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Virginia Zoo partners with Great Ape Heart Project on orangutan research

NORFOLK, VA – On October 24th and 25th, the Virginia Zoo’s veterinary staff will partner with specialists from the Great Ape Heart Project (GAHP), vet staff from the Columbus Zoo and an internal medicine specialist to perform advanced imaging on the Virginia Zoo’s four adult orangutans – Schnitz (41), Pepper (43), Solaris (20), and Dara (24). The imaging will include radiographs, abdominal ultrasounds and echocardiograms to be performed while the animals are under anesthesia, ensuring a safe and controlled environment for the team to conduct evaluations.

The Great Ape Heart Project (GAHP) was founded in 2010 with the goal of reducing heart-related deaths and improving the health and wellbeing of apes in managed care. They do this through collecting and analyzing cardiac data to investigate and understand heart disease in great apes amongst the zoo community. The imaging, along with routine health information collected during our orangutans’ exams, will help further the GAHP’s mission of understanding how heart disease can evolve throughout a great ape’s life.

The Zoo’s veterinary intern, Dr. Lauren Novak expressed that “it is a great pleasure to be able to work with the Great Ape Heart Project in this mission, while furthering our understanding of the Virginia Zoo’s orangutans’ health and wellness.”

Cardiovascular disease is one of the leading causes of mortality for great apes living in human care, yet little is known about its cause. To monitor heart health, it is recommended that orangutans receive echocardiograms, also known as an ultrasound of the heart, every few years or anytime they undergo anesthesia.

In addition to the imaging, the vet team will collect blood oxygen levels, blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate and blood, urine, and saliva samples while the animals are sedated. They will also perform x-rays throughout the body to check for abnormalities.

All three species of orangutan – Bornean, Sumatran and Tapanuli – are listed as critically endangered in the wild by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), making their representation in zoos an increasingly important part of education and conservation. They are found only in parts of Borneo and Sumatra, and deforestation for palm oil and timber are the largest threats to their extinction.

About the Virginia Zoo

The Virginia Zoo, located in Norfolk, Virginia, is home to more than 700 exceptional animals representing over 150 fascinating species. Founded in 1901 and residing on 53 beautifully landscaped acres, the Virginia Zoo has demonstrated a commitment to saving and protecting the world’s wildlife by inspiring a passion for nature and taking conservation action at home and around the world. The Virginia Zoo is an accredited member of the Association of Zoos and Aquariums and is recognized as a global leader in education, recreation, science, wildlife conservation, and animal care and welfare. For more than a century, the Zoo has connected

adults, families and school children with the natural world and its wildlife. To learn more, visit virginiazoo.org.

About the Great Ape Heart Project

Formally established in 2010, the Great Ape Heart Project (GAHP) addresses a critical need within the zoo community to investigate and understand cardiovascular disease (CVD or heart disease) in great apes. The project was founded with the goal of creating and maintaining a centralized database that can help us analyze cardiac data, generate reports, and coordinate cardiac-related research activities, while vastly improving communication among zoos, research facilities and sanctuaries where apes are housed. The data we collect will help individual animals, as well as enhance a body of knowledge that will benefit zoos internationally. The project now involves more than 70 institutions, including veterinarians, cardiologists, geneticists, epidemiologists, nutritionists, animal managers, ape specialists and research pathologists. To learn more, visit greatapeheartproject.org.

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