Educator’s Background Information

Lions and cheetahs are among the hundreds of animals that call Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park® home. In fact, there are more than 1,700 animals – over 250 species – that live at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®, one of four Theme Parks at The Walt Disney World Resort. Accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park® reflects Walt Disney’s dedication to nature and conservation, and in doing so, the Park leads the way in animal care, education, and research.

Caring for African Cats at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®

Like all of the animals at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®, great care is taken to ensure that both lions and cheetahs receive excellent care. This includes a healthy diet, daily monitoring, training, veterinary care, enrichment, and a clean, safe environment that fits their individual needs. Here are some of the important tasks of caring for African cats at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®:

- Exhibit cleaning and maintenance.
- Completing and documenting animal observations. This is an important part of an animal keeper’s day. Since wild animals usually hide an illness or injury (which would draw the attention of predators), keepers must know their animals well enough to be able to detect even the slightest changes in behavior.
- Feeding animal diets (most diets are prepared in the Animal Nutrition Center).
- Participating in conservation and research projects both at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park® and in the field.
- Providing training and enrichment activities.
- Administering health care under the supervision of the veterinary team.
Enrichment and Training: Enhancing Life for African Cats at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®

At Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®, providing enrichment for the animals is an important part of the animals’ daily care. This means encouraging natural behaviors by providing objects and activities that motivate an animal to make choices, be active, and explore. This can be accomplished through the design of their exhibit or habitat, introducing new landscape items (like dead trees to climb on or push around), toys, food, and unique scents. Providing animals with safe and appropriate enrichment activities requires a thorough understanding of each species’ natural behaviors (knowing how, when, and where they would spend their time in the wild), creativity, careful observation and documentation, teamwork, and problem-solving skills. Enrichment improves the animals’ physical and mental health by keeping them busy and active.

The lions and cheetahs at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park® are provided with a variety of enrichment items and activities. In the heat of summer, “meat popsicles” (ice blocks with meat frozen in them) help the cats stay cool and encourage them to use their teeth, claws, and ingenuity to get to the “treat” inside. Super-tough plastic balls for chasing and swatting promotes physical activity. Drilling a hole in the ball and stuffing it with hard-to-get treats increases the challenge and excitement. Sprinkling spices, flavorings, and other exciting scents in their habitat promotes exploration and scent marking. A habitat complete with hills, tall grasses, shade trees, rocks, shrubs, fabricated termite mounds, dead trees, stumps, and a sweeping view of the savanna provide opportunities to rest, communicate, interact, hide, explore, and (safely) view prey species much as they would on the African savanna.

Training Helps Keeps African Cats and Staff Active and Safe

Safety is our top concern at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®. Training is one of many tools that Disney’s Animal Care staff uses to enhance the health and well-being of all the animals. Training keeps animals mentally active and challenged. It also can allow the animals to participate in their own care routines (for example, lions and cheetahs voluntarily open their mouth for dental exams and stand on a portable scale for routine weigh-ins). This makes care safer for both the animals and keepers. Most of the animals (including those on the Park’s 100-acre savanna) are trained to move from their exhibits to their nighttime living quarters by using different sounds (such as whistles, drums, and bells) as cues. This
allows each animal to be checked regularly and allows outdoor exhibits to be properly maintained. By training these and other behaviors, animals are able to receive better, safer, and more frequent care. To get these remarkable behaviors, keepers use positive training methods by encouraging and rewarding the behaviors or actions they want, then adding hand or verbal cues. In order to make training successful, animal keepers must “do their homework” and consider many factors. These include the animal’s natural history, background, personality, any exhibit limitations, and the animal’s preferred rewards (or re-enforcers), learning environment, and schedule.

Veterinary Care: Keeping African Cats Healthy at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®

Exceptional veterinary care is another way that animals are cared for at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®. The veterinary team works closely with animal keepers seven days a week, reviewing reports, observing animals, and inspecting and evaluating animal care procedures. Preventative care is also a top priority for the veterinary team and animal care staff at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®. Preventative care includes routine check-ups and blood work, dental exams, and annual physical exams. This proactive approach is important in keeping animals like lions and cheetahs healthy.

Nutrition: Keeping Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park’s® African Cats “Fit and Full”

Eating a well-balanced diet is not only important for people, it is important for animals too. The animal nutrition team works closely with the animal keepers and veterinary staff to ensure that all animals receive a healthy diet that meets each animal’s specific nutritional needs and resembles their natural diet as closely as possible. This team also assists keepers with training and enrichment foods – another element of each animal’s daily diet. These items include small pieces of additional meat or large bones for the lions and cheetahs.

Understanding the Social Scene: Behavioral Research at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®

To better understand the animals that live at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®, our team of behavioral researchers conduct studies on a regular basis to monitor and record behavior. These studies are essential to helping us care for animals like lions and cheetahs, because they can help us learn who is “best friends” with whom, where the cats spend their time, and which enrichment items are favored. This knowledge is important for providing the utmost care to lions and cheetahs at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®.
HOW DO WE CARE FOR AFRICAN CATS AT DISNEY’S ANIMAL KINGDOM THEME PARK®?

