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Zoo exhibit designers try to inspire visitors

BY SHERYL BASS
Staff Writer

BOULDER — Not every zoo can claim a public restroom with a piped-in voice detailing potty practices throughout the animal kingdom. Now, the Denver Zoo can thanks to Boulder-based ECOS Communications Inc.

ECOS stands for Environmental Communication Specialists. The company mission is to inspire others to take action on behalf of wildlife throughout the world.

Much of the company's work involves creating the educational signage, sculptures, videos and the ambient sound one experiences at zoos and public parks. In fact, the environmental communications company designed many elements of the new \$27 million Denver Zoo Predator Ridge exhibit.

"Conservation, education and recreation combined to influence the approach of this new exhibit," said company principal Chip Isenhart.

Chip and Jill Isenhart wanted to create a distinct African and Northern Kenyan feel at Predator Ridge. So they and their team designed directional and educational signs and assisted with landscape architecture in keeping with this theme.

Jenny Dyer develops the educational content of the ECOS signs. She writes in an informal, conversational style. "My goal is to create text that children can read to adults," she said. "That intergenerational approach is really important." She added that signs are intentionally placed low, so that they are

➤ See Zoo, page 12A



JONATHAN CASTNER

As part of their design work at the Denver Zoo, which included signage, sculptures, videos and ambient sound, Boulder-based ECOS Communications Inc. created the graphics in the visitor center bathrooms. From left, Jenny Dyer, Jill Isenhart, Seth Frankel and Chip Isenhart.

handicapped accessible and kid-friendly.

Already, Rosanne Elkins, vice president for the Denver Zoo's development, believes Predator Ridge has increased public donations.

"It really gives the zoo a wonderful new image. When you talk about building for new generations, this is what we're talking about," she said.

Additionally, ECOS designed 20 life-size, stainless steel sculptures of animals migrating around the zoo's entrance. The team also created many elements inside the Boettcher welcome center and the new Janus Center, which houses a gift shop and executive offices.

In the month since the Predator Ridge exhibit opened, Elkins said, people have "adopted" a crocodile sculpture for \$35,000 and another animal sculpture for \$17,500. More patrons have called to discuss estate gifts and additional direct gifts are under discussion. The zoo gained about 2,800 visitor-members in the past three months.

ECOS Communications was founded in 1991. The six-employee company has leased the same 1,000-square-foot Pearl Street location since its inception.

The Isenharts are photographers and met when they both earned master's degrees at the Yale school of forestry and environmental studies. Their goal with ECOS Communications was to bring an appreciation of wildlife to the public in entertaining and innovative ways. That's the idea behind the zoo's unusual bathroom experience.

Though the company has approximately 30 clients, including the city of Boulder and the Nature Conservancy, the Denver Zoo is by far its largest account. The team already has begun the conceptual research phase for a \$30 million Asian Tropics exhibit. Completion is anticipated in approximately four years.

Predator Ridge is approximately seven acres from the street, but only three acres are animal habitat. In contrast, the Asian Tropics exhibit will include eight acres of habitat or approximately 10 percent of the zoo's total space. Animals will include rhinos, tigers, elephants an aviary component and a large cat area.

ECOS Communications' employees are staunch proponents of activity based management or ABM. This more modern zoo design exists as much for the enrichment for the animals as for the enjoyment of the viewing public. Habitats are designed to allow the animals to interact in the world with their more natural behaviors.

ABM poses logistical challenges for educational information companies like ECOS, however. When animals have a wider range in which to roam, for example, it is more difficult to place signs strategically. For the Asian Tropics exhibit, the team is toying with interactive signs that change the animal under discussion at the touch of a button.

ECOS Communications once had 10 employees, but the Isenharts chose to scale back so they could be more hands-on in the development of exhibits. Though the company does not disclose revenues, management acknowledges that ECOS projects are booked more than a year in advance.

Rather than expanding staff, expansion plans are primarily philanthropic. The team is developing a business plan to connect the public with scientists for small-scale donation opportunities via the Internet. ECOS team members initially may partner with a large ecological company to fund the project. Regardless, the public could directly support individual researchers, circumventing "middle man" conservation organizations.

"It's sort of e-commerce in reverse," said ECOS senior exhibit designer Seth Frankel.

The company already initiated "change the world" donation kiosks in the Denver Zoo's Primate Panorama. When patrons make a donation, the machine generates animal noises and instantly adds the donation to a live running total. ECOS has sold such conservation kiosks to several institutions. As of press time, the five nationwide units have earned more than \$80,000 in small change. ECOS team members hope to offer three-dimensional stainless steel sculpture packages to hotels, museums, zoos and corporate buildings.

Contact Sheryl Bass at (303) 440-4950 or e-mail research@bcbr.com.

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Chip Isenhardt
COMPANY PRINCIPAL
ECOS COMMUNICATIONS INC.