



A History of Riverbanks Zoo & Garden

Riverbanks Zoo and Garden is one of the most successful mid-sized zoos in the United States. Since opening in April 1974, Riverbanks has won a number of awards for exhibit design, breeding programs and marketing efforts. Riverbanks attracts more than 850,000 visitors each year and has a non-profit support society of more than 30,000 memberships – amazing statistics for a zoo located in a city with a metropolitan population of less than 700,000.

In the early 1960s, a group of local businessmen initiated the concept of a small community zoo. Known as the Columbia Zoo, the proposed facility was designed exclusively as a children's zoo with a nursery rhyme theme. Funding restraints and other problems doomed the initial effort, but the concept of a zoo for the Midlands of South Carolina persisted.

In 1969 the South Carolina General Assembly created the Rich-Lex Riverbanks Park Special Purpose District, the legal and governing authority for what was to ultimately become Riverbanks Zoo and Garden. The seven-member Riverbanks Park Commission was established as the district's governing authority.

By creating Riverbanks as a Special Purpose District, the state legislature significantly expanded the Zoo's support base. Richland and Lexington counties joined the city of Columbia as full partners in the burgeoning Riverbanks project. Each of the three political entities appointed two members to the Commission, with the seventh appointed at-large. Approximately 100 acres of land on both sides of the Lower Saluda River and just outside of the city proper were leased to the commission by South Carolina Electric and Gas (SCE&G) for 99 years at \$1.00 per year.

Following five years of planning and construction, Riverbanks finally opened to the public on April 25, 1974. Notable features of the original Zoo design were the mountainous, moated exhibits for cats and bears (these remain a part of the Zoo's landscape today and can be seen immediately upon entering the parking area). Other major exhibits included two buildings with a total of 21 individual exhibits for small mammals and a moated enclosure for giraffes and white rhinos. Perhaps the most striking architectural feature of the new Zoo was the 22,000-square-foot Ecosystem Birdhouse. Located in the heart of the Zoo, this building housed hundreds of birds in indoor and outdoor exhibits.

Early on, Zoo leaders and local government officials realized that Riverbanks would not be a self-supporting operation as originally intended. During the first two years of operation, the Zoo suffered financially as several attempts to secure adequate operating support failed. In the summer of 1976, Palmer “Satch” Krantz was hired as executive director. That decision, combined with a change in the make-up and philosophy of the commission, led to a reassessment of the Zoo and its position in the community.

Armed with a renewed sense of purpose and spirit, the Zoo began to establish itself as a valuable community asset. In the fall of 1976 the Riverbanks Zoological Society was formed, giving citizens their first opportunity to actively show their support. Within three years several thousand people had joined the Society, demonstrating to local government leaders that there was indeed strong grassroots support for the Zoo. Knowing they had the support of the community, local government leaders voted to begin funding the Zoo as a millage agency in 1980, effectively ending the financial crisis.

Several major accomplishments marked the early 1980s. Full-time staff positions in education, veterinary medicine and marketing were established. The Society began using direct mail to sell memberships with astonishing results. In 1982 Riverbanks received the prestigious Edward H. Bean Award from the American Zoo and Aquarium Association (AZA) for its black howler monkey breeding program, and in 1983 the Education Center opened, marking the first significant addition to the Zoo.

In 1986, the Commission and staff turned their attention to planning the first major expansion of the Zoo. Based on visitor surveys, industry trends and the need to correct problems from the initial construction, an aggressive expansion plan, known as Zoo II, was developed. As further evidence that tremendous strides had been made with government leaders, a \$6.35 million bond issue was unanimously passed for Zoo II in 1987. Construction began soon thereafter on two major new exhibits and several visitor service amenities. When construction was finally completed in the fall of 1989, Riverbanks had changed from a small Zoo to one of significant size and importance.

Relocating and expanding the Zoo’s entrance to a more central location in the park was a key component of the Zoo II plan. Combined with a new gift shop, Riverbanks was better able to accommodate its rapidly growing audience. A new 200-seat restaurant, the Kenya Cafe, also was built, solving a problem that had long plagued the Zoo – the need for an adequate food service facility.

