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WiFi wild side: Zoo has wireless Web link

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The Cleveland Metroparks Zoo is using wireless Internet to let students experience zoo exhibits in real time from classrooms across the country.

The zoo has had a distance-learning program since the late 1990s, but now, for the first time, the zoo staff is able to use videoconferencing equipment in exhibits where large animals live. In the past, production of the educational programs was confined to two rooms suitable only for smaller animals, said Vicki Searles, education curator for the zoo.

The expanded offerings are possible because zoo staffers no longer need a cable to hook up to the Internet.

They can roam with their video gear across the one-third of the zoo's 168 acres now covered by the network, Searles said.

The zoo is working to extend the network to the entire campus.

Searles said she believes Cleveland's zoo is the first to purchase this type of technology.

Case Western Reserve University put in a similar system last year so students could use laptops anywhere on campus, said Molly Ford, a spokeswoman for Cisco Systems, which provided the 20 wireless access points at the zoo.

The Cleveland Zoo spent \$120,000 to install the network, which came from a \$248,000 U.S. Department of Education grant that was awarded in late 2005.

The rest of the grant went toward other outreach and education programming, Searles said.

Right now, the zoo's wireless network isn't available to visitors, but Searles said that is a possibility down the road.

The zoo hired Total Systems Integration Inc., a network engineering firm based in Galion in central Ohio, to install the system.

The Internet connection is provided by OneCommunity, which offers high-speed Internet access to nonprofit organizations in Northeast Ohio.

Searles said the technology will allow continued enhancement to the distance-learning program.

The videoconferences are usually 45 minutes to an hour long, and students in up to three classrooms can participate at once, Searles said. The students can see and talk to the zoo staffer putting on the presentation as well as to students in the other classrooms.

One of the zoo's programs focuses on primates and takes place at the orangutan exhibit.

"They get to learn all about primates and see up close what the orangutan looks like," Searles said. "It's perfect for urban or rural schools that maybe don't have money for field trips."

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