

The National Zoological Park opens renovated luxury residences for its chinchillas, mongooses and potoroos



By JULIE ANN MILLER

A child knocks on the glass front of the enclosure. The binturong, curled catlike on a log, rouses himself and turns his raccoon-like face toward the curious crowd.

"It's been around too long. Look at its whiskers, how long they are!" comments one zoo visitor. A child exclaims, "Look at its tail."

The 40-pound binturong displays his compact body covered with rough gray hair and his thick, prehensile tail. He calmly looks at his admirers, while licking his lips. Then, wrapping his tail around his paws, he turns his back on the crowd and settles down to another nap. His companion, in her spot further back in the enclosure, does not stir.

Thus the binturong meets the public at the 1983 opening of the remodeled, small-mammal house at the National Zoological Park in Washington. The captive-born, Southeast Asian arboreal carnivores, closely related to civets, had spent two and a half years off display at the zoo's breeding facility in Front Royal, Va.

"We're not sure how the animals will react to the people. But they all have room to get away and hide, so they won't feel threatened," Bill Xanten, collection manager of the small mammals, told *SCIENCE NEWS* shortly before the opening.

One of the first visitors remarks, in a similar vein, "These poor animals are probably going, 'What in the world?'"

No more rows of bar-fronted cages for the small mammals at the National Zoo. A \$2 million renovation has transformed their home, which had originally been constructed in 1937 for \$225,000 as a WPA (Works Progress Administration) undertaking. Now it is a complex of custom-designed enclosures, varying in style according to the habits of the animals and the tastes of their keepers.

"Some of the environments are naturalistic; some seminaturalistic and some are surrealistic," says Xanten. "We wanted them to be aesthetically pleasing and also utilizable by the animals."

Pink termite mounds (made of concrete) against a brightly colored landscape, an 18th century southern African

villager's hut, a Madagascar forest with a stream and waterfall and an abstract mural are among the enclosure designs. "We used different ideas and different techniques in each exhibit," Xanten says. The Orabussu titi monkey exhibit was the last one completed before the opening. It features a stone bluff with water dripping and was modeled after a photograph in *SMITHSONIAN* magazine.

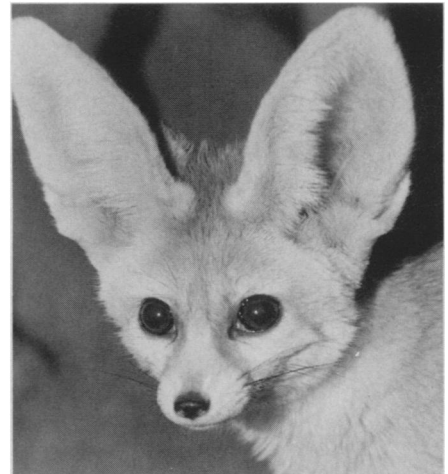
But however exciting the exhibit design, it was the animals themselves that held the spotlight on opening day. There were 105 specimens of 34 species. Another 13 species will soon be added to the collection.

"Hey, that's neat," "Oh, they're cute," and "Aren't they strange looking" were the predominant reactions of the early visitors. With a child chirping, "I wish I had a mongoose like that." And an elderly tourist instructing, "Chinchillas: That's what you get the fur coats from." And a young mother crooning to an obedient toddler, "Say bye-bye to the potoroos."

The zoo is proud of its new facility. "As far as I know we have the largest small-mammal collection in the United States, and this is the largest small-mammal building," Xanten says. "The other unique thing is that we have made a major attempt to make the building and to select the species to show the maximum amount of animal activity in naturalistic exhibits."

Using a large number of live plants was one innovative step to give a natural quality to the exhibits. The zoo is now building a greenhouse to supply the plants and to deal with any plant diseases, since the plants can't be treated in the enclosures occupied by animals. "The biggest problem is: are the animals going to let the plants grow?" Xanten says. There had already been problems with the marmosets, and on the day of the house opening the Southern potoroos (rat kangaroos) kept pulling up one plant. In some cages natural plants had already been replaced with plastic.

There are only a few nocturnal animals on display, because the keepers decided not to use reverse (day-for-night) lighting. Xanten says the animals are often difficult to see in such displays and still can be inactive during the hours the zoo is open to



Fennec fox of north Africa represents the small mammals in zoo's symbol.

visitors. Instead the exhibits at the National Zoo concentrate on diurnal animals that are lively and easy to see. In the first month of operation, Xanten is pleased with this strategy. "The animals have been out during peak visitation hours and in the evening they are asleep," he reports.

On his last day before retiring as zoo director, Theodore H. Reed officially opened the small-mammal house, cutting a wide yellow ribbon printed with a fennec fox in the zoo's stylized insignia. He said, "It's been a team effort. Everyone in the zoo has been involved. I am very proud."

