

Jungle Island: Pleasant for people, not so much for animals **After years of problems with its animals, Jungle Island is set to reopen with a new theme, no big cats, and one less orangutan**



Officials with Jungle Island hope to reopen their gates in a few weeks and lure in visitors with new adrenaline-pumping experiences to complement the more than 500 animals on exhibit.

The bayside tourist attraction on Watson Island has been closed since Hurricane Irma brushed South Florida with its monster winds and punishing storm surge in early September. The historic storm leveled more than 200 trees and ravaged its botanical gardens, says Chris Gould, Jungle Island's managing director. Irma also partially lifted the roof off the Treetop Ballroom, resulting in water penetrating the interior walls and carpeted floors.

"The damage was pretty extensive," Gould tells *Biscayne Times*. "We lost our largest trees. The botanical gardens is where we took it on the chin. It certainly reduced the attraction value of Jungle Island."

So for the past eight months, employees and construction crews have been busy making repairs to the Treetop Ballroom, replenishing the park's lost flora, and building new amenities, like an indoor state-of-the-art trampoline park, an aerial rope-course experience called Tree Walk Village, an outdoor skydiving wind tunnel, and escape rooms.

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By early February, the ballroom was back in business hosting events, and before spring ends, the park should be fully operational again, says Gould.

Despite the new heart-pounding attractions, the managing director promises that Jungle Island remains committed to its roots as an exotic-animal haven.

“A lot of the investment we’re doing now is to raise the bar even further,” he explains. “In our plans for the future, we’re focusing on having incredible animal habitats -- everything we can do to elevate to incredible standards for the visitors and for the animals’ own enrichment and stimulation.”



Yet some familiar animals won’t be around to greet visitors and partake in the changes. Ten big cats -- including Mahesh the Bengal tiger who escaped from his enclosure in 2010, and the world’s largest cat, 922-pound “liger” Hercules -- that lived part of the year at Jungle Island were sent back to their owner, Mahamayavi Bhagavan “Doc” Antle, an exotic animal wrangler who owns and operates a much-maligned wildlife tourist attraction in South Carolina called Myrtle Beach Safari.

“Generally speaking, large animals don’t fit our footprint,” Gould says. “We don’t have a lot of room. The cats are no longer here, and there are no plans to have them return.”

An even more unsettling development took place less than eight weeks ago. On February 11, a Jungle Island employee discovered the lifeless body of Jake the orangutan in his enclosure.

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One of six orangutans at Jungle Island and a fixture at the animal park since birth, the 300-pound ape died just two weeks before his 18th birthday, Gould says. An autopsy performed by Jungle Island veterinarian Jason Chatfield concluded that cardiopulmonary distress claimed Jake's last breath, but he'd been fighting respiratory problems for more than two months, the managing director adds.

"Jake was our largest orangutan, and the alpha male of the group," Gould says. "He was a real charismatic animal. He was someone everybody in the park felt they had a relationship with him. It has been a really tough time for the whole Jungle Island family."

The departure of the big cats, and Jake's sudden death amid the development of new diversions, constitute the latest chapter in Jungle Island's continuously evolving history from roadside parrot show tucked inside a Miami-Dade suburb to a quasi-theme park facing Biscayne Bay.



Since relocating from Pinecrest to Watson Island in 2003, Jungle Island -- previously known as Parrot Jungle and Parrot Jungle Island -- has earned a spotty animal-welfare record, lost its accreditation with the world's preeminent zoo and aquarium organization, and has faced withering criticism from animal rights groups, such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, or PETA.

But the attraction has garnered some positive headlines as well, stories about pulling out all the stops to treat ailing animals, as well as teaching its orangutans to use iPads. In May 2012, the six orangutans were given the tablets as part of a mental stimulus program in hopes of having them communicate with humans. However, only two orangutans, eight-year-old fraternal twins Pumpkin and Peanut, showed interest in the devices.

Also in 2012, caretakers noticed that Peanut was lethargic, not eating, and not going to the bathroom. During emergency surgery to treat an intestinal obstruction, a tissue sample was removed for biopsy and confirmed to be non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, and the orangutan underwent several rounds of chemotherapy (she is now in remission).

In 2016 the medical staff ordered a full-body CT scan on Casper, a 19-year-old leucistic (white) alligator with a history of melanoma. The 13-foot gator had lost his appetite and had dropped in weight.

Still, critics say the number of incidents documenting poor animal care outpace the times Jungle Island has gone the extra mile to provide medical treatment for the creatures in its care.

"Jungle Island's horrible record of animal welfare violations speaks for itself," says Brittany Peet, the director of captive law enforcement with the PETA Foundation. "It's a roadside zoo and it's no surprise it has so many complaints about animal care."

Gould emphatically refutes Peet's accusations. "The welfare of the animals is our paramount responsibility," he says. "Everything we do is constantly measured and evaluated in terms of where the animals live, how they live, what their diet is, and what type of enrichment they get with other animals."

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