

Report of Code 1 Orangutan 28 May 2017

Compiled by Maria Finnigan Director Life Sciences

1. Background

1.1 Summary of Code and Time Line

At approximately 1:45pm on 28 May 2017 a Keeper called a CODE 1 ORANGUTAN over the two-way radio and advised that there was a mother and juvenile orangutan on the public boardwalk. Following Emergency Management Procedure protocols, a Senior Keeper immediately identified themselves as the Emergency Coordinator, requesting further detail of the incident and staff assistance.

Primate Keepers identified that the mother and juvenile orangutans were adult female Sekara, and her five year old son Sungai. The Emergency Coordinator called for a member of the Veterinarian Department and Firearms Team to be on stand-by. Zoo staff and Docents oversaw the safe removal of visitors from the boardwalk area. Using food as enticement, the Orangutans' Keepers encouraged the orangutans to move back into the vicinity of the orangutan exhibit. The orangutans were then called into the night quarters of their exhibit and the Code 1 was called 'over' at 2.07pm.

1.2 Events that immediately followed the code

The orangutans remained locked in the night quarter facilities for the remainder of the day and were observed throughout the afternoon for any sign of injury.

The Emergency Coordinator and Keepers immediately assessed the exhibit and spoke with witnesses. Staff were able to determine that the juvenile had been playing on overhead ropes and had likely lost his grip, dropping into the garden bed below. His mother was seen to immediately follow to retrieve her son.

Footage taken of the incident by a members of the public was shown to staff. A short time later, the Zoo became aware that this footage had been uploaded to social media channels, tagging traditional media outlets including channel Seven News and 6PR radio.

Duty Director (Claire Wright), Primate Supervisor (Holly Thompson) and Media Manager (Dan Henry) attended the site and liaised by phone with Acting CEO (Maria Finnigan) and Curator Operations (John Lemon). A number of media enquiries were responded to. The Media Manager advised the Ministerial Media Advisor of the incident (phone message), which was noted by that Advisor by late afternoon.

2. Review and Actions

2.1 Review of incident and exhibit by senior Life Sciences Staff

The following morning, the Acting CEO led an onsite review of the incident with the Curator Operations and Primate Supervisor, focussing on the four exhibits in which overhead ropes connect to external poles, and the level of activity of the younger members of the orangutan colony on these particular overhead ropes.

The orangutan colony currently contains three juvenile orangutans under seven years of age who have been seen to display high levels of play behaviour. Given the extent of this play, it was considered that there was a high risk of another young orangutan losing its grip when moving or playing on the ropes, and breaching containment. It was determined that these ropes would be removed prior to the orangutans going back into these exhibits.

2.2 Actions taken to mitigate risk of further breach

Three of the exhibits with external poles connected via ropes are regularly used to house mothers and juveniles, and it was agreed to disconnect the ropes from the external poles in these exhibits. The disconnection of the ropes was completed by 30 May 2017.

The fourth exhibit retained connections to the external poles as this exhibit is used to house an aged diabetic male (Hsing, 42 years) and an adult female companion (Utama, 38 years). Neither of these orangutans are agile and the ability to keep the male orangutan's fitness levels up using the ropes enables better management of his diabetes.

Should this fourth facility be required to house younger orangutans, the external pole will be disconnected. This has been noted for future reference.

3. Discussion and longer term actions/considerations

Perth Zoo's breeding colony of Sumatran orangutans currently consists of two adult males, five adult females and three juvenile offspring. The orangutan facilities comprise seven open outdoor enclosures and one enclosed outdoor enclosure, all of which are interconnected through an internal night quarter den area (see Diagram 1). The orangutans are rotated through the different enclosures to heighten positive welfare by providing variety.

The use of external poles and ropes to supplement the travel routes within the orangutan exhibits is a design feature used by many zoological institutions globally. In 2002, the original design process for the exhibits' climbing structures factored in the known physical capability and intelligence of orangutans, to meet containment requirements and maximise visibility for visitors.

On two occasions in 2015, a juvenile female orangutan breached containment by displaying jumping behaviour not previously seen in orangutans. As a result of those incidents, modifications were made to the exhibits to mitigate the risk of a breach reoccurring. Given the recent breach, a further review of all of the original design calculations for containment is being undertaken.

The modifications made to the exhibits has minimised the risk of further containment breaches, but it has also reduced the complexity within the exhibits for the orangutans, reducing exercise options and elements that create interest for them in their immediate environment. This is a welfare management issue.

The ultimate goal for Perth Zoo is to provide the highest level of positive welfare for the animals in our care, aligned with the highest levels of containment of the animals to ensure staff and visitor safety. As such, research into optimising the internal configuration of the existing climbing infrastructure to increase the arboreal travel paths available to the animals is being included in the full review of the entire orangutan facility being undertaken.

Diagram 1: Perth Zoo Orangutan Facility configuration showing location of external poles removed and site of breach.

