



David M. Jones, DVM
Zoo Director

Watani Grasslands Reserve - Visitor Experience: Art, Graphics & Interpretives

In addition to some of the largest and most spectacular breeding herds of elephants and rhinos in the Western Hemisphere, a variety of artwork, graphics and exhibit interpretives await visitors to the new Watani Grasslands Reserve at the North Carolina Zoo.

Tropical grasslands make up about 20 percent of the African continent and support a wider variety of animal species than any other habitat in the world. The interpretive theme of the new elephant and rhino exhibit is that of an eco-tour into that environment--an imaginary African national park rich in elephants, rhinos and herds of antelope. The tourists (the Zoo visitors) are immediately immersed in the sights and sounds of the wild African habitat.

Pathways become “discovery trails” where eco-tourists can look up to see a watchful cheetah (sculpture) poised on a boulder or come across a large ostrich nest (sculpture) with child-sized eggs. As they walk along, and if they’re observant, they’ll see an African dung beetle (sculpture) going about its work of recycling. A variety of other African species (sculptures) awaits the tourists throughout the trail and symbolizes the interconnection of life on Africa’s grasslands.

A 130-foot walkway immersed into the grasslands habitat affords special views, and the tourists will find themselves surrounded on both sides by elephants, rhinos and antelope. They may see an elephant scratching itself against a gnarled rubbing tree or look in another direction and see kudu shading themselves under acacias or a rhino wallowing in mud to cool itself. [*The Elephant's Tree*, a steel and concrete structure, weighs about 5 tons and was built by the N.C. Zoo’s exhibit staff—as were most of the other structures in the new exhibit.] Tourists can cool *themselves* under the arbor mister—a palm-inspired metal tree emitting a vapor spray--or play the elephant game, a giant 20-foot “board game” built into the “discovery trail” and containing both educational and recreational elements for children. The game allows them to pretend to be elephants searching for food and water.

Farther down the trail, the tourists come across an old bush-helicopter hangar that is being used by rangers to track elephants. This coordinated program helps the local (African) people protect their crops, homes and even their lives from the migrating herds. Inside the hangar, the tourists can learn more about the conservation program and see radio collars used to track elephant movements, maps and other information about how elephant tracking is done and its benefits.

At times, tourists can watch from inside the hangar while rangers (zoo elephant keepers) put the big animals through a series of training exercises to facilitate management and husbandry.





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Wherever the tourists turn along the “discovery trail,” they’ll encounter the interesting and sometimes unexpected and some of nature’s most magnificent animals along their discovery journey into the Watani Grasslands.

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