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The Palm Beach Zoo makeover trumpets the tropics.

A ZOO RENEWED

By TIM O'MEILIA
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

WEST PALM BEACH — Muchacho, the prodigal jaguar, has come home. But it's a home he's never seen before.

Five years ago, the South American cat was sent away from his small-town enclosure in the small-time Palm Beach Zoo at Dreher Park while the zoo tried to reinvent itself.

Call it a \$42 million extreme makeover.

Now with surgery on the 24-acre property complete and most of the construction wounds healed, the \$18 million centerpiece of the reconstruction — the Tropics of the Americas — opens June 17.

Soon, Muchacho, 10, will welcome his longtime mate, Nabalam, and their 6-month-old cubs to their new home amid ruins modeled on the ancient Mayan culture of the Yucatan peninsula.

He and his family will have a four-bedroom night house cleverly

hidden beneath a 45-foot Mayan pyramid and a cold running waterfall.

The jaguars and the wild South American bush dogs are among the eight exhibits in the Tropics, where more than a dozen new mammal species will be on display.

More than 75 new species and more than 500 animals, not including fish, will roam the 3 acres devoted to Central and South American animals.

The little zoo that Paul Dreher
See ZOO, 4A ▶



GARY CORONADO/Staff Photographer

AMID THE FACE-LIFT: A replica of the Mayan rain god, Chac, and a Mayan pyramid are part of the \$18 million Tropics of the Americas exhibit opening June 17.

It started in 1950s with four animals

► ZOO from 1A

began in the early 1950s with two chickens, a goose and a goat has joined the big time.

"This puts us on the map," said Garrett Hambuechen, the zoo's interim executive director. "It's some of the best exhibitry in the world."

The decision to highlight tropical rainforest animals in subtropical South Florida was a no-brainer.

"It doesn't make sense for us to do a polar bear when we can excel in tropical and subtropical species," general curator Keith Lovett said. "We can have them outside year-round. It's better for behavioral and reproductive reasons. They don't have to be housed indoors in the winter."

The exhibit is named for George and Harriet Cornell, who donated most of the money for the exhibit and, in fact, are the zoo's largest benefactors for the entire redevelopment. Board members also contributed millions to the project.

"It's a shame neither of them lived long enough to see this," said Kane Baker, the newly elected president of the zoo board. "This was George Cornell's dream."

Busts of the Cornells welcome visitors to the Tropics. A 1,000-foot path through the exhibit, which leads into a plaza of ruins, begins at a replicated Mayan residence and an explorer's tent.

Mayan temples flank the plaza, one home to the jaguars and the other to the two pairs of bush dogs. The zoo is among only five in the United States to exhibit the wild dogs, which have a weasel-like appearance. They like to swim and emit a high-pitched squeal instead of a bark.

Giant concrete balls, the 1,500-year-old Central American version of unfathomable crop circles, dot the plaza along with huge concrete Olmec heads, a civilization that preceded the Mayans.

Also in the plaza is a Mayan observatory, where nocturnal creatures such as the Goliath bird-eating tarantula, the size of a dinner plate, Death's Head Cockroaches and giant centipedes live in the cool darkness. Outside is a dig site playground.

The path leads through a giant tule tree (the South American answer to the redwood) and takes visitors to a suspension bridge over the grasslands of South America where giant anteaters wander.

"When you look at their bodies, sometimes you can't tell whether they're coming or going," education curator Kristen Christensen said. They can eat 30,000 ants or termites a day, but at the zoo, their long, sticky tongues find an occasional cricket or worm offered up in the simulated termite mounds.

Also roaming the savanna are Patagonian cavies, which resemble super-sized guinea pigs, capybaras and ostrich-like rheas. But the oddest

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GARRETT HAMBUECHEN
Interim executive director,
Palm Beach Zoo at Dreher Park

and largest are the Baird's tapir, a Dr. Seuss concoction with a pig-like body and elephantine nose that is related to both the horse and rhinoceros and can grow to 800 pounds.

Around the corner is a cave populated by long-tongued bats and blind cave fish that eat bat guano. Outside are a pair of monkey islands, soon to be home to five species of Capuchin and spider monkeys.

Farther is the Amazon Marketplace, where a boa constrictor and other reptiles and amphibians live.

Finally, the path leads to a concession stand, the Tropics Café, which opened two years ago.

Twenty-three artists from Chemrock Landscapes of Tucson, Ariz., a firm that creates naturalistic environments, built the pyramids, statuary and tule tree from 4,000 tons of concrete and steel and fashioned the 100-foot long limestone cave with stalactites and stalagmites.

Architect Azeo "Ace" Torre, a zoo exhibit designer, planned the Tropics project.

"There's nothing but pure elation," Baker said of the exhibit. "It's been a long road, and things are hard to come by: money, space and the manpower to do it."

The Tropics is the latest in a succession of projects in the zoo's redevelopment. The \$1.2 million Tiger Falls was finished in 2001. The Florida exhibit, which recreates a cypress swamp with Seminole chickees and an 1800s homestead, was done in phases. It includes state animals such as the Florida panther, alligators, flamingos, otters and American bald eagles.

The \$2 million entry fountain was finished last year and a \$800,000 wildlife carousel the year before. All have proven to attract guests. The zoo had 350,000 visitors last year.

Four acres of the tropics are left undone. Zoo officials are halfway to raising the \$4.5 million for a state-of-the-art veterinary hospital. The next phase of the Tropics will feature a rope bridge to a 25-foot-high walk-through aviary and an 11,000-square-foot discovery center and river village.

