NEWS RELEASE

Great Ape TRUST OF IOWA

For more information, contact:

Beth Dalbey
Communications Editor
Great Ape Trust of Iowa
515.243.3580
Cellular: 515.314.6773
bdalbey@greatapetrust.org

Great Ape Trust emerges stronger after Floods of 2008 test young organization's mettle

500-year flood leaves a mark in the brief history of scientific organization studying ape intelligence

Des Moines, Iowa – June 26, 2008 – The founder of Great Ape Trust of Iowa says the Floods of 2008 tested the mettle of the organization like no other event in its brief history, but it has emerged stronger than ever.

"The entire Trust team performed heroically," said Ted Townsend, who announced the now internationally known scientific research institute in 2002. "When 'our time' came, everyone responded with heartfelt professionalism, personal sacrifice and tireless dedication. I could not be more proud of their effort, values, efficiency and results. This reminder of Mother Nature's supremacy has forged a lasting spirit of unity and bonding throughout our campus. The Trust is stronger than ever."

Floodwaters have receded enough on Great Ape Trust of Iowa's southeast Des Moines campus that caretakers and scientists can shuttle to the ape residences in their cars and load supplies on a flatbed trailer hitched to a tractor, rather than transport everyone and everything by boat. Power has been restored to the orangutan home, and its return is imminent in the bonobo home. The level of water has dropped about 12 feet since June 10-13, when the runaway Des Moines River spilled across the 230-acre

campus, and the gummy sludge left in the water's place is drying. A dozen or more pair of hip waders have been retired.

These are the latest flood-recovery victories at Great Ape Trust, a scientific research center studying ape intelligence, language and behavior. They go a long way toward eliminating some of the inconveniences faced by the Great Ape Trust staff in the aftermath of record flooding that, at its peak, left every inch of the southeast Des Moines campus affected, swallowing some parts in as much as 12 feet of water.

As important as they are, the gradual return of people comforts can't compete with the sight of the orangutan Azy somersaulting across fresh, sweet-smelling straw and exploring the upper reaches of the outdoor enclosure when he, Knobi and Allie accessed their outdoor enclosure for the first time in 11 days on June 23. Nor can improvements in the quality of the animal care staff's life compare with the upcoming reintroduction of bonobos in their "greenhouse" – Great Ape Trust lingo for sunroom – where they work with researchers.

A week after the floodwaters seeped in, ape homes were "as clean as the day we moved into them," said Dr. Rob Shumaker, director of orangutan research. "As far as the apes are concerned, we are 100 percent back to normal."

Ape well-being is – and was throughout the flood emergency – the top priority of Great Ape Trust employees, who stood thigh-high or deeper in floodwaters as they worked around the clock to manage water inside the ape homes at levels ensuring maximum stability for the buildings' floating concrete slabs. Fueling and monitoring pumps, while simultaneously tending to the apes' needs, meant the bonobos and orangutans remained safe and dry on the upper levels of their vertical homes, designed to simulate apes' natural environments.

"The orangutans' hands and feet," Shumaker said proudly, "never touched water."

Said Director of Bonobo Research William M. Fields: "The main inconveniences were to people."

With life returning to normal for the ape residents of Great Ape Trust, the well-being of the staff is equally important, said members of the Great Ape Trust senior leadership team, comprised of Director of Operations Jim Aipperspach, Director of Communications Al Setka, Fields and Shumaker. They joined Townsend in praising the

response of the entire staff throughout the flood emergency and during the ongoing recovery process.

“I’ve been impressed – in fact, overwhelmed – with the staff’s dedication, commitment and positive response to decisions as they needed to be made,” Aipperspach said. “Without exception, our employees performed beyond what was expected to get us through the emergency.”

