

Zoo taps into wireless network

By CHUCK SODER
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The Cleveland Metroparks Zoo is using wireless Internet technology to make students who participate in the zoo's video-conferencing program feel as though they're on a virtual field trip.

The zoo's education staff was able to move the free program outdoors two months ago, when the zoo installed a wireless Internet network, said Cathy Ryan, program coordinator. Now zoo staff can stand just outside the zoo's cages and aquariums as they teach students across the country. Staff members previously could bring small animals into the zoo's two indoor studios, but they only could show larger creatures via video.

"This allows us to step beyond our walls and boundaries," Ms. Ryan said.

The zoo hired network engineering firm Total Systems Integration Inc. of Galion, Ohio, to design, install and support the system, which consists of 20 access points supplied by Cisco Systems.

The zoo paid for the work using \$120,000 of a \$248,000 U.S. Department of Education grant awarded in 2005. It used the rest of the money to develop and staff outreach programming in schools.

The network covers roughly half the zoo's 168 acres, and Ms. Ryan said the goal is to expand it eventually to cover the entire property.

The new technology could be used in other ways, Ms. Ryan said. For instance, veterinarians might one day broadcast surgeries on zoo animals, and staff could use the technology to communicate with each other.

"Anything and everything could be possible," she said.

The zoo receives its Internet connection from OneCommunity, which provides ultrabroadband Internet access to nonprofits, schools and government organizations in Northeast Ohio.

The videoconferencing program began as a partnership with the Cleveland Municipal School District in 1998. Today, the zoo broadcasts programs across the nation to two or three schools at a time, Monday through Friday, throughout the school year.



New technology enables Metroparks Zoo keepers to share their knowledge over the Internet.
Photo credit: CLEVELAND METROPARKS ZOO