

Rafiki

At Disney's Animal Kingdom

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Inspiring a love of animals and concern for their welfare is the underlying theme, both subtle and obvious, throughout Disney's Animal Kingdom — in its entertaining shows and adventures, in its artistic representations of animals and in its shops and restaurants.

But the active heart of this effort is in Rafiki's Planet Watch on the north side of the theme park near the edge of Africa and its herds of exotic animals.

From the time visitors board the puffing steam trains of Wildlife Express, they know this is no vicarious adventure. It is an exploration of challenges faced by animals and humans around the world — fascinating, innovative and colorful — but seriously concerned with efforts here and around the world to save the animals and their environment.

More important, it aims to inspire those who come here to take an active role in conservation within their home communities, according to Dr. Jackie Ogden, director of Animal Programs for Walt Disney World Resort.

Rafiki's Planet Watch also includes The Affection Section where guests can touch and make friends with gentle domestic animals like goats, a miniature donkey and sheep, plus live demonstrations featuring unusual and exotic animals — llama, Indian-crested porcupine, spectacled owls and lesser anteaters, among many others.

On the train trip, narrators explain how the facilities help protect the animals and give information on animal care.

At Rafiki's Planet Watch depot, guests begin a leisurely walk through a jungle of lush vegetation, interrupted occasionally by a view of cotton-top tamarins — a small monkey from Colombia, South America — and examples of backyard habitats that are models for how to make a home friendly to wildlife. Also along the path, children can join in Kids' Discovery Club activities about wildlife. Soon, guests are welcomed by a gigantic montage of brilliantly colored animal faces — a heroic painting of animals, including a gorilla, lion, panda, wolf, crocodile and others — that stare right at the human visitors from across the fa