

Helping animals keep their cool at the zoo

Staffers come up with inventive ways to help their charges cope with heat

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A greenish chunk of ice is melting slowly on a rock in the Houston Zoo's cougar exhibit. Shasta and Haley are somewhat wary.

The two cougars circle around the ice, ignore it for a while, then circle again. Finally, Shasta moves in and takes a few tentative licks. He retreats, moving swiftly along the exhibit's edge, then returns to the cold, wet block for another lick.

Outside the exhibit, a group of little boys is enthralled.

"It's a lollipop," one of them says, pointing. "Look, there's a lollipop right there for him."

"He's licking his ice cream," says another. "Are they the only ones that get ice cream?"

The greenish ice pop is the sort of treat only a cougar would love. The mix of water and chicken broth contains whole eggs and a thick rib bone. The icy creation is there to help Haley and Shasta stay cool on a day that will soon reach 98 degrees.

It's summer in Houston, and the animals at the zoo are toughing out the temperatures just like the rest of us.

"If it's uncomfortable for us, then it's probably uncomfortable for them," said Angie Pyle, a senior keeper in the carnivore division. So every day of the long, hot summer, zoo staffers look for inventive ways to keep their charges cool.

Ice pops are popular. The biggest are 5- or 10-gallon buckets filled with water, a little Gatorade or food coloring, and a hand-picked assortment of tasty treats. For carnivores, that's likely to be a bone or eggs, with blood or a little tuna juice to make it tasty. Herbivores get whole pieces of fruit.

"They have to wait for it to melt to get that apple or whatever we place inside," Pyle said. Unless the animals lick and chew at the ice, it will last for four or five hours. "It's a matter of waiting it out or cracking them open."

Ice pops aren't the only way for animals to chill out. Sometimes keepers will freeze their toys. Or they'll put those toys in the pool so the animals have to take a cooling dip to retrieve them.

Not all animals like to swim - in fact, tigers and jaguars are the only cats at the zoo that swim for recreation. But at least one lion doesn't mind being teased into the water.

"Sometimes we throw barrels over the moat," Pyle said, "and every single time, she'll swim out and get it."

If an exhibit doesn't have a pool or a moat, keepers will bring in plastic baby pools. On really hot days, they'll fill the baby pools with ice.

And a couple of times each summer, the zoo brings in snow. Yes, snow - a truck with a snow machine will create a winter landscape in the Houston heat.

Most carnivores aren't big on frolicking in the snow, Pyle said, so keepers have to entice them.

"They may go out and step in it - that's about it," she said. "But if you build a snowman that's got meatballs inside of it, they're definitely going to interact with it."

Bath time

The zoo's elephants get a cool bath every summer morning. Three-year-old Baylor, an Asian elephant, was the first to get lathered up and sprayed down on a recent 90-degree morning. A cluster of sweaty kids and parents watched from the shade outside the barn.

"He's taking a shower," said Cash Rowney, also 3, as elephant keeper Kim Putnam sprayed Baylor down with a hose.

The elephants each drink between 40 and 60 gallons of water a day. "We usually go out and offer them drinks from the hose throughout the day and hose them off," Putnam said. Water stations are available throughout the exhibit, but Methai, the 44-year-old matriarch of the group, prefers to drink almost exclusively from the hose. During her bath, she opens her mouth wide, letting a stream of cool water splash inside.

Elephants flap their ears to cool off, and their wrinkles trap water against their skin, which they cover with mud or sand to retain that moisture.

"Really," Pyle said, "animals are much better at dealing with the heat than we are."

But that doesn't mean they can't use a little help. A zoo staffer recently found instructions on Pinterest for turning PVC pipes into a makeshift sprinkler, she said.

"You hook up a water hose, and there's water going all over the place," Pyle said. "It's like a little kid's water play station."

So far, the sprinklers have been a hit with the ravens and the otters. The zoo's ocelot, Novia, may be the next to get one.

"We're trying to be as creative as we can."

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