Grade: 2–6 | Length of Activity: 30–45 minutes | Subjects: Science, Language Arts | Staff: One teacher or volunteer

DESCRIPTION
Caring for African cats in a zoo setting is complex – lions and cheetahs have very specific needs, such as special diets, nutrition, and health care. Students will learn about the complexities of caring for African cats such as lions and cheetahs in a zoo setting through an interview with a specialist from Disney's Animal Kingdom Theme Park®.

OBJECTIVES
Through participation in this activity students will:
• Describe at least two ways that Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park® cares for lions and cheetahs.
• Define the terms training and enrichment; both important parts of animal care and welfare in zoos and aquariums.
• Give one example of appropriate training for big cats like lions and cheetahs.
• Give two examples of appropriate enrichment for big cats like lions and cheetahs.

POSITIVE ACTIONS TO HELP AFRICAN CATS
Visit a local AZA-accredited zoo with lions or cheetahs to learn more about these impressive African cats and what it takes to properly care for them in a zoo setting.

Procedures
1. Ask students to brainstorm a list of what lions and cheetahs would need in a zoo setting. Record their answers.
2. Explore the ways that lions and cheetahs are cared for at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park® by distributing worksheet 52 to the class. Choose to have students read the interview individually or out loud in a classroom setting.
3. Once they are finished, have students compare the needs they listed to the needs provided at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®. Encourage class discussion by asking the following questions:
   • What are things that lions and cheetahs need in their zoo habitat? Food, water, cover, veterinary care, enrichment, training, proper nutrition, effective management techniques, behavioral studies, etc.
   • How are these provided at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®? Animal specialists research the needs of big cats and provide all their requirements.
   • What is enrichment? Items and activities that encourage natural behaviors.

SET UP
Make copies of worksheet 52 for each student.

SETTING
Classroom

MATERIALS
Worksheet 52: How do you care for lions and cheetahs at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®? Interview with a Big Cat Enrichment and Training Expert: Michelle Skurski – interview transcript

Extensions
• Have students research the different features found in a well-designed zoo habitat. Then, split the class into small groups. Have each small group create a 3D model of a zoo habitat for lions or cheetahs using their research. Some helpful resources include:
  o http://aza.org/
  o http://animalenrichment.org/default.html

• What are some examples of enrichment used at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®? Meat popsicles, boomer balls, cool rocks, browse, etc.
• What is animal training? Training is teaching. High-quality training programs benefit animals by reducing stress and allowing them to assist in their own medical health care.
• What are some examples of animal training used at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®? Shifting big cats from one habitat to another, present their tail and paws for check-ups. They also have been trained to open their mouths so the veterinarians can check their teeth, etc.

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o AZA’s Zoo Tube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RuSrhtcjqMQ

o Design a zoo habitat for the National Zoo’s Giant Pandas: http://nationalzoo.si.edu/Education/ConservationCentral/design/

• Arrange a class visit with a local zoo or aquarium accredited by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). If possible, ask to interview a member of the animal care staff. Discuss and compare their findings and observations.

Wrap-up

Use the following questions to help summarize the lesson.

1. Why are enrichment and training important to African cats living at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®?
   Training makes it easier for us to care for the animals and allows the animals an opportunity to participate in their own care. Enrichment allows the animal to have opportunities and make choices, both in their habitat and in their night house.

2. Compare an enrichment item used for a lion or a cheetah to an item that you use. What actions does the item encourage for you and for the cat?

Caring for African cats in a zoo setting is complex – lions and cheetahs have very specific needs, such as special diets, nutrition, and health care.
To help us learn a little more about caring for African cats, we interviewed an expert at Disney's Animal Kingdom Theme Park®. Read below to find out more about caring for lions and cheetahs in zoos.

Hi Michelle, thanks for speaking with me today! Can you tell me a little bit about what you do at Disney's Animal Kingdom Theme Park®?

Sure, I would love to! I am a Zoological Manager of Behavioral Husbandry. While that sounds like a mouthful, it is actually very simple! My job is all about animal training, animal enrichment, and animal welfare. I help animal keepers train and enrich the animals.

So I've been learning that a habitat includes food, water, cover, and a place to raise young. How do you think a zoo habitat is different from a wild habitat?

Great question! A habitat, no matter where it is, must have all of these things. In the wild, lions and cheetahs might have a larger area where food, water, and cover are more spread out. They may have to go looking for water, hunt for food, and struggle to find cover. In a zoo, all of these needs are provided for them. But, the habitats at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park® are designed to feel as “wild” as possible. So, there are still open places, large trees for cover, and even times where the lions and cheetahs have to search for their own food.

Wow, so researching an animal’s wild habitat is really important when building a zoo habitat. What else can we learn from researching lions and cheetahs in the wild?

Researching how they spend their time in the wild can help us understand life in a zoo. For example, cheetahs do their hunting during the day to avoid larger predators that might steal their food. As a result, we feed our cheetahs during the day when they are most active and most likely to eat.

That’s amazing! Can you tell us some special features of the cheetah habitat at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®?

