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Volunteer opportunities will abound as Great Ape Trust recovers from flooding

Des Moines, Iowa – June 26, 2008 – Great Ape Trust of Iowa expects to have a number of volunteer opportunities available as recovery from the devastating Floods of 2008 continues on the southeast Des Moines campus.

Already, Great Ape Trust has seen an outpouring of support from formal and informal partners. For example, a five-ton, 6x6 military transport vehicle on loan from Verizon Business pushed through standing floodwater, transporting both volunteers from Simpson College and 50 bales of fresh straw to bed the orangutans' outdoor enclosure. Great Ape Trust and Simpson College formed an academic partnership last year.

The orangutans and bonobos are safe and dry, as they have been throughout the flood emergency, which began June 10 and at its peak left every square inch of The Trust's 230-acre campus covered with some water. Cleaning the campus grounds is a massive task, and while good progress has been made in getting the ape buildings back into pre-flood shape, logistics have hindered those efforts. For 13 straight days, the only way Great Ape Trust employees had to travel from the gates to the ape homes was by boat.

Preparation for the arrival of clean straw began June 14 when the outdoor

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enclosure was still under water. Employees formed an assembly line and moved several tons of wet, mud-caked straw by hand – lifting it with a pitchfork, then passing it to the next employee to the next and finally to an area outside of the enclosure, where it could be disposed of with a front-end loader.

The straw removed, the enclosure had been cleaned and disinfected, and was ready for the orangutans' use. However, getting clean straw to the buildings was one of the logistical problems that made alternatives to the boat necessary. Verizon's "swamp buggy," as engineer Dave Pontious calls it, resolved the problem. Loaded with fresh straw and the Simpson College volunteers, the massive truck pushed through floodwaters and delivered the straw to the orangutans' outdoor enclosure. It can push through up to eight feet of water, Pontious explained.

Verizon uses the vehicle to get to infrastructure that is difficult to reach, but the vehicle loaned to Great Ape Trust Friday was also used in Iowa City and by the Iowa National Guard to deliver sandbags to flood-weary Iowans, as well as during the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

"We're all in this together," Pontious said. "Part of the company philosophy is to help people in times of emergency. This is the right thing to do."

Verizon heard about Great Ape Trust's predicament from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which worked closely with officials from The Trust during the flood emergency.

Simpson College sent more than a dozen volunteers to help with the cleanup. Their work consisted of everything from removing mud-caked mulch from landscaped areas of campus, disposing of water-soaked equipment from the bonobo building and fluffing straw in the outdoor orangutan enclosure under the watchful gaze of Azy, Knobi and Allie – who will access their outdoor space early next week, thanks to the volunteers' efforts. The college also sent members of its maintenance staff to Great Ape Trust to help return power to the bonobo home.

Simpson Dean of Academic Affairs Steve Griffith said volunteer service is a strongly held value at the college. The college president, Dr. John W. Byrd, has allowed any Simpson employee whose supervisor approves it to volunteer for flood cleanup in Iowa without a loss of pay.

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“The president understands the need to volunteer,” Griffith said, “and community service is big part of Simpson College’s mission. It’s a good part of who we are.”

Receding floodwaters are revealing a significant amount of work to be done to return the campus to its pre-flood beauty and remove debris left in the raging river’s wake. To learn more about upcoming volunteer opportunities, please e-mail dwatson@greatapetrust.org.

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.

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Insights Through Collaborations with Apes