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Q+A

Success Breeds Success

Lee Ehmke has led the Minnesota Zoo in a dramatic turnaround, building new exhibits, raising attendance and remaking the zoo into one of our state's key attractions. >>

INTERVIEWED BY JOEL SCHELLER

■ Lee Ehmke at the Minnesota Zoo's new entrance



>> To learn more about Ehmke and his work prior to coming to Minnesota, you may find the entire interview in *Meetings: Minnesota's Hospitality Journal* podcast on iTunes or at our website, www.mn-meetings.com

For more than a decade Lee Ehmke, director and CEO of the Minnesota Zoo, has worked to ensure the zoo's future in Minnesota's hospitality industry.

His initial 10-year plan to get the zoo back on track from its lackluster performance during the late 1990s is now bearing fruit. Ehmke has overseen some of the major exhibits, including *Russia's Grizzly Coast*. Since the bears arrived in Minnesota in 2008, the zoo has set attendance records every year, drawing more than 1.3 million visitors annually. The multiphase Heart of the Zoo project is currently underway. The first phase, completed this summer, includes the Target Learning Center (which opened in late May), upgrades to the main entrance, the Cargill Environmental Education Center and the *3M Penguins of the African Coast* (which opened to the public on July 9).

Q. There's a lot going on at the zoo. What is the Heart of the Zoo project? What will visitors see and experience when they come to the zoo this summer?

A. The Heart of the Zoo is actually a multiphase project of which the first phase is going to be opening up this summer, and it really will change the first impression that people have when they arrive at the zoo. We have 485 acres; we've got lots of big beautiful outdoor exhibits and a lot of wonderful exhibits in the zoo, but the entry experience has never been optimal. And there's been a sense of, 'Where are the animals?' There's a lot of hard-edged '70s architecture. There's a

and other education activities that we have here at the zoo, an area called the Beehive, which is a small nature play area for younger kids. And at the heart of all that will be a new penguin exhibit, *The Penguins of the African Coast*, which will feature a small flock of penguins who are coming from other zoos from around the country, and it's the first time the Minnesota Zoo has ever had penguins. The final part of phase one of the Heart of the Zoo is the Target Learning Center, which is a new indoor theater space built basically on the footprint of our old Beluga Whale pool, which had been sitting empty for a number of years. So in the winter time that will offer our indoor bird show, with free flight birds, one

Well I started here at the zoo in 2000, and the zoo had been through a number of difficult years where attendance was declining, funding from both the state and other sources was uncertain at best. And I think there was a general sense that the zoo had kind of hit the doldrums, that it hadn't really been growing. And although, as you mentioned, it was kind of considered state of the art back in the late '70s, there were some initial flaws in both the concept and in the way that it was executed that I think were more and more obvious by the time the zoo was 20 years old or so. The biggest among them, I think, was the original vision for the zoo. Only about a third of the original plans were developed. So the number of exhibits and the experiences offered in the exhibits probably weren't keeping pace with what was happening at other major zoos around the country. It's a very big zoo. In the summertime when it's hot, I think for young families in particular getting around the zoo, and then not necessarily getting great views of animals, was often criticized. And I think the other thing that was always different about the zoo but was hard to explain to guests was the fact that because it's Minnesota there was always a focus on the northern climate animals as opposed to kind of standard zoo animals that people might expect to see in a major zoo.

So arriving with those kind of things happening, on the flip side, it's a beautiful site. Every other zoo in the country would love to have our acreage. We are not a 100-year-old zoo, with hugely outdated buildings that need to be replaced. And there was a great staff here

"...we wanted to take the center of the zoo, the heart of the zoo, and really make it strong, powerful and memorable."

long walk between the parking lot and actually having an animal experience, so the Heart of the Zoo is a reinvention of the main building and all of the area connecting the visitor parking lots to the outdoor exhibits. So phase one has three major components: a new entry from the parking lot that will use landscape and animal sculpture and new graphics to really welcome people as they come into the zoo in a much nicer way that really resonates with our mission of connecting people, animals and the natural world. When they come into the new building they will be in part of the Cargill Education Center, which will have new classrooms for the school groups

of the most popular offerings at the zoo. But this summer we'll have a number of theatrical events, a whole puppet performance that's based on environmental themes, after-hours events and the like, so it's a great new venue for the zoo.

When the Minnesota Zoo was founded in 1978 it was considered cutting edge in its design. By the late 1980s it was listed among the nation's best. Yet by the late 1990s, the zoo was struggling a bit. Can you describe your arrival here in Minnesota? What was your view of the situation when you got here?



to the zoo? All of those things kind of feed into the success of an institution and *Russia's Grizzly Coast* and the reaction we had after that opened was very strong. The last two years were the best years in the history of the zoo in terms of attendance and again I think that has directly helped us financially, obviously, as more people come through the door but I think more importantly is the community interest and the interest of the Legislature and, again, the corporate supporters we have here at the zoo. All of that really bolstered their confidence in what we were planning to do in the future.