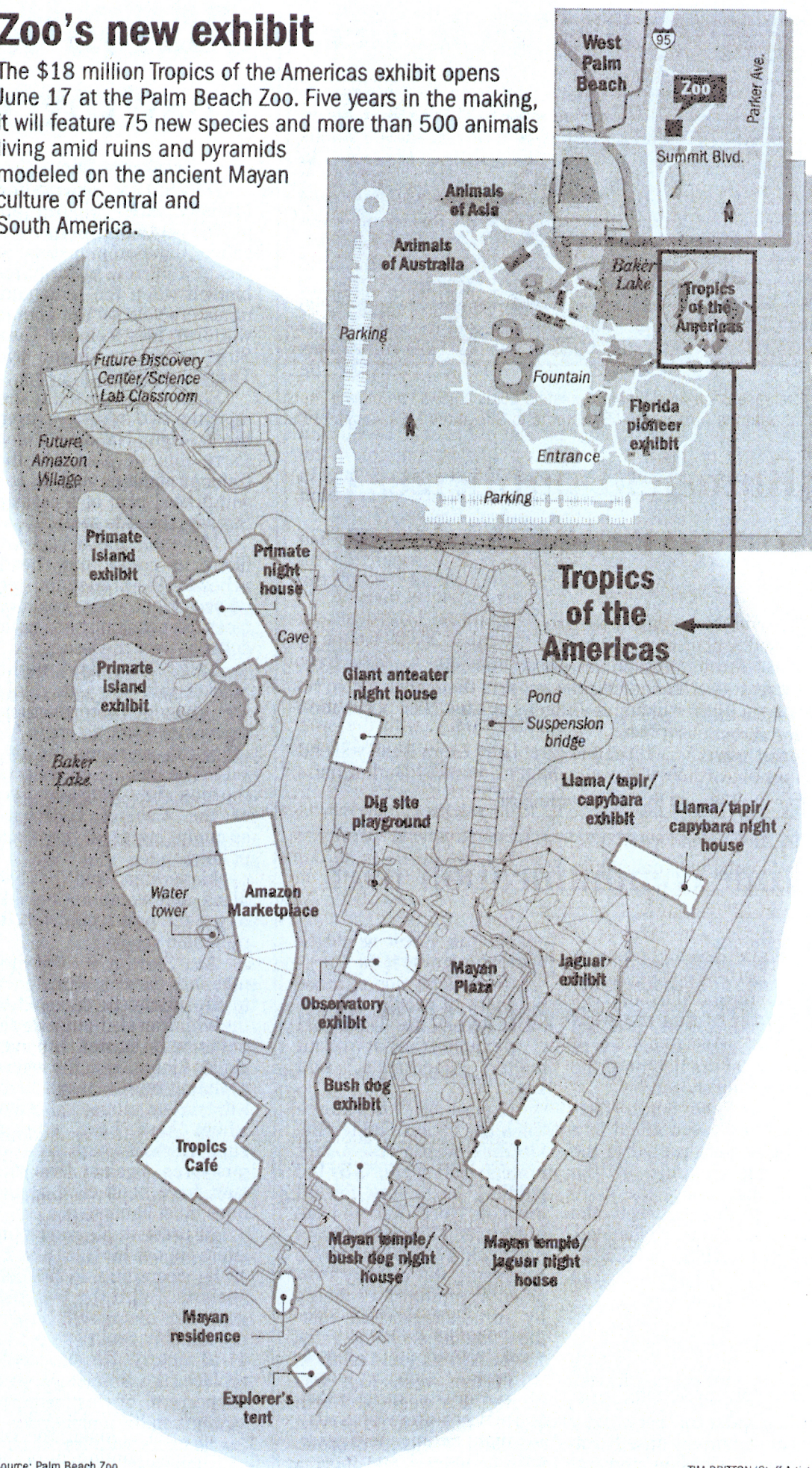
But the zoo will work the kinks out of the Tropics exhibit before embarking on a new campaign costing \$18 million to \$20 million. No timetable has been set.

"I can't tell you how proud I am of the staff and board," Hambuechen said. "They're not here because they make a great salary but because they love the place and the work."

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Zoo's new exhibit

The \$18 million Tropics of the Americas exhibit opens June 17 at the Palm Beach Zoo. Five years in the making, it will feature 75 new species and more than 500 animals living amid ruins and pyramids modeled on the ancient Mayan culture of Central and South America.



Source: Palm Beach Zoo

TIM BRITTON/Staff Artist

Weekend Latin festival makes new habitat for culture at zoo

By TIM O'MEILIA
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

WEST PALM BEACH — Hispanic music, food and culture will be celebrated this weekend at the first Fiesta Latina at the Palm Beach Zoo at Dreher Park.

Zoo visitors will get a taste of entertainment from child singer Jorge Gabriel and reggae/hip-hop group Dezperate Meazures on both days. Other Latin singers and artists will appear at the celebration, which runs from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Mayor Lois Frankel and outgoing zoo President Jorge Rodriguez-Lugo will be guests at the 11 a.m. opening ceremonies.

The weekend will feature Latin food,

bilingual storytelling, arts and crafts, face painting, tattoos and animal encounters. Zoo guests will get a peek at the new Tropics of the Americas exhibit.

Off-site parking is being provided at the Airport Hilton, with Palm Tran shuttle service to the zoo every 20 minutes. The cost for a roundtrip is \$1 for adults and 50 cents for seniors and students 21 and under. Children under 8 are free.

Admission to the zoo is \$7.50 for adults, \$6 for seniors and \$5 for children 3 to 12. Children under 3 and members are free. The zoo is located at 1301 Summit Blvd. between Forest Hill and Southern boulevards. For more information, call 533-0887.

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