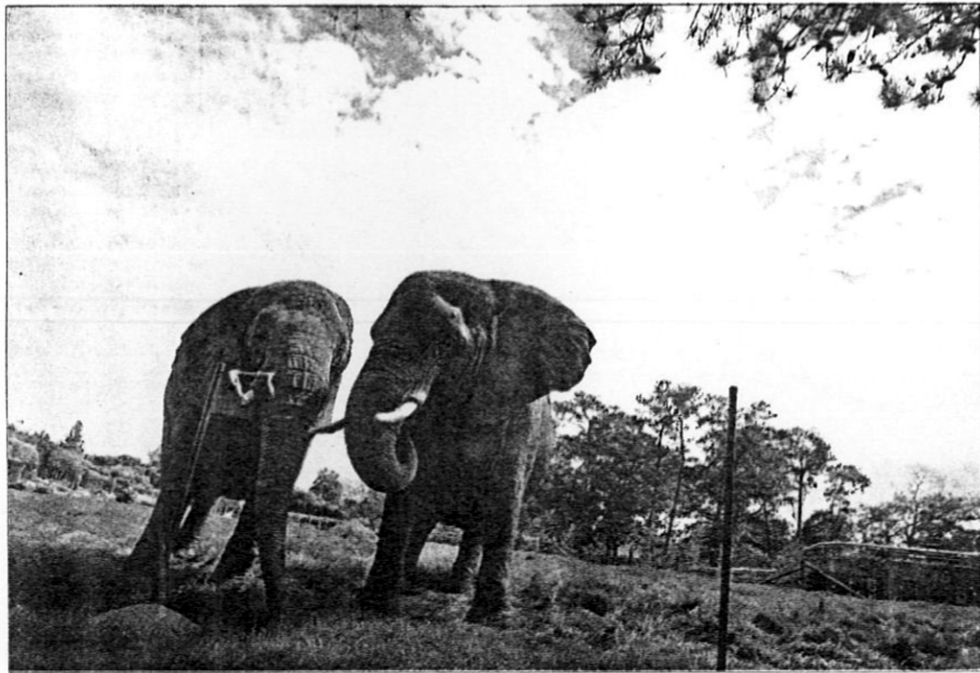




SPOTLIGHT ON AFRICA



African elephants Monica, left, and Lisa enjoy the lush grass in the new Okavango Delta exhibit at the Virginia Zoo in Norfolk. While some of the animals won't be there for the opening this weekend, officials say there will be plenty to see.

VICKI CRONIS PHOTOS/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Zoo ready to unveil new "walking safari"

BY JOAN C. STANUS
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

NORFOLK — The habitats are ready, and the banners up, welcoming an expected 20,000 visitors. Dozens of entertainers are set to perform.

But as officials at the Virginia Zoo put the final touches on the \$15.8 million Okavango Delta exhibit, they learned that a few well-heeled guests of honor will miss the opening party.

Others will arrive late, and another will likely be too shy to greet admirers.

The two female lions will be no-shows because of a

OPENING WEEKEND

The Virginia Zoo's Africa Okavango Delta Exhibit

Information: 624-9937, ext. 13; or go to virginiazoo.org

shipping glitch.

Three Red River hogs, coming from the San Diego Zoo's Wild Animal Park, likely will not arrive until Sunday or Monday.

And the zoo's new zebra is still too skittish to venture out in public.

"We're trying to introduce

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Yolima Carr, a horticultural technician at the zoo, plants an African garden in the new Okavango Delta exhibit near the rhinos' new home. The gardens and grounds will feature many African plants.

Zoo: New \$15.8 million exhibit ready for its debut

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them as rapidly as we can . . . but this is not like buying a can of oil," said Gary Ochsenbein, zoo superintendent. "We're not going to endanger the animals."

Animals on view for the first time this weekend will include several bongos, a pancake tortoise, monitor lizards, an African rock python, various exotic African birds, a rock hyrax and a brush-tailed porcupine.

Longtime zoo favorites, like the African elephants and Southern white rhinoceros, will be settled in their new environment.

Other new animals yet to arrive are the meerkats — expected in late June — and two

CHILDREN ADMITTED FREE THIS WEEKEND

The zoo's admission fee will be waived for children under 12 for the opening weekend. Visitors are encouraged to take a free shuttle from city parking lot

39 at the corner of Monticello Avenue and Princess Anne Road. It will run continuously from 9:30 a.m. until 6:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Masai giraffes — still too young to be shipped from the zoos where they're being held, said Louise Hill, animal curator. Both giraffes should arrive later this month.

Two female zebras will be added to the collection by early July in addition to a gazelle and a dik-dik.

The lions are expected to arrive in Norfolk on May 13 and

will need another week to adapt to their environment before being shown, Hill said.

Despite the animal no-shows, zoo officials and board members said the public will have plenty to see and do this weekend.

The new exhibit is patterned as a "walking safari" through Botswana's Okavango Delta, a portal to the Kalahari Desert.

"It has been a long and sometimes lonely road getting here," said Marshall Martin, the zoo's board president. "But we're proud of what we have to show off to the community this weekend. It's a fabulous trip for anyone who wants to take it."

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