

BUSINESS

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SECTION F

Animal house



Photos by MARK LEFFINGWELL / Daily Camera

From left: Seth Frankel, Jenny Dyer, Jill Isenhart and Chip Isenhart, all with ECOS Communications, are responsible for many of the new natural history interpretations, signs, educational information and soundtracks at the Denver Zoo.

Boulder firm helps shape Denver Zoo

By Karen Mitchell
For the Camera

Had Noah been privy to the future site of the Denver Zoo, he might have steered the ark this way.

The zoo's recent renovations include the stunningly realistic \$27 million Predator Ridge exhibit, a new underground parking structure, zoo entrance and several new structures. Boulder-based ECOS Communications, a privately held company owned by Chip and Jill Isenhardt, was instrumental in much of the ambitious project, which incorporates such surprise elements as educational and entertaining audio in the restrooms.

ECOS designs and produces wildlife and natural history exhibits with a conservation and educational bent for zoos, museums and nature centers.

At the zoo, ECOS's presence is omnipresent, in signage, life-sized steel animal sculptures, including insects, and hands-on learning tools such as touchable teeth and claws. Ambient animal sounds piped into restrooms are punctuated by voice messages conveying fun and fascinating tidbits about water conservation and even animal "poop and pee facts" such as: "Elephants can pee up to 25 gallons per day. That's more than an SUV can hold in its tank. Dear me."

In 2001, ECOS was enlisted to work its magic in the zoo's parking garage renovation, in which surface parking area was revamped for the arrival



African Wild Dogs lay in the shade on the other side of the glass window of their habitat at the Denver Zoo. The signs explaining about the wild dogs were created by ECOS Communications of Boulder.

plaza and a new garage was built underground, and on the arrival plaza.

"We conceived of a program with soundtracks, tidbits about

conservation and fun surprises in garage elevators, attractive well-lit graphics to get you around," Chip Isenhardt says. "We did all the environmental

graphics, banners, signs and way-finding materials. In essence, we were thinking about what it's like to arrive as a visitor to the garage, which sets the stage. It's one of the most visited places at the zoo, and we have a captive audience."

The previous zoo entrance was very un-dramatic and not noteworthy, he says.

"You didn't get to the animals until after you walked down a ramp. Our idea was to help provide an experience that gets people excited before they even walk past the ticket counter booth."

Now, zoo visitors are immediately immersed in the natural rock work habitat formations of Predator Ridge. The area mimics the topography of Samburu, in Kenya, where animals and congregate around kopjes, leftover protrusions from granite.

Predator Ridge, home to 14 African species, offers a plethora of animal enrichment opportunities. To wit: an Isenhardt sculpture of a mongoose mother and her young that activates the sound of a mongoose when you touch it. The sculpture is in a fabricated termite mound with a glass bubble that you can enter, surveying the scene from the bubble, which protrudes into the exhibit.

The Ridge also boasts a new enclosure for a pride of lions, and, across a hidden moat, hyenas and African Wild Dogs. Phase Two, to be developed later, will house other animal species integrating the scope

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Zoo receives new signage

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of predator and prey.

"Predator Ridge concrete rock formations were made by Rock and Waterscape in California, one of several firms we work with," Isenhart says. "There is also a large number of local independent artists and designers - a quiver of talent - who significantly influenced the look of the project, and we really appreciate their integrity and the quality they brought to the team. Our own staff have big shoulders for design."

The Isenharts, widely-traveled wildlife photographers, met at the Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies where they focused on translating scientific issues to lay audiences. Both have worked for the MacArthur Foundation, Conservation International and on an environmental presentation for the Legislative Assembly of Costa Rica.

They went on to found ECOS in 1991 with two fellow Yale graduate students, Don Whittemore and Dawn Amato, subsequently buying out their partners' interests. The ECOS client list includes Colorado State Parks, the Colorado Division of Wildlife, and the U.S. Forest Service. But working on various Denver Zoo projects has been particularly sweet for Denver native Chip Isenhart.

"The zoo projects are exciting because I grew up going there with my mom, Myra Isenhart, who was a zoo volunteer," he says. "I got my start in wildlife photography during those visits, and it holds a place in my heart. Now we go with our kids (Jesse, 3, and Hannah, 5.)"

ECOS was first enlisted by the Denver Zoo more than 10 years ago to create signage and rainforest conservation exhibits for the Tropical Discovery section. Since that project, the company's responsibilities have grown, Isenhart says, as it worked on Primate Panorama, Northern Shores and various other exhibits.

"We've become more responsible for environmental graphics, the visual landscapes around exhibits, and for help-



MARK LEFFINGWELL / Daily Camera

One of several multi-sensory displays created for the Denver Zoo by ECOS Communications. This one allows you to get a sense of what a lion's tongue feels like.

ing to craft the entire experience down to how rocks and sculpture interact and how benches are oriented. We've grown into that with zoo and other clients. Now we offer a broad range of services. The key in what makes us unique is our science background and our ability to translate complex scientific issues to lay audiences."

ECOS brings us a unique blend of talents for interpretive graphics, says Craig Piper, Denver Zoo vice president for planning and capitol affairs.

"They know how to tell a story for our animal exhibits and how to create an environment that supports the learning opportunities we provide," he says. "They understand natural history, lots of animals, and they also are good designers. Very few companies in the country have that primary animal focus."

ECOS's proximity to the zoo is an attractive component, he says. "They're a natural, and we like local. It makes for easy

communication. This isn't normal construction; it's complicated and we have to adjust things in the field. ECOS is here on regular basis."

The testament to ECOS's work is watching zoo visitors enjoy it, Piper says. "We just go out there and watch and listen and talk to people. We're seeing excitement, laughter and delight, and they can answer questions that tell us they're reading the graphics. That's proof of success."

Next on the ECOS to do list at the zoo is Asian Tropics, with elephants, tapirs, rhinos and small animals and birds. That 8-acre campus will open in 2007. The project will focus on the cultural human connection, Isenhart says.

"Elephants are revered and worshipped in Asia and we've talked about creating a village in the middle of the exhibit to illustrate the way they coexist, and don't, with humans," he says. "There's a rich story to tell with many parallels people can identify with. We always

try to tease out examples that relate to this region or to the U.S. to help put exhibits in context."

ECOS is currently bidding on a project for the Museum of Biodiversity, opening in 2008 in Panama City, Panama, designed by Frank Gehry. "We're hoping to do the Worlds Collide exhibit, featuring the interchange of North American and South American flora and fauna," Isenhart says.

The Isenharts chose Colorado for its proximity to the University of Colorado libraries and science departments, and because Chip Isenhart's mother weighed in with "persuasive articles about the artist's pool in Boulder," he says.

"Our fortune has been to focus in Colorado, and we've tried to make our mark here within a day's drive to our client base and the airport," he says. "We footed our own salaries for more than a year because we wanted office space off the bat so we could separate our personal and professional life."

ECOS, currently not taking on new clients, now gives EPS (Environmental Profit Sharing) money each year to researchers and projects in harmony to its work.

"This year we're funding conservation education on wild dogs through a project in South Africa," Isenhart says. "They had provided free video tapes of wild dogs for Predator Ridge and we want to support their efforts."

Being able to work together as a couple has been a success of its own, Isenhart says. "To be with the one you love and see your company grow and unfold is an incredible reward. I couldn't imagine it any other way."