What do you think it's done for the region's hospitality industry in general? Are you seeing more visitors from outside the state?

Yeah, we do track our visitors and we definitely see an up tick in visitors from everywhere: regionally, locally and from beyond. I think having an attraction, especially one like *Russia's Grizzly Coast*, is a unique exhibit. It's not something that you can go to another zoo and see anything like it at all. So it really does give us a claim to something unique and powerful and interesting that people are wanting to come to see. In general, we've estimated that the value of having the zoo—actually a study was done a couple years ago—as \$114 million a year of direct and indirect economic benefit to the state of Minnesota. Some of that obviously is coming from visitors from Greater Minnesota or from out of state, or even out of the country, but we believe we are an economic engine for the state. We are one of the great attractions. When you look at Twin Cities venues and attractions, our attendance is among the very highest of all of them, and we know that a large percentage of our guests are coming from outside the metro area. So we are definitely serving as one of those anchor establishments that people want to see when they come to the Twin Cities.

and a really strong conservation ethic. There were some drawbacks and some great needs but there was also a really great potential.

What key issues did you identify when you first created that initial 10-year Strategic Plan?

One of the things was really thinking about the guest experience and what visitors were going to find, not just in terms of the animal exhibits but everything else that happens when you visit the zoo. And one of the catchphrases that we came up with in our plan was that we wanted to increase the density and intensity of the experience so that it wasn't a series of long walks punctuated with a couple of animal exhibits but that there would be much more going on. And again, whether it's animal exhibits or interactive interpretive areas or places to sit and rest or for kids to play, all of those things, we wanted to create a lot more of that and do it in the core of the zoo. Rather than sort of jumping out to expand the far reach of our site, we wanted to take the center of the zoo, the heart of the zoo, and really make it strong, powerful and memorable.

What went into the work behind the scenes to get the multi-million-dollar exhibit, *Russia's Grizzly Coast*, to break ground in 2006?

Well a lot was really bringing our owner and our landlord, the state of Minnesota—getting them to feel confident that the zoo had a good plan, was going to execute on the plan, and that it would work. So that took a fair amount of work, actually years of ground-

work working with legislators, working with the then governor to develop a plan that was something we were not going to change in the next year if it didn't work, that it was a long-term vision, that it was strategic and that it had been thought out. So I think it took a number of years of gaining the confidence of the Legislature, getting the public interested in supporting the zoo as well, and then having a few of those smaller successes like the meerkat exhibit and the tiger lair renovation that we did along the way to kind of demonstrate where we were headed. So it was the biggest new infusion of capital in the zoo since the zoo opened back in 1978. And one of the things we wanted to be sure was that we didn't overestimate the impact, and we didn't. We conservatively estimated what the attendance gains would be and we kind of blew them all out of the water. So that, in turn, has led to continued support by the Legislature and by the corporate community and by private donors, which is resulting in phase one of The Heart of the Zoo being a reality as well.

What has *Russia's Grizzly Coast* meant for the zoo? How did it set the stage for new things to come?

Well, attendance isn't everything but it's a lot. A lot of our revenue flows directly from the number of people who come to the zoo, and there's also that whole bit of word-of-mouth and buzz around the community about, Is the zoo something that you are proud of that you want to bring your friends? And when people come from out of town do you want to go



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I recently read that a bill introduced in the Minnesota Senate would trim \$1.9 million from zoo operating funds over two years. What effect would those kinds of cuts have on the zoo?

Well those would be tough to manage. And just a little bit of background: We are a state agency, but we've relied less and less over the last several years on state funding to support our operations. At one time, 60 percent of the zoo's annual operating costs came from the state appropriation. Right now we are down to about 29 percent. The rest we are either earning ourselves or bringing in as contributions. So we have steadily reduced our reliance on state support, despite the fact that we are a state agency. That said, the kind of cuts that are included right now in the Senate's operating budget would be pretty difficult for us to handle all in one year. What we've seen is a gradual decline in state support that we've been able to gradually make up for with other moneys. Having a big cut, \$1.9 million over the biennium that's been proposed, would require us to do much more than just hold down expenses. It would probably mean closing or greatly reducing the offerings that we have right now. Now we are hopeful that the final bill will be quite a bit north of the 15 percent cut that's been proposed. The House bill is a 10 percent reduction; the governor's recommendation is 5 percent. Those are numbers that we think we can accommodate given we are anticipating a lot of attendance growth this year because of the penguin exhibit that's opening up. Our fund-raising activities continue to be successful, so at a certain level we think we can do our part as part of state government to reduce expenses, but what's been proposed currently at the Senate level would not be easy to do without some pain. **III**



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