



Friday, December 28, 2007

## Noah's Ark emphasizes 'respect' of dangerous animals

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As Jamal Smith, of Locust Grove, emerged from the welcome center at Noah's Ark Animal Rehabilitation Center Thursday with his four children, he said he was not concerned about any dangers posed by the animals at the center.

"They haven't had any incidents here, and there are two fences before you get to the animals," said Smith, flanked by his children, ages 12, 10, 7 and 2.

Smith is among a number of patrons who have visited Noah's Ark this week, just days after a tiger mauled three men at the San Francisco Zoo in California on Christmas Day.

Photo by Renee Richardson// Animals that are meat eaters, such as gray wolves, are kept behind two, tall fences to prevent the animals from getting out.

According to Noah's Ark Founder and Director Jama Hedgecoth, the center has received a lot of calls from people concerned about the possibility of similar incidents involving one of the many wild animals there. However, she said tigers don't normally attack people unless they are provoked.

"It's not in their nature to attack people, unless they are teased or angered," said Hedgecoth, who has more than 35 years of experience interacting with animals, including lions, tigers, monkeys and bears. "There had to be something with people going on in the tiger's mind."

The Associated Press reported Thursday that police investigating the California case found a shoe and blood in an area near a moat at the zoo, suggesting that one of the tiger's victims taunted the animal by dangling a leg or other body part over the moat's edge.

Hedgecoth said the center hasn't had any problems with the two tigers who live in the 250-acre habitat. Part of the reason for that, is that she, her husband and son are the only people who are allowed to come in contact with the more dangerous animals at Noah's Ark.

"There's too much chance for error when you have a lot of people handling the animals," Hedgecoth said.

The level of interaction varies from animal to animal, and that respect of each animal's boundaries is key.

"Every animal is different, just like every human is different," she said. "You may have one tiger with a great temperament, and another that's very cranky. If you don't respect them, you could get hurt from either one."

According to the Noah's Ark director, there have been incidents of patrons teasing the animals. In those cases, the teasers were asked to leave the facility, in order to prevent incidents similar to the one in California earlier this week.

"It could happen to anybody," Hedgecoth said. "No one is immune to a tragedy like that."

- The Associated Press contributed to this article.

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