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To: Budget Committee

From: Robin D. Hale, Acting Chief Executive Officer

**Subject: 2008 Stingray Exhibit at the Toronto Zoo**

This letter responds to the issues raised in the correspondence from Mr. Rob Laidlaw of Zoocheck Canada (2008-02-13), and similar letters addressed to the Budget Committee, concerning the Zoo's 2008 special Stingray Exhibit.

**Background:**

The Toronto Zoo's decision to bring in this exhibit came about after careful research, due diligence and considerable planning and debate to find the best possible exhibit for viewing and education of the zoo-going public. The Toronto Zoo is a highly respected and accredited conservation education centre in Canada and North America. It should be noted that this type of exhibit is not new and can be found in many other zoos, aquariums and all Sea World parks in North America. The Toronto Zoo staff consulted with other leading institutions such as Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, Milwaukee Zoo, Brookfield Zoo (Chicago), Phoenix Zoo and the Lowry Park Zoo (Tampa). The Zoo's Board of Management supported and approved the recommendation to provide this exhibit in the Fall 2007.

The exhibit company the Zoo has contracted with, Living Exhibits Inc., is a California based company with extensive experience in the provision of this type of exhibit. The principals are Mr. Mike Yeakle and Dr. Brian Joseph, D.V.M. Prior to forming Living Exhibits, Mr. Yeakle and Dr. Joseph worked for Sea World of California, Sea World of Ohio, the San Diego Zoo, Minnesota Zoo and Point Defiance Zoo. They have produced and managed more than fifteen seasonal exhibits including Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, Milwaukee Zoo, Brookfield Zoo, Mystic Aquarium, Phoenix Zoo, John Ball Zoo and Turtle Bay Exploration Centre.

**Animal Welfare:**

Mr. Laidlaw refers to newspaper reports about the exhibit in his letter. Unfortunately, the media has published misinformation regarding the care of the stingrays while they are at the Toronto Zoo.

The exhibit provides up-close viewing and supervised opportunities to feel the texture of two commonly found North American stingray species as they swim by in their exhibit. The exhibit is a 60,500 litre pool with a circumference of 55 metres (180 feet), a waterfall and ample resting and protected space for the animals. The stingrays decide if they are to be touched. They can be quite gregarious and seek out the contact or they can seek solace in the centre of the pool. The exhibit is designed by marine experts with a state of the art life support system to service the pool and balance important water chemistry.

With respect to the stingray barbs, it is incorrect to suggest that the barbs are removed and the animals mutilated. This is not something that the Toronto Zoo would condone. The barbs are chitinous material, similar to fingernails, and are humanely trimmed with nail clippers prior to introducing the stingrays to the pool. The barbs grow back slowly over several months.

### **Educational Benefits:**

Providing supervised and up-close viewing of animals is a proven and effective means of educating children and adults as well as conveying a strong conservation message. It provides the opportunity for children and adults to respect, understand, admire and importantly be involved and protect the natural world. This is the basis on which most aquariums and zoos develop their exhibits.

The exhibit will be supervised at all times by animal staff and exhibit interpreters and will offer special keeper talks and feedings throughout the day. These provide incredible learning opportunities for visitors, while respecting the welfare of the animals. The Toronto Zoo has an unblemished track record of over thirty years of providing similar supervised interactive experiences with nature. Examples include our animal demonstrations and keeper talks, Kids Zoo, camel and pony rides.

### **Financial Impact:**

The Stingray Bay exhibit is included in the Zoo's 2008 Operating Budget and is estimated to cost \$932.0 thousand with a revenue offset of \$1,956.1 thousand. A \$3.00 (per person) fee over and above regular admission fees will be charged. The cost for children attending in a school group will be a charge of \$1.00 per person. The net revenue impact of the Stingray Bay exhibit is estimated at \$1,024.1 thousand.



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