as curator at the Apenheul Zoo in the Netherlands, and was brought in to consult on the feasibility of a walk-through primate exhibit. Based on his advice, it was decided to build an exhibit, to be named Monkey Village, housing squirrel monkeys and saki monkeys together. The zoo already had the saki monkeys in its collection and the management was searching for a larger group of squirrel monkeys (preferably hire numbers in females than males, a common ratio both in the wild and in captivity) while the exhibit was under constructions. Because the New World Primate TAG does not collaboratively manage common squirrel monkeys, they are not often bred in the zoo environment. Since there were no groups of captive squirrel monkeys available within the necessary timeframe, we chose to obtain wild-caught monkeys. Wild-caught monkeys would also be less used to people and more likely to maintain a larger flight distance from our guests, an important fact for liability issues. At the time, there were 2.10 monkeys available in Guyana, South- America and the Phoenix Zoo took them. The animals arrived on April 29, 2003 in pairs from Bucksire Corporation, Pennsylvania and were placed under quarantine in the Phoenix Zoo's Animal Care Center (ACC).

At ACC the animals were housed the same way they arrived, in pairs. All animals were tattooed on their inner left thigh and were shaved for identification.

Figure 1 here

Animals were tattooed for identification purposes

Photo by Josh Crabtree, Senior keeper/Discovery Trail

After the 30-day quarantine, the squirrel monkeys were transferred into the Upper Education cages (an off-exhibit area, not open to visitors) for temporary housing. This consisted of six cages which permitted visual and tactile contact, but which did not allow the animals to have direct access to each other. This was the perfect setting to keep the animals in pairs again until the introductions could begin.

After consulting several times with Leo Hulsker, Primate Supervisor at the Apenheul Zoo, and with Dr. Lawrence Williams, Assistant Professor at the Primate Research Laboratory at the University of South Alabama, we finally decided that since none of these primates had seen the

new exhibit before, did not know each other well and had not have a chance to form subgroups yet, the best course would be to introduce all the animals together at the same time.

Since the animals were wild-caught it was necessary to establish a feeding routine quickly, while they would be accustomed seeing people but still not overly friendly toward them. While the animals were housed in the Upper Education Cages, a new behavioral management program started by teaching the animals to recognize feeding time through classical conditioning. Keepers were wearing orange-colored jackets only while provisioning the monkeys. The exhibit always was approached from the front part, so the keepers would be well visible and the animals can see the orange colored jacket from the far. Having a dilemma of trying to move the monkeys out from the smaller cages into a natural looking exhibit and at the same time Monkey Village still being under constructions, the keepers started renovating another exhibit (open to the public) where these monkeys were to be held temporarily until Monkey Village could be built. The keepers put an enormous effort into remodeling. They changed all the branches, logs and ropes, painted all the walls with murals, provided extra hiding places and escape routes and redesigned the night house. By the end of June 2003 everything was ready for the introduction.

Figure 2 here

Primary trainer Tracy Fleshman wearing orange colored west during conditioning. Photo by Hilda Tresz

The introduction took place on July 1, 2003 at 0700 in the temporary Squirrel Monkey Exhibit in the Discovery Trail. The animals were released through their night house area to the exhibit.

Figure 3 here

Common Squirrel monkey exhibit, Discovery Trail Photo by Hilda Tresz

It was decided that the best approach would be to leave the animals alone to work out their differences and to establish a social hierarchy; we would not intervene unless a severe injury occurred. An observation program was developed to document the introduction; due to a shortage of volunteers, we scheduled a combination of instructors, keepers, interns and volunteers to make observations for at least two weeks. The introduction was also documented on video.

The introduction was a complete success. The animals spent their time cautiously looking around, testing the mesh and branches and foraging from their feed pans. Mating behaviors were observed and mostly were initiated by the dominant male. At first the two males spent a considerable amount of time huddling together, but by the second day they were seen joining some of the females. Aggressive chasing and grabbing was minimal among both sexes. On the second day we released our male ocelot into his own exhibit, directly across from the squirrel monkeys – he had been confined out of sight during their introduction – and the squirrel monkeys came together in a single group when he appeared. Our hot weather also aided us. After 08:30AM, on most mornings, the temperature rose above 90° F, slowing all activities down; at

those temperatures, the squirrel monkeys spent most of their time drinking and huddling in the trees, either by themselves or in groups of up to six individuals.

All the animals acclimated very fast to their new environment and started to form bonds within a couple of days.

For medical and husbandry reasons the animals had to be taught to enter to the night house every day. Wooden branches were provided to connect the night house entrance with the exhibit for easy access and food was placed on it to lure the animals inside. They received novel food items only inside the night house to encourage them for coming in. Keepers routinely entered onto exhibit, a bell was rung and food items were distributed as reward, gradually decreasing the distance between the animals and the night house. The animals eventually were only fed inside. In October the monkeys received their physical exams and were transferred into the Monkey Village holding area. The same night house training program was repeated for husbandry and medical purposes before they were introduced to the visitors.

Monkey Village opened to the public on the weekend of November 13-14 of 2004 and is one of the most popular exhibit ever since.

Acknowledgements

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