

Where do the animals go in the winter?

If you ask that question to most people in New England, the answer would be, “some sleep and others hibernate”. Hibernation doesn’t that just sound sweet. Ignore the hassles and stresses of everyday life and sleep for six months. It makes me tired to think of such a thing, although more sleep would be nice. Well, for the animals at Southwick’s Zoo winter time means something different.

After Columbus Day weekend, the number of zoo visitors decline. As much as we would like to stay opened for the winter, the lack of visitors and harsh winter conditions makes it impossible for us to keep operating. At Southwick’s, during the fall we start our own period of dormancy. Human and non-human animals alike get ready for the long, cold winter. The zookeepers break out warm rain gear, hiking boots and soon snow apparel. The chimps are given blankets and the pellet stove in their house is cleaned and back to operational mode. I think this year; we may have to get them a new television as well. Other animals adapt in other ways. The lions, tiger and leopard suddenly seem to be more alive and they look larger as well. That is because their fur coats become heavy for the winter. The hoof stock, of course, weathers the cold temperatures just fine. It only makes sense that a Tibetan yak would be more comfortable when the air gets really cold. The rhino’s have a heated floor and a heated building. They spend most of their time outside when the weather is cooperating. They push through their plastic flaps and get the choice to stay inside or out. I have to say that it is pretty amusing to see a four thousand pound animal “ice skate”. While most of the animals have the choice to stay outside on occasion, other species need to spend the winter inside. I have had people ask me, “Why don’t you send them south”? Wait a minute, “why don’t you send me south”? Well, the answer to the first question is that Southwick’s is our animal’s home. Transporting animals is expensive and stressful. We pride ourselves on having very healthy animals with stress free habitats. The amount of time that the smaller mammal species, birds and reptiles stay inside is pretty minimal, since we began building winterized habitats many years ago. They have the same keepers and same familiar surroundings each year.

Well now, the answer to the second question “Why doesn’t anyone send me south in the winter” is because we have the zoomobile program that is available to go to schools all winter long. The staff at the Earth Eco-education center stays busy taking care of the animals along with giving interns opportunities to earn college credits. The entertainment and education doesn’t stop because the zoo is closed it just changes, like the seasons.

I hope to see you in the spring!

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