Riverbanks Farm, an interactive display of domestic animals exhibited in a contemporary farm setting, opened in 1988. The architectural design of the Farm’s barn was noted by the South Carolina chapter of the American Institute of Architects with an Award of Achievement.

Without question the most successful element of the Zoo II plan was the Aquarium Reptile Complex (ARC). The ARC combined two groups of animals – reptiles

and fish – into one exhibit sequence. Starting in South Carolina, visitors are taken on an imaginary trip through a number of diverse habitats, from the desert to the tropics to the ocean. Along the way, animals native to those habitats are seen in naturalistic exhibits. The central element of the ARC is a 55,000-gallon Indo-Pacific coral reef tank.

The ARC's impact on Riverbanks was dramatic. In 1990 more than one million people visited the Zoo.

Immediately after completing Zoo II, the Commission and staff began to develop the next phase of the Riverbanks project – a formal botanical garden. Included in the Commission's original lease from SCE&G was approximately 53 acres of land immediately across the Lower Saluda River from the Zoo. This incredible piece of property had been virtually unused for more than 100 years. The site presented the staff and designers with a number of challenges, such as a 100-foot rise in elevation from the river to the hilltop above. It also is heavily wooded with native hardwoods and pines, and large granite boulders litter the site. The property contains the stone ruins of one of South Carolina's first textile mills and is the site where General Sherman's troops camped and shelled the city of Columbia prior to marching in and burning it during the Civil War.

Construction of Riverbanks Botanical Garden began in 1994 following the unanimous passage of a \$6 million bond issue. The Garden opened on June 10, 1995 and is connected to the zoo by an 800-foot-long bridge over the Lower Saluda River. The Garden includes a 10,000-square-foot visitor center, a formal walled garden, an antique rose garden, a historical interpretive center and a half-mile long nature trail along the native forest and riverbank. Visitors may access the Garden by walking or by taking a motorized tram.

In December 1997 the members of Lexington and Richland county councils approved the most ambitious bond issue in Riverbanks history—\$15 million. These monies were used to fund a number of improvements in the Zoo and Garden, known collectively as Zoo 2002. Among the improvements was a new entrance to Riverbanks through the Botanical Garden, replacement of the Zoo's original birdhouse, a new entry plaza, a lemur island exhibit, new exhibits for elephants and gorillas, a new visitor service center (food, gift and group assembly area) with an Africa theme and a koala exhibit. These improvements were constructed and completed over a three-year period, between 1999 and 2002.

In April 2004, the 3-D Action Theater opened in the auditorium at Riverbanks' Education Center. The Panasonic Digital Cinema package provides the ultimate movie experience and is capable of other functions such as PowerPoint presentations and video conferencing—making the theater the perfect setting for meetings, receptions and numerous other functions. The 3-D Action Theater is the first of its kind in any zoo in the world.

Riverbanks is now considered by community and political leaders as well as the residents of Columbia to be the area's premier attraction. Riverbanks has twice won the Travel Attraction of the Year award by the Southeast Tourism Society and also has twice been awarded the annual Governor's Cup by the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism as the state's Most Outstanding Attraction. The Zoo and Garden have been cited in a number of prestigious publications, including *National Geographic* and *Horticulture* magazines. The AZA also recognized Riverbanks with a second Edward H. Bean Award in 1998 for its toucan-breeding program.

In recent years, the Zoo has become more interactive. The Education Department is continually expanding its programs and several interpretive sessions are held throughout the park daily—sea lion feedings, elephant training demonstrations, aquarium dives, penguin feedings and a bird flight demonstration. Visitors also have the opportunity to feed the colorful lorikeets and the majestic giraffes.

The role of zoological parks and botanical gardens is rapidly changing. Conservation and education are now central to the mission of every professional zoo and garden. Limited funding, both from the public and private sectors, has forced many nonprofit organizations to adapt creative operating strategies. Today's audience is sophisticated and demanding. Riverbanks Zoo and Garden is up to new challenges and looks forward to a prosperous and rewarding future.