

ORANGUTAN ESCAPES

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Updated by Sandy Walker

Many escapes can be attributed to one of two causes, human error or design flaw. The following material has been synthesized from the escape protocols of several U.S. zoos and from written reports of escapes. It is impossible to provide more than a few guidelines for handling escapes, as each facility and animal is different. Many factors will influence choices to be made, and there may be several strategies with a high probability of success. Escapes are best handled through prevention! Common sense, attention to shifting, locking and securing enclosures, knowledge of animal behavior and maintenance needs of facilities will go a long way in eliminating the risk of an escape. Always work carefully and attentively and **THINK SAFETY!**

FOCUS ON THE TASK AT HAND

Avoid carelessness, inattention or hurrying in locking enclosures and shifting animals. One caregiver suffered serious injuries when, in rushing to go to lunch, she hit the wrong switch and shifted an adult pair of orangutans into the work area where she was standing, rather than into the exhibit she had just finished servicing.

CHECK

Always double-check your locks, tugging on them firmly to be sure they are **REALLY** locked. Most orangutans are very aware of locks and will be checking behind you, so be sure **YOU** are the one to discover a missing or defective lock.

CONCENTRATE

Volunteers, curators, veterinarians, maintenance workers and fellow caregivers should be made aware that distracting orangutan caregivers from their normal routine can be hazardous to caregiver and animal safety.

DON'T MAKE ASSUMPTIONS

Be sure the location of each animal in the group is known before entering an enclosure. Don't assume an enclosure is empty because no orangutans are seen. Count off or name each individual in the group, making positive visual contact with each animal before unlocking the presumably empty area.

COMMUNICATE

If more than one caregiver is working an area, stay in close contact, being sure that everyone clearly understands their assignments. Check

on each other often and be sure to avoid potentially disastrous situations. If Dick is working orangutan night dens and Jane is working the on-exhibit areas, they should both be present during shifting. If Jane allows the plumbers into the night dens to unstop a drain while Dick is at lunch, she should stand by until they are finished and the area is secure. Otherwise, Dick would have no knowledge of the plumbers' presence.

PREDICT

Think through your actions to their likely conclusion. Diagramming a complicated shifting routine, or writing down each step, can help you anticipate problems. This also aids in the communication process, so that each individual knows clearly what will happen and who will do what. Thinking aloud is also a good way for senior caregivers to teach new caregivers how to anticipate the animals' responses, and to be sure all alternatives have been considered.

In spite of all our caution and anticipation, escapes happen. Each institution must have its own escape protocol, outlining the appropriate methods of communication, containment, areas of responsibility and evaluation procedures. Caregivers should be familiar with all aspects of an escape plan. A yearly drill can be scheduled to practice escape procedures.

COMMUNICATION

- Where is the command center? (Security, curator's office, etc.)
- Is it the same place at night and on weekends?
- Who is responsible for staffing the command center?
- How is information about the escape expressed --by radio, telephone, or in person?
- What information is communicated? (Observer's name and title, location of observer, identity and number of escapees, location and direction escapees are traveling and their status--calm, running, aggressive.) Indicate if the escapees are completely unconfined--where animals have direct access to visitors, or in secondary containment--in a caregiver service area, mechanical room, etc.
- Is a "code" used to indicate an escape? (There is no point in calling code green to keep an escape confidential, if it is followed by "five orangutans heading for the Hilltop Restaurant.")
- Who is in charge on the scene? What if that person is unavailable? How is the person in charge designated? (Hat, orange safety vest, etc.)
- Are the telephone lists of essential personnel up to date and posted in the appropriate locations?

- Who handles the media, and when?
- Who has the authority to declare the emergency over and how is the all clear broadcast?

CONTAINMENT

- NEVER attempt to capture an escapee without assistance. Take shelter in a secure area or remain out of sight, while keeping the escapee under observation, until help arrives.
- Your actions should minimize stress and danger of injury to the orangutan, the visitors, and zoo staff.
- No matter what your relationship with a confined animal, that animal, once free of confinement, may act VERY differently. Always assume the escapee is dangerous--even young orangutans have a powerful bite when alarmed, and are stronger than most humans.
- Only those who have a positive relationship with the escapee(s) should be on the front lines. Orangutans recognize and remember individuals, and may become dangerously aggressive if confronted by people whom they dislike. This is a good reason to remind all those who may have to participate in an emergency response to cultivate a positive relationship with the apes.
- Most staff members responding should be involved in crowd control and secondary support. Female and juvenile animals may be viewed by the public as **less** dangerous than they may be. Staff should be calm but firm in removing visitors from the scene. Be polite and discrete but honest about the necessity for clearing the area. Any requests for information or complaints should be forwarded to the director/public relations staff. Any zoo volunteers on the scene could help with crowd control/evacuation of the public and provide needed equipment ON REQUEST. Other equipment such as rifles, dart guns, water hoses, etc. can be kept nearby, but OUT OF SIGHT of the animal, and should be produced only at the request of the scene commander. Zoo staff should never act independently and only **at the request of the scene commander**.
- The scene commander should determine a recapture strategy and communicate it clearly to the team, after being advised by those caregivers most familiar with the escapee.
- Keeping the animal in a familiar location or routine may be of considerable help in resolving the situation quickly and safely. For example, if a familiar face and voice call the animals to eat according to their normal routine, escapees may willingly walk back into their enclosures, provided the route is clear and the situation remains calm.

PREPARATION

Make sure that:

- Responsibilities are reasonably distributed.
- Members of the Emergency Response Team are readily available or have clearly designated substitutes.
- Lines of communication are open and working.
- Correct phone, pager and radio numbers are clearly and prominently posted in any area that might need them.
- Annual drills are performed to help staff review emergency procedures and protocols.

EVALUATION

It is important to discover why and how the escape happened so that corrective measures can be taken and improvements can be made to better respond to future emergencies.

APPENDIX

The following institutions were surveyed for escape protocol information:

Chicago Zoological Park
National Zoological Park
San Francisco Zoological Gardens
Zoo Atlanta