Absolutely! When designing the lion habitat, we wanted to make sure everything they needed was included. Since lions spend most of their time sleeping – about 20 hours a day – we made sure to include a nice, shady place for them to rest or sleep. Since we are in Florida, and it is hot here, we put a big shady tree and a cool rock equipped with a fan that keeps the lions cool during the day. The habitat also has a higher rock that the lions can use to look out over the savanna. This allows them to see (but not actually reach!) other animals.

What are some special features of the cheetah habitat at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®?

For cheetahs, we really took into account the fact that they are more active than lions. Since cheetahs do more running and hunting, the cheetah habitat is much longer in length, allowing them room to build up speed and run like they would in the wild. The cheetah habitat is also slightly sloped, giving them higher points to look out from.

Can you tell us about how you provide proper nutrition for lions and cheetahs at DAK?

Definitely. We have a nutritionist on staff that plans out all of the diets for every animal, including the lions and cheetahs. Then, nutrition assistants prepare all of the food – about four and a half tons of food a day! For lions and cheetahs, this food mostly consists of meat. Lions and cheetahs also receive vitamins and minerals to make sure they stay healthy and get all the nutrients in their diet that they would receive in the wild.

Can you tell us about how you provide proper medical care for lions and cheetahs at DAK?

The animal keepers that care for the lions and cheetahs weigh the animals and keep a record of their weight. They also collect blood samples to make sure the animals are healthy. The keepers check every day for any signs of illness or injury. At Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park®, we also have a team of 10 veterinarians and veterinarian assistants who take care of all the animals, including the lions and cheetahs. Just like people get a check-up with a doctor once a year, every lion and cheetah has a check-up with one of our veterinarians. Veterinarians can also prescribe medicines and give vaccines if needed.
What is training?
Training is simply teaching. Just like you might train your dog to “sit” or “come,” training allows zoo staff to teach animals to perform a certain action.

Why is training important?
Training is important for several reasons. Training makes it easier for us to care for the animals and allows the animals an opportunity to participate in their own care!

What types of training do we offer to lions and cheetahs?
First, all the training that we do with lions and cheetahs is done in what we call “protected contact.” This means that there is a strong mesh screen between the animal care staff and the cat. This is for our safety and the cat’s security. Both lions and cheetahs are trained to move from their night house into their exhibit and back on cue. This is important for their safety; for example, if there is a bad storm approaching, the cats can be called in to keep them safe. We also can call them in at night or to do check-ups or other training sessions. Much of our training is centered on medical care. For example, the lions and cheetahs are trained to present their tail and paws for check-ups. They also have been trained to open their mouths so the veterinarians can check their teeth. And, all of their check-ups can be done at their night house and when they are awake, making it unnecessary to move the cats or put them under anesthesia.

Wow, that is really neat! So, what is enrichment?
Enrichment incorporates everything we do for an animal - every aspect of a lion or a cheetah’s day. Training is included in this. Enrichment is not just about giving toys, but it is also about what their habitat looks like. Enrichment allows the animal to have opportunities and make choices, both in their habitat and in their night house. Enrichment is a very important part of caring for zoo animals.

What types of enrichment do we offer lions and cheetahs?
Great question! Scents are a favorite of lions and cheetahs! They have a very keen sense of smell. Perfumes, like the kind you might buy at the department store, are very popular. Keepers spray perfumes on logs and the cats come up, roll, and scratch in these areas. In addition to perfume, other scents are also used. The lions and cheetahs at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park especially love the smell of cinnamon and pumpkin pie. Keepers use these smells to keep the cats interested and give them different options in their environment.

Cardboard boxes or tubes are sprayed with scent to encourage play. Lions, especially, rip and shred these apart. This provides another form of exercise.

Tough plastic balls are another form of enrichment. These toys are specially designed for large cats in a zoo setting. Lions and cheetahs might play with these in a similar way that kittens might play with a ball. They come in all sizes and can be especially fun for younger cats.

“Meatsicles” are a fun enrichment item! Meatsicles are special frozen treats for lions and cheetahs, made of meat and fish. Lions and cheetahs especially like these when it is hot, in the same way we might eat a frozen treat or ice cream in the summer!

We also find different ways to present food to lions and cheetahs. For example, we give them different meat, but also might hide small pieces of meat around their habitat. Sometimes we put this meat in paper bags and hide them; this encourages the lions and cheetahs to look, or forage, for their food. Other times, cardboard boxes or tubes are used to hide food.

It sounds like lions and cheetahs have a pretty good life at Disney’s Animal Kingdom Theme Park! But it sure takes a lot of work to care for them. Like the saying goes, don’t try this at home!

That’s right! While lions and cheetahs are amazing animals, they do not make good pets. They can be very dangerous and require a lot of food, special health care, large spaces to roam, and plenty of exercise, training, and enrichment. This is way more than the average person can provide. So definitely learn more about lions and cheetahs, and if you’re really interested, take a class about them at your local zoo. You never know, you could even become an animal keeper or animal care expert!

Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with us today, Michelle. It is great to learn more about all the time, effort, teamwork, and knowledge that go into taking care of lions and cheetahs.