

The animals are lonely, but local attractions are surviving during coronavirus — for now

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Nobody's buying tickets anymore at Calusa Nature Center. The place closed weeks ago because of the coronavirus.

But just try telling that to the animals.

The Fort Myers nature center is home to alligators, eagles, turtles, raccoons and more. And they all need to eat.

That's where Jeremy Hargett and his crew of animal caretakers come in. They still go to work every day to feed the animals, clean their habitats and just spend time with them.

"They mean a lot to us," Hargett says about the animals at the Fort Myers nature center. "It's something that we're pretty passionate about doing. We're not gonna stop it."

It's not just a job for his team of contracted caretakers, Hargett says.

It's a calling.

"Most of them, honestly, would probably do it for free," he says. "Because they love the animals. They have a bond with them, and they want to keep them safe."

Of course, that's what all Southwest Florida animal attractions want, too. But feeding and caring for their animals has gotten harder during the COVID-19 crisis.

For most of these attractions, ticket sales disappeared overnight thanks to coronavirus-related closings. And donations declined, too.

"We did take a hit," says Deanna Deppen, executive director of Shy Wolf Sanctuary in Naples. "We do a lot of education programming. ... (And) we had to cancel everything."

Places like Shy Wolf and Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum have been sounding the alarm for weeks with email blasts and social media posts.

March and April are two of their busiest months of the year. And without all that money coming from tickets and donations, they worry that their animals might eventually go hungry — especially if stay-at-home measures continue longer than another month or two.

These attractions spend as much as \$5,000 to \$8,000 a month just for food for the animals — everything from vegetables and "Flamingo Chow" for the herbivores at Everglades Wonder Gardens to fish, mice and whole chickens for the gators and birds of prey at Calusa Nature Center.

And that doesn't include the cost of veterinary care and paying for essential employees who haven't been laid off or furloughed — mostly the animal caretakers.

For now, everyone says they're OK. Between donations and emergency funds, they can stay afloat for at least another month or two.



Senior aquarist Carly Hulse poses with the giant Pacific octopus at Bailey-Matthews National Shell Museum. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

But what happens after that?

Naples Zoo will lose an estimated \$1.5 million in ticket sales and other earned revenue from being closed in March and April, says president and CEO Jack Mulvena. And those losses will continue if stay-at-home orders extend into May, June or longer.

"I think we're in as good of a position as we could be in," Mulvena says. "But that's the caveat: A lot's going to depend on what happens the rest of the summer."

"When will facilities like ours be allowed to open? If they're opened, what are going to be the restrictions? Will there be restrictions in numbers? Will there be maximum numbers that we're able to see?"

Donors have responded to the fundraising campaigns, though. Shy Wolf, for example, has raised about \$20,000 to help care for its approximately 55 wolves, coyotes, foxes, gopher tortoises and other animals.

"We have enough, fortunately, in our account that we're not living month to month like some places are,"

Deppen says. "But we definitely don't want this to go on for too long."

Meanwhile, Naples Zoo has raised more than \$200,000 from donors for its emergency operating fund, plus it recently got a \$772,600 loan from the federal Paycheck Protection Program to pay for its essential employees.

The zoo's emergency fund was meant to help it after hurricanes and other natural disasters, but Mulvena says he never thought they'd be using it for a pandemic. Still, he's glad the money's there as a safety net for the animals.

"It's been painful," Mulvena says. "But it could've been a lot more painful, honestly. We're trying to count our blessings and look on the bright side."

The coronavirus has affected these animal attractions in other ways, as well. But they've been adapting.

Everglades Wonder Gardens stocked up on masks and latex gloves for its employees. Caretaking crews at Bai-



Billy the sulcata tortoise eats a meal at Calusa Nature Center. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

ley-Matthews and Naples Zoo work two different shifts and don't interact with each other. And workers at Bailey-Matthews also sanitize everything before and after their shifts.

"So we're basically double-sanitizing," says Dorrie Hipschman, executive director of Bailey-Matthews.