Xanten agrees, "There is no question in my mind, this is the premier small-mammal house in the world." □

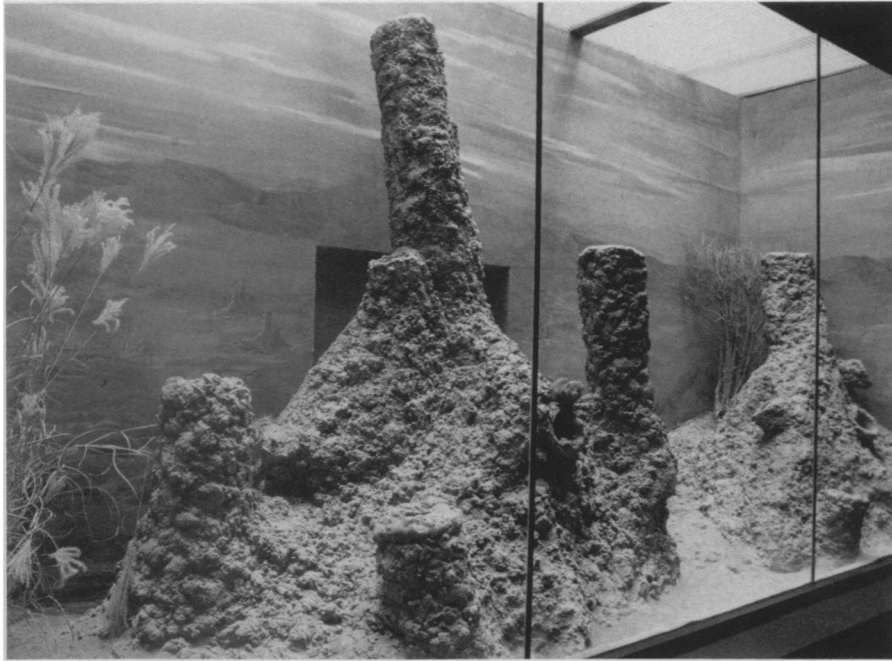


Close-up of oriental small-clawed otter.

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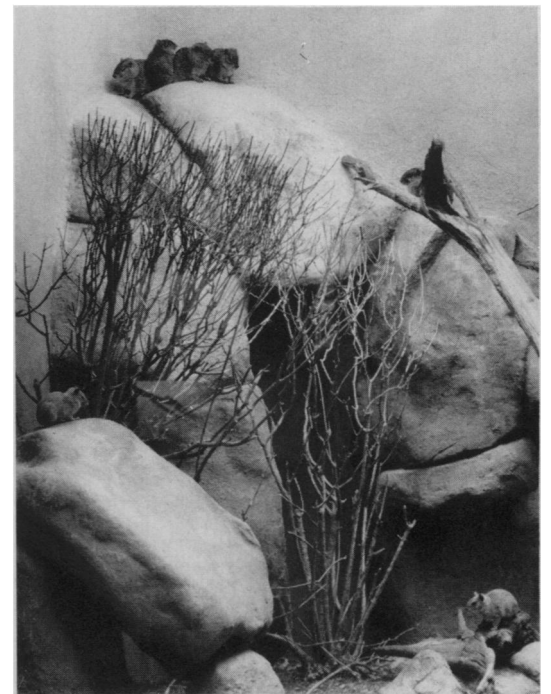
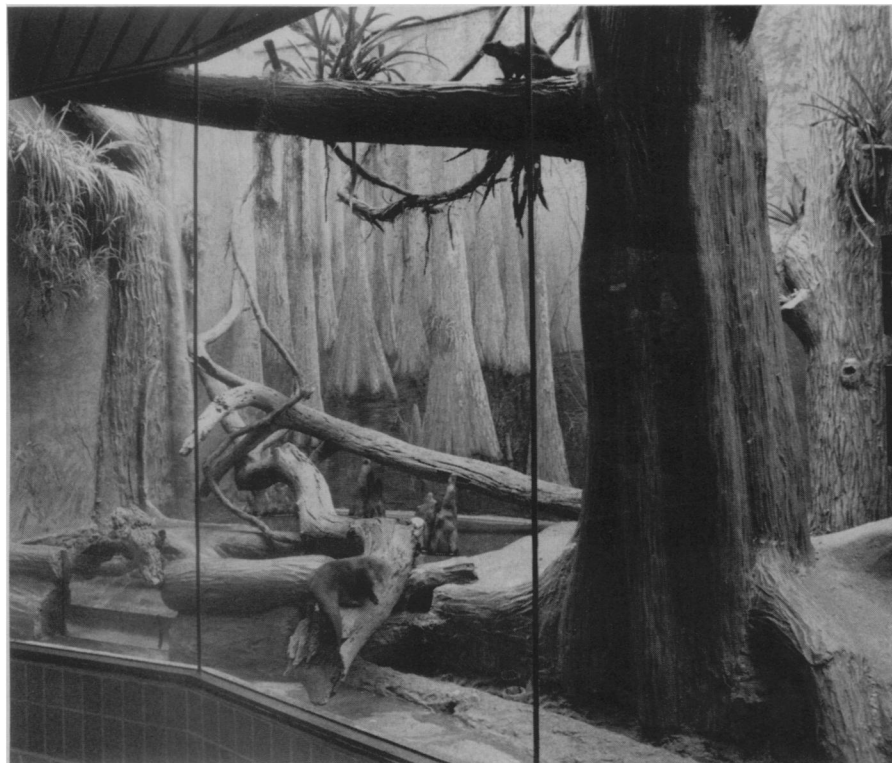
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Modern Living for Small Mammals



Photographs: Jessie Cohen, Smithsonian

New home of the dwarf mongooses (above and left) is African scene including model of abandoned termite mound.



Giant squirrel and oriental small-clawed otter share a Southeast Asian tropical swamp (left). The rock caves (above), rodents of eastern South America, tend to cluster on the uppermost ledge of their rocky hillside.