Ingenuity and creativity marked the days. Temporary docks were installed to make it easier to board boats. The tunnel leading to the orangutans’ outdoor yard became a staging area for water-discharge pumps. A virtual island accessible by only one of the three roads leading to it, Great Ape Trust also lost vital communications systems, such as e-mail and telephone, when The Trust’s server operating system was moved off campus. Employees are relying on cellular phones and cellular modems for broadband access until Internet connections and the server can be restored.

Such isolation made crisis communication all the more important for an organization that is internationally recognized, Setka said.

“Communications, both internal and external, is never more important than during a crisis situation,” he said. “We went to great lengths to provide our Web site video clips, slide shows and articles that chronicled the days’ events. This provided key information to the media and our stakeholders across the country, as well as to the families and loved ones of staff members who were literally waist deep in the flood.”

Aipperspach marveled at the calm, measured response by employees in a situation that could have bred chaos. “During the flood emergency, everyone in the organization was singularly focused on getting through the crisis,” he said. “We are now singularly focused on restoring our campus and our organization to what it was prior to the flood.”

A big part of that involves ensuring that all employees are healthy and can resume their normal lifestyles, he said. Dr. Brigetta Hughes, staff veterinarian, has worked with Des Moines University to ensure that occupational health needs, such as Tetanus and Hepatitis B. shots, have been available free to all employees. Importantly, Aipperspach said, employees are being encouraged to take vacation time as they would under normal circumstances and to the extent possible return to a regular work schedule.

Restoring the campus to pre-flood condition is expected to take months. Preliminary estimates put damages and losses at several hundred-thousand dollars.

Specifically, four modular administrative suites, which provided workspaces for the administrative, scientific research, public safety and technology staffs, are a complete loss. Those employees are working from a nearby private home, which The Trust leases for visiting scientists and other guests, or remotely from other locations.

Damage to the orangutan home was minor, primarily affecting electrical outlets and major appliances, all of which have been replaced. The mechanical, electrical and electronic systems in the bonobo home sustained significant damage, and good progress is being made to restore those systems. It may be a month before the human-occupied areas of the building are fully functioning.

“Gratefully, Great Ape Trust has flood insurance,” Aipperspach said.

The return to an everyday routine is longer in coming for the seven bonobos, whose home is large and complex. Their greenhouse is clean and sterile, but with workers replacing flood-stained drywall, electronic and electrical systems, and other flood-damaged items in the human-occupied areas, the bonobos’ access to that part of the building is limited until the work is finished.

Throughout the flooding and during the recovery, Fields and his staff have used symbol-based lexigrams to communicate with the bonobos about the situation. Fields said the conversations further reflect the validity of the bonobo language research program, the only one of its kind in the world.

Exposed to spoken English as infants, Kanzi, Panbanisha, Nyota and, to a lesser degree, Nathan acquired language in the same manner as children do from their parents and have demonstrated that they have receptive competence for spoken English. The matriarch Matata and two of her offspring, Elikya and Maisha, have been part of a non-language competent control group since their days at the Language Research Center (LRC) at Georgia State University, where they lived prior to moving to Great Ape Trust in 2005.

“When they were frightened and afraid, we could reassure Kanzi, Panbanisha, Nyota and Nathan by telling them what would happen,” Fields said. “We were unable to do that with Matata, Elikya and Maisha, so we had to tell Kanzi everything would be all

right and depend on him to reassure the others."

As more water entered the building, the bonobos' demeanor changed. They stopped bartering – a characteristic of bonobo social organization – for enrichment items to compensate for their inconvenience and became more accommodating.

"When we got 34 inches of water in the building, they got very cooperative and very quiet – not demanding at all," Fields said. "Now that the water has receded, they remain happy, calm and not demanding."

For more flood stories, slide shows and videos, go here.

GREAT APE TRUST BACKGROUND

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in southeast Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, Great Ape Trust will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities.

Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes. Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization and is certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). To learn more about Great Ape Trust of Iowa, go to www.GreatApeTrust.org.

####

Insights Through Collaborations with Apes