

# A Safari through *AFRICANISIUS*

by Eileen C. Herbert

The Spiny Tail Lizard stirs and a galago peers with wide eyes as Jennifer Peterson passes by. The junior biology major just entered *AFRICANISIUS*, a mini-zoo on the Canisius campus. Jennifer, and 12 other students in Dr. Michael Noonan's zoo biology class, built *AFRICANISIUS* from the ground up to celebrate the wildlife of Africa in a simulated Serengeti kopje and nocturnal forest.

Building the zoo in an empty room of the Health Science Building was a huge endeavor, but before the group even began construction, it spent countless hours researching how to design and build the exhibits, and how to care for the animals.

"We did a lot of research in class and out in the field before starting the project," said Peterson.

Noonan, professor of biology and psychology, begins his zoo biology class with academic lectures on ethics and exhibit design, zoo philosophy and zoo history, including several experiential exercises at the Buffalo Zoological Gardens, Rochester Seneca Park Zoo and the Toronto Zoo.

"Because of Dr. Noonan's connections at the Buffalo Zoo, we were able to visit there often," said Peterson. "The Buffalo Zoo lent us the animals for *AFRICANISIUS* and we worked closely with Kevin Murphy, curator at the zoo and a 1986 graduate of Canisius' Animal Behavior Program."



Adrienne Vargo '03 picks up a Pancake Tortoise on display in *AFRICANISIUS*.

The students continued their research by visiting several zoos across the country. With Noonan behind the wheel, they set out on an intense five-day road trip. In Chicago, they visited the Brookfield Zoo, the Lincoln Park Zoo and Shedd Aquarium. The group also visited the Toledo Zoo in Ohio and the Detroit Zoo in Michigan.

"We went on several tours and talked to zoo veterinarians," said Peterson. "We learned how to use plants in the exhibits, how to hide keeper access and how to build a natural environment for the animals." The students also toured the zoo kitchens to learn about the animal's dietary needs.

The construction began in October, as soon as the group arrived back on campus. The class, coincidentally consisting of all women, was inexperienced but determined to complete the major construction project that lay ahead.

"We started by taping on the floor where we wanted the exhibits," said Jennifer Snekser, a junior biology major. "Then, with the help of Peter Paufler, the college's carpenter, we got the lumber and plywood and constructed the walls."

Next came the real challenge — building the kopje (small hill) for the hyrax exhibit.

"Again, Pete was our coach," said Adrienne Vargo, also a junior biology major. "We made an outline of the hill with chicken wire. We had to mix the concrete in the basement of the Health Science Building and bring it up to the third floor in wheelbarrows. We then had to lay the concrete handful by handful in order to shape and build the hill. It took us five days to finish!"

The students worked long hours as carpenters, plumbers, concrete masons and painters. After three weeks of hard work, the zoo was finished and it was finally time to bring in the animals. Hyraxes, distant cousins of the elephant; galagos, nocturnal primates; Elephant-Nosed Fish that navigate



A tiny galago peeks out at *AFRICANISIUS* visitors from his perch.

via their electric field; Spiny Tail Lizards; Barbary Doves; Pancake Tortoises; Egyptian Spiny Mice and five species of African finches and cichlid fish from the Central African Rift Valley were placed on exhibit at AFRICANISIUS.

With the habitat built and the animals in place, the students hung up their tool belts and got back to the business of animal care.

“We worked in shifts to take care of the zoo,” said Peterson. “There were always two of us scheduled in the zoo. We prepared the animals’ food, fed them and answered visitor’s questions.”

After three weeks, the zoo closed and the animals were returned to the Buffalo Zoo. That’s when the students learned real-world lessons about materials recycling — a

major environmental conservation theme promoted by zoos worldwide.

“As much as possible, the zoo materials are stored to be used in future zoo biology projects,” said Dr. Noonan. “When students in 2003 use these materials, they will see elements of AFRICANISIUS painted on some of the surfaces. They will also see elements of The Vanishing Amazon from 1999 and Zoostralia from 1997. This is a neat thing because the students become connected to others that they have never met and they see that the recycling and reuse of forest products can and should be done.”

A record 700 people toured AFRICANISIUS during its three-week run and Noonan credits the great success of the zoo project

to the dedication of his students.

“This class coalesced into a group with phenomenal energy, incredible creativity and very high productivity,” he said. “They are among the very best students with whom I have ever worked. They all put in endless hours on this project and the final result exceeded all expectations.”

Noonan’s students concur saying the experience gave them more than a great education in zoo biology. It taught them life lessons in commitment, responsibility and teamwork.

“In order to complete such a big project, we all really needed to work together toward a common goal,” concluded Adrienne Vargo. “It was an amazing experience and one that I will remember forever.” ■



LEFT: Jill Wierchowski '02, Jenifer Sneker '03, Alison Dockum '03, Dr. Michael Noonan and Adrienne Vargo '03 pose in front of their AFRICANISIUS exhibit.

BELOW LEFT: Dr. Michael Noonan and Jill Wierchowski '02 examine a Barbary Dove.

BELOW: Jenell Eckert '02 and Kevin Murphy, curator at the Buffalo Zoo, mix concrete to build a kopje (small hill) for the hyrax exhibit.

