Eat Like an Animal at the Akron Zoo

By Chris Norman

Has anyone ever told you, “You eat like an animal?” Well, since 2014, you can at the Akron Zoo in Akron, Ohio.

At first, it may seem like a strange partnership—apples and alpacas, lettuce and lemurs, turnips and tortoises—but the Akron Zoo sees a vital link in local organic produce and conservation. It’s a part of our efforts to practice sustainable operations and reduce carbon emissions.

The Zoo partnership with Hattie Larlham achieves this link, plus promotes healthy eating, social entrepreneurship and urban renewal. Hattie’s Gardens at the Akron Zoo grow fresh produce on land owned by the Zoo, and the new Hattie’s Food Hub just two blocks away creates a year-round market where area residents can buy healthy food at affordable prices within a food desert. A food desert is a geographic area where affordable and nutritious food is difficult to obtain. With this addition, area residents will now have an option—within walking distance—to purchase fresh produce. Producing and purchasing locally reduces the use of fossil fuels, lowering costs and benefiting the environment.

The gardens have transformed two acres of unused land at the Akron Zoo into organic gardens that grow chemical-free produce. These gardens were a catalyst that led to building the $1.2 million Hattie’s Food Hub, which opened on nearby vacant city property in 2016. The food hub creates a year-round market for area residents to purchase healthy food, using the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). It’s also a place for farmers to have their harvest processed into goods that can be sold throughout the year (by canning, drying or freezing at the peak of harvest).

In addition to supplying food for local residents, fresh produce is being supplied to the Akron Zoo’s Komodo Kingdom Café for its visitors. The café is certified by the Green Restaurant Association (GRA) and is the first 4-star, green-certified restaurant in any zoo or aquarium in North America.

“We are excited to collaborate on such a unique project with a first-class organization like Hattie Larlham that will benefit our community,” commented Douglas M. Piekarz, president and chief executive officer of the Akron Zoo. “Our neighbors are able to take advantage of affordable and healthy food options, and our visitors are able to enjoy this locally-grown food at the Zoo’s café.”

The partnership emphasizes the importance of people, planet and prosperity. In addition to addressing the issue of a food desert, beautifying the neighborhood and providing organically grown food, the partnership has created income opportunities for eight people with developmental disabilities and a job coach while reducing expenses at the Zoo.

Chris Norman is the director of capital projects and sustainability at the Akron Zoo.

By the Numbers

ASIAN ELEPHANTS AND AZA
Between 2011 and 2015

More than $8.1 million was directed to elephant conservation

29 Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA)-accredited facilities reported spending nearly $1.6 million specifically to protect and conserve Asian elephants

From 2013 to 2015, members reported directing almost $950,000 to Asian elephant research focused primarily on health, reproduction and welfare.

AZA members reported donating more than $1.1 million to the International Elephant Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of both African and Asian elephants, and an AZA Conservation Partner.

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