

Oklahoma City Zoo animals fed a healthy diet

The Oklahoma City Zoo spends nearly \$500,000 a year to feed its animals. Nutritionists try to offer a variety of foods that mimic what the animals would eat in the wild.

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Published: June 19, 2011

Zookeeper Nadine Varner tossed fistfuls of crickets into the air, giving a scissor-tailed flycatcher the chance to snap the bugs up with its beak.

"To birds," she said, "this is chocolate cake."

The [Oklahoma City Zoo](#) spends nearly half a million dollars each year to feed its 1,800 animals. That includes everything from \$80,000 for red meat to \$20,000 for bugs to \$40,000 for rabbits, mice and chicks.

On Wednesday, the zoo trust approved part of the food contracts for the upcoming 2011-12 fiscal year, which starts July 1.

The challenge with feeding hundreds of animals is to keep them healthy and interested, said [Dr. Jennifer D'Agostino](#), the zoo's head veterinarian and nutritionist.

Commissary workers plan and dole out the food, and zookeepers mix up feeding schedules to keep animals on their toes.

Complex food schedule

The meat arrives in four or five shipments a year and is kept in giant freezers, D'Agostino said. Produce arrives every few days. And a chirping box of crickets and other bugs arrives about once a week.

Seasonal produce is used when possible, like autumn pumpkins.

Specialty animal food — shaped like dry dog food — provides nutritional supplements, D'Agostino said.

The horticulture team grows a few plants for the animals to eat. The apes especially love banana leaves. Some zoo staff members even donate venison during deer season.

Predators enjoy whole prey, like rabbits, rats and quail.

Many of these prey animals are dead when they are given to the carnivores. First of all, D'Agostino said, not all zoo visitors would like to see the killing of an animal. Second, she said, "the food might escape." At \$12 a rabbit, zoo officials don't like dinner to hop away.

Predators occasionally will kill and eat native animals that live in the zoo, such as squirrels or birds.

“Every once in a while, they will attack something,” D’Agostino said, “but I think that’s more for sport than food.”

Some foods don’t work. For example, the elephants don’t like pears, and the bears won’t eat mushrooms. Parrots love to pick out only the peanuts from a mixed pile of food.

Varied diets

The variety and richness of animal diets is relatively new for the zoo, D’Agostino said. Even a decade ago, most animals received the same meal every day. Predators usually ate animal food and rarely received whole prey. Obesity was a problem.

Now the goal is to offer a variety of foods that mimic diets in the wild.

“We try to do a variety because of the nutritional balance it gives them,” D’Agostino said.

The result, she said, is less pacing, more natural behaviors and a higher quality of life. Now the only overweight animals are the donkeys, who’ve been put on a diet, D’Agostino said.

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