At Naples Zoo, caretakers are wearing face masks and taking other precautions around their animals. This is especially true with its big cats — a change they made after a tiger contracted COVID-19 at the Bronx Zoo.

Caretakers at these local attractions are also spending more time with their animals, many of which need more human contact now that the locals and tourists have stopped visiting.

Usually, most animals ignore visitors during meal time at The Shell Factory & Nature Park, says owner Pam Cronin. But not anymore. Now they stop eating and mosey right over.

"They're so lonely," Cronin says. "It's amazing."

"The donkeys are adorable. They come right over and they wanna nuzzle, and the petting farm animals are just going crazy. ... It's really very sweet."

The same thing is happening at Naples Zoo, where the animals are curious about the sudden lack of visitors.

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Zoo technician Mallory Enzor feeds the flamingos at Everglades Wonder Gardens. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

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“On a normal day, from 9 to 5, we’ve got sometimes 3,000 visitors here,” Mulvena says. “So they’re wondering where everybody is.”

Despite the financial difficulties, many local attractions admit the timing could have been worse. Coronavirus-related closings came after many of them experienced record-breaking ticket sales in February and early March. So they had some financial cushioning to fall back on.

“Our February 2020 was almost equal to our whole 2017 — the whole year,” says Thomas Hecker, president and CEO of Everglades Wonder Gardens in Bonita Springs. “We couldn’t be on better financial footing going into something like this, that was unpredictable. So we have money kind of in the bank for a rainy day.”

Still, many attractions had big plans for the height of tourist season. Now those plans have been put on hold.

Bailey-Matthews had just opened a new 5,000-square foot, \$6 million aquarium, complete with octopuses, fish and other marine life.

“We opened the aquarium officially to the public on March 1, and we closed on March 16,” says executive director Hipschman. “So we were open for 16 days.”

Meanwhile, things were finally starting to look up for the financially troubled Calusa Nature Center in Fort Myers. Ticket sales were increasing, and —



Caretaker Rene Ameritech poses outside the alpaca habitat at The Shell Factory & Nature Park. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

thanks to a grant — they’d recently installed a new projector in the planetarium. But the projector never got a chance to debut.

“Things were actually on the uprise,” says board president Jim Reynolds.

For now, though, these attractions say they’re hanging in there. Thanks to emergency donations, grants and feder-

al loans, they’re managing to stay afloat.

Bailey-Matthews just received a \$171,500 Paycheck Protection Program loan from the FDA, which will pay for its staff salaries for eight weeks, Hipschman says. Plus they’ve gotten lots of private donations.

“Our donors have been amazingly generous,” Hipschman says, “and we’ve been incredibly grateful.”

Still, fundraising has been a tricky proposition. These attractions need the money, but so do a lot of people in Southwest Florida — many of whom were laid off or furloughed during the coronavirus crisis.

Everglades Wonder Gardens plans a big membership drive next month, but Hecker says he’s wary about pushing too hard for donations. “I feel like there are needier people that are in the restaurant business and the service industry that need more help.”

Reynolds of Calusa Nature Center feels the same way.

“We don’t want to reach out and ask a lot right now, because everybody’s hurting,” he says. “It’s hard to donate when you don’t know what the future holds.”

Even so, donations have come pouring in anyway. And, no matter what, the people running these attractions all vow the same thing: Their animals will be OK, even if the closures continue.

They’ll find a way.

“We really haven’t missed a beat in terms of animal care,” says Mulvena of Naples Zoo. “The animals were never gonna go hungry or not get the same kind of high-quality care that they always get.”

“That’s the commitment you make and you don’t ever depart from it.”

Reynolds agrees. Although he admits he still worries about the future.

“Do I think we’ll survive?” he says. “Yes, we’ll definitely survive. But it depends on how long this goes.”

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Reptile Keeper Rachel Myers trains an alligator at the Naples Zoo.

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Shy Wolf Sanctuary founder Nancy Smith with one of the sanctuary’s rescues, the wolfdog Sukaii. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS