

## = Navajo Nation Zoological and Botanical Park =

The Navajo Nation Zoological and Botanical Park is located in Window Rock , Arizona , the capital of the Navajo Nation . It is the only tribally owned zoological park in the United States and is notable among zoological facilities in that it labels its exhibits in a Native American Indian language . Having been operated by the Navajo Nation Parks & Recreation Department since its inception in the early 1960s , it became part of the Navajo Nation Department of Fish and Wildlife in September 2006 .

While its facilities have the unique mission of preserving and caring for the fauna and flora significant to Navajo culture , its existence has also sparked controversy among the more traditionalist elements in Navajo society .

## = = History = =

The zoo 's first specimen was a bear that had been left behind after the 1963 Navajo Nation Fair by a state organization , and the animal was named " Yogi the Bear , " after the then @-@ popular cartoon character . Since then , the exhibit has grown to about 50 different species on display , almost all of them native to the area . In 1976 , the zoo , then named " Navajo Tribal Zoo , " relocated to its current home and became part of the Navajo Tribal Parks & Recreation system . In September 2006 , it was reorganized to be administered by the Navajo Nation Department of Fish and Wildlife .

## = = Staff and budget = =

The facility 's current director and curator is Matthew Holdgate , a biologist from the University of New Hampshire with prior work experience as an animal research specialist at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and with the U.S. Forest Service in California .

The zoo currently employs five full @-@ time and one part @-@ time staff members and has an annual budget of US \$ 336 @,@ 000 . It is primarily funded by the Navajo Nation Government , but also solicits for donations from project sponsorship , animal adoption , and donations ; admission is free .

## = = Exhibits and mission = =

The zoo operates on an area spanning 7 acres ( 2 @.@ 8 ha ) and is located in the vicinity of the Navajo Nation Museum in Window Rock ( Tségháhoodzání ) . It is home to about 150 animals , representing over 50 species and sees an estimated 33 @,@ 000 visitors each year .

The zoo dubs itself " A Sanctuary for Nature and the Spirit " , and according to its mission statement , it aims to conserve " native plants and animals , including rare , sensitive and endangered species " with an emphasis on fauna and flora that is important and significant to Navajo culture and traditions . In this spirit , it houses primarily animals native to Navajoland and implements cultural and educational programs in cooperation with schools and similar facilities in the area ; furthermore , it provides care for injured and orphaned animals found in the wild . The zoo also fosters the use of plants and animals for ceremonial purposes in accordance with Navajo tradition , and regularly accepts appointments for offerings being made and ceremonies held within its facilities .

Its wild creatures include black bear , bobcat , Mexican wolves , elk , Gila monsters , coyotes , rattlesnakes , cougars , skunks , and red foxes , as well as cranes , golden eagle , red @-@ tailed hawk , and great horned owls . In keeping with Navajo tradition , none of the zoo 's birds were captured for the purpose of being exhibited , but were rather rescued after sustaining injuries from vehicles or electrical lines and are thus unable to fly ; the majority of the other specimens are also non @-@ releasable and unable to survive in the wild due to being orphaned or having been confiscated as illegal pets from their former owners .

Starting in 2008 , the zoo 's then 30 @-@ year @-@ old Discovery Center was renovated and redesigned to bring it in line with modern zoo standards ; apart from displaying the majority of the

park 's invertebrates , it also incorporates a display with traditional Navajo stories relating to the animals .

#### = = = Adopt an Animal @-@ Program = = =

Any animal in the zoo can be " adopted " for a price of US \$ 100 annually to cover the cost of food and care ; the adopting party will receive a certificate and has his or her name engraved on the plaque next to the exhibit in question . If the animal has never been adopted before , the sponsor will have the opportunity of giving the animal a name ; in this process , various animals have been given names such as " Napoleon " for the park 's mountain lion and " Señor Atsá " for the golden eagle .

#### = = = Eagle sanctuary = = =

Since 2008 , the zoo has been lobbying for a permit to build an eagle sanctuary in order to be able to distribute the animals ' feathers to tribal members for ceremonial purposes in accordance with federal law . Since the species are listed as endangered , any remains of dead animals are confiscated by the federal government and transported to a central repository in Colorado ; members of Native American Indian nations then have to apply individually to receive parts , such as feathers , in a lengthy process with wait @-@ times that can exceed several years . Since a tribally operated eagle sanctuary constitutes an exception to the process , it would be instrumental in strengthening Navajo cultural sovereignty ; currently , only the Iowá and Zuni nations operate eagle sanctuaries for this purpose .

#### = = Controversies = =

In January 1999 , outgoing Navajo Nation president Milton Bluehouse ordered the zoo closed after two women from Rock Ridge claimed to have been visited by the Diyin Dine?é , traditional Navajo deities , who had given them a warning , saying that the Navajo people were not living according to tradition by keeping caged animals , specifically bears , snakes , and eagles , which are considered sacred .

Subsequently , during his first days in office , Bluehouse 's successor , Kelsey A. Begaye , received more complaints and letters protesting the zoo 's closure than concerning any other political issue . After temporarily reversing Bluehouse 's decision , Begaye then summoned a meeting with the Navajo Nation 's Hataa?ii Advisory Council to discuss the situation ; the group , however , refused to consider the matter while the animals were in hibernation and postponed any advice or decision until April of the following year . Options under consideration were releasing the animals into the wild , not accepting new animals and closing the zoo after the last one had died , or renaming the zoo to a term that would be considered more respectful to the animals .

Opponents to the shut @-@ down maintained that most of the animals were unable to survive in the wild and would perish , and that the zoo 's facilities had become one of the last possibilities for future generations of Navajos to see the sacred creatures and thereby relate to traditional stories , due to the fact that most younger Navajos are more accustomed to dealing with domesticated livestock rather than untamed animals .

On March 12 , Begaye announced his decision to keep the zoo open without expanding it and letting the remaining animals live out their lives on the zoo @-@ grounds . According to Harry Walters , an anthropologist and former chairman of the Center for Diné Studies at Diné College in Tsaile ( Tséhíł? ? ) , the incident demonstrates a crucial difference between Navajo and Western culture in the way visions and supernatural experiences are handled : " Rather than focus on the sightings to determine if who saw it was nuts or not ? that 's what a Westerner would do ? we look at it as a message : ' Are we going the way we should ? ' " Walters said .