Creating the Nation's first BioPark

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Letter from the Desk of David Challinor
October 31, 1989

The leaves in Rock Creek Park are turning, and we have been blessed this past week with warm days and cool nights. The family of six Golden Lion Tamarins that have been ranging free all summer from their nest box high in a beech tree were recaptured recently. With the arrival of cold weather here, the family is being readied for their flight on November 7 to the Poco das Antas Reserve in spring-time Brazil.

Before departing each will receive a physical examination, and two will be fitted with small radio transmitters. The unique black bands with which their tails were marked last spring will be restored for easy individual identification in the forest.

They all seem in excellent health and have been attracting curious crowds to watch with wonder their agility in moving about the tree canopy. The most common question the visitors ask is, "Why don't they run away?" We explain by asking, "Where to?" The animals are already "there" and have established a comfortable range around their nest box and steady food supply.

Assuming all are in good health, they will be sent directly to the Reserve. There each of the young Zoo-bred adults will be put in a cage (4m x 2m x 2m) with a tamarin of the opposite sex, which has been living in the wild for at least a year. Within three or four days, more than 95% of these pairs will have formed a bond; that is, they will comfortably share the nest box in the cage. Once bonded, the pair is released on a private farm near the Reserve to establish their new territory. With one pair member experienced in living wild, the other soon learns from it what it takes to survive.

This technique has been a very successful way of introducing Zoo tamarins to the forest. Of the 67 animals released since 1985, 26 are still living, and these Zoo-bred animals have produced 21 live births of which 16 are still alive in October 1989. In fact, some of these 16 are the grandchildren of the original released animals.

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All this shows that with dedicated research, such restocking programs can work. Ben Beck, the Zoo's primatologist, inspected new potential release sites last July, and we are very encouraged with the enthusiastic response from private owners of forest near the Reserve. In fact it has become almost a local status symbol to have your land considered as a release site. With such strong regional support and cooperation, all the participants in this truly international effort have good reason to be optimistic that the program will succeed.

I will be notifying you before the next newsletter which of the first two weekends in May the Advisory Board will meet. We are planning an interesting time at both Rock Creek and Front Royal for those attending. In fact the next family of tamarins in training for release should be in their beech tree nest box by then. You will all have a chance to see first hand how the training technique works and receive the latest news on our reintroduction efforts from Ben Beck himself.