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Scientists unveil facility to house apes Azy, Indah

By **JASON CLAYWORTH**

REGISTER STAFF WRITER

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Scientists in Des Moines on Tuesday unveiled the first part of what that they say will be the most comprehensive ape research program in the world.

The three-story building, along with a three-story outdoor facility, will provide room for the first two orangutans at the Great Ape Trust of Iowa research center on the city's south side.

The brother-and-sister orangutans, Azy and Indah, will arrive Sept. 28. Three other species of apes will eventually live at the 200-acre facility.

"I really see this as a monumental effort to change the way we understand and view great apes," said Robert Shumaker, director of orangutan research for the trust. "Nothing on this scale has been built in the United States and, frankly, not in the world."

The trust project is spearheaded by Ted Townsend of Des Moines, whose family owns an engineering firm. Townsend has spent about \$10 million on the first phase of the project, which will also include another building for a family of bonobo apes that will arrive in about six months. Later phases will have buildings for gorillas and chimpanzees. Private donations, grants and endowments will largely pay for future expansions and operational costs.

"I got to the point in my personal life where I'd done all the play things and decided I had to make an impact with the range of resources I've been afforded in life," Townsend said. "I have time, energy, experience and some amount of financial capability and wanted to do more than retire in the Bahamas."

Azy, 26, and Indah, 24, will arrive via airplane from the Smithsonian National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C. They will be lightly sedated and placed in "transport suites." Scientists will put video cameras inside the suites to monitor the apes' reactions.

The trust will focus primarily on scientific study and education. The public will have opportunities to view the work, Shumaker said.

"What these people are proving is apes have a capacity, while not our capacity, they have a capacity to

Going ape

Donations to the Great Ape Trust of Iowa come with e-mail newsletters, tote bags, journals, caps and a free e-mail address on the greatapetrust.org system. For more information go to: www.iowagreatapes.org or call (515) 243-3580.

utilize tools, art, language and agriculture," Townsend said.

Orangutans have DNA traits similar to humans.

"My hope is when the larger population understands who and what they are, what they mean to us and what we can learn about ourselves from them, there might be a sea change that has a chance to save them," Townsend said.