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Tuesday | Mar 30, 2004

Last Update 2:45 pm

Rodeo foundation helps Sierra Safari Zoo

Ray Hagar
RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL
12/6/2003 12:35 am

Helped by national publicity about its financial woes, the Sierra Safari Zoo in Reno has received the largest donation in its history — \$10,000 — ensuring that Nevada's largest zoo will not have to sell any animals to survive, zoo officials said Friday.

"We are out of our immediate crisis because we were down to almost nothing," said Jimmy Martin, the zoo's founder and co-director. "This donation came as a big surprise. For us, it was totally out of the blue."

The Reno Rodeo Foundation donated \$10,000 to the Sierra Safari Zoo this week — one of many donations the four-acre zoo has received since a story about the zoo's financial plight appeared recently in the Reno Gazette-Journal. The story was picked up by the Associated Press and ran in newspapers around the country.

"Overall, since those stories, we have raised about \$20,000," Martin said. "Our goal is about \$40,000, so we are halfway there."

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David. B. Parker/RENO GAZETTE-JOURNAL
Two of the baby ring-tailed lemurs at Sierra Safari Zoo look out from their home on Tuesday. The zoo has a total of four babies.

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The zoo — home to almost 200 animals, including lions, tigers, monkeys and alligators — is the only place in Nevada to see baboons, wallabies, lemurs and hyenas, zoo officials said. The zoo is also one of two U.S. facilities to display a liger, a cross between a tiger and a lion. The liger at the Sierra Safari Zoo is the offspring of a male lion and female tiger, Martin said.

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The Rodeo Foundation made the donation because the zoo adds to the quality of life for many school children, said John Solari, president of the Reno Rodeo Foundation Trustees.

“So many kids from Northern Nevada, along with other organizations, come out here,” Solari said about the zoo. “This is basically all we have in our area for the kids to see all these different type of animals. It’s a good cause, so hopefully they will keep it going and get some additional funding.”

Other key contributions include \$2,500 from Western Nevada Supply and \$1,000 from Saturn of Reno, Martin said.

“Most of the donations have come from individuals in the \$25 and \$50 range,” he said.

Martin stressed that the zoo’s money problems are not over.

“This has probably been the worst financial jam we have been in. But we can’t call this a big fundraising success yet and have everybody stop donating.”

The zoo is targeting the cities of Reno and Sparks for financial help.

“They have not supported us in the past, but we have not asked them to. We are also beginning to see more interest from the business community and foundations in helping the zoo. We’ve had good support from individuals in the past but not from businesses.”

Low attendance at the zoo, which is open from April through October, has put the zoo into financial jeopardy, Martin said. This year, admissions revenue dropped 11.5 percent, to \$57,418 from \$64,841 last year. At the same time, the cost of insurance for the zoo jumped to \$16,000 from \$